

A Weberian Sociology of Religious Experience

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1. Introduction

Sociologically speaking, religious experience is understandable if it resulted in social action (or inaction). However, if a religious experience resulted in no change of the experienced's social action, we may not understand it sociologically. For example, a person claims her/his religious experience of the receiving of the spirit, but there was no change in her/his life and social action after such experience, we have little access what the religious experience meant for her/him. We may not understand her/his religious experience *as such*.

Sociological understanding comes from the combination of social action (or inaction) with its subjective meaning. On the other hand, there is room to understand religious experience when the person demonstrates a change in her/his social action. Paul the Apostle is a typical example of this sketch. After his religious experience of conversion, Paul abandoned his zealot persecution of the Christians, and conversely became a passionate advocate of Christianity. From this historical fact, we can assume that there is a relationship between Paul's religious experience and the change of his social action. Here is a task for the student of sociology of religion to grasp the subjective meaning of the conversion. Max Weber gives an exemplary interpretation of Paul's subjective meaning of conversion:

Paul's conversion was not merely a vision in the sense of hallucinatory perception. Rather, his conversion was also recognition of the profound inner relationship between the personal fate of the resurrected founder of Christianity and the cultic ideologies of the general oriental savior doctrines and conceptions of salvation ([1963: 130](#)).

Weber calls such conversion *metanoia*, the complete reversal of individual's central attitude toward the value and meaning of life and the world (1968:1117). Paul states his complete reversal of the center of value:

Whatever was valuable to me, I now consider them rubbish for the sake of Christ.

One would argue psychologically or neurologically that Paul's loss of consciousness was a neurological disorder like epilepsy, and that his hearing of Jesus's voice was an illusion which was caused by the psychological protection against his failure and desperation. Such arguments of mechanical and pathological causal relationship may give scientific explanation of the phenomena from the presupposition of psycho-physiology, but give no causal relationship between Paul's subjective meaning and his change of social action. Rather psycho-pathology presupposes to reduce human behavior to the mechanism of the law of nature and flesh, rejecting any subjective meaning as well as religious causal relations. Therefore, sociological concern has little to do with such arguments. The central concern of the understanding sociology is the subjective meaning of religious action, which is related to an individual's view of life and the world. And religious experience is understandable only through the context of its outcome in social action.

2. Religious Experience Defined

I define religious experience as the subjective experience of the sacred. Such experience must be subjective since the experience of the sacred has no ground for objective acceptance. Religious experience in any religiosity is, first of all, preoccupied by the extraordinary psychological state of the here and now. For example, the Puritan's permanent state of grace, having proved oneself, is psychologically the concrete object of the extraordinary feeling. The Buddhist's Nirvana is psychologically to enter the contemplative and euphoric possession of the sacred, which is only achieved by extraordinary persons. The Sufist's mystic union with God is the extraordinary feeling of apathetic ecstasy (Weber 1946C: [278, 287](#)). These psychological states have undoubtedly been sought for the sake of the sentient value in the here and now. In this respect, these experiences have been equal to the alcoholic orgy of the Dionysian, totemic meat orgies, the dance ecstasy of the carnival, the sexual ecstasy of the Hindu Shakti and all sort of magical intoxication such as opium and nicotine. Such experiences had been considered specifically sacred because of the psychic extraordinariness *as such*. The rationalized religions, however, began to distinguish the "sacred" state of the extraordinariness from the "profane" one, referring the ethical or doctrinal meaning of such states. In addition, they developed religious means to attain the "sacred" psychological state, and denounced the "profane" state that had little to do with such religious procedure. From the beginning of religious history, such experiences of the psychic extraordinariness have been connected to two important conceptions, "rebirth" and "salvation." "Rebirth, a primeval magical value, has meant the acquisition of a new soul by means of an orgiastic act or through methodically planned asceticism" (Weber [1946C: 279](#)). Rebirth would be either "a sudden transformation of the spirit" or "a gradual process of purification" (Weber [1963: 150](#)). The cultural customs of rebirth such as "initiation," "circumcision," "confirmation," or "commencement" have played important phases of private and collective life. The primordial concept of rebirth has been sublimated to "conversion" or "incarnation" by rationalized religions. The more religious ideas were elaborated and rationalized, the more religious experience was concerned with the quest for "salvation" that came from "an motivation of certain integral values" (Weber [1963: 149](#)). Then the possession of sacred values through religious experience was sublimated into a

belief in salvation, the signified "image of the world." One who experienced this world as a specifically "meaningless," would seek somehow a meaningful image of world, or "cosmos." Salvation could attain a specific significance only where it expressed a systematic and rationalized image of the world and represented a stand against this world. The meaning and actual psychological quality of salvation depends upon such a world image and such a stand. From what and for what one wished to be redeemed depended upon one's image of the world (Weber [1946C: 280](#)).

3. What is Included and Excluded ?

In the course of religious history, religion differentiated from magic, and developed the idea of sacred and the way of salvation. The more religion has been rationalized, the more the way of salvation has dogmatized and the means of sacredness has been established methodologically. From the today's point of view, I would like to limit religious experience to the experience that is related to the central meaning of sacred value system or world view. In this respect, the extraordinary experiences such as dancing, sexual, carnival and alcohol orgies or chemical intoxication are excluded from the categories of religious experience. Since such experiences break any meaningful order and value system of the life; it is nothing to do with the religious image of the life and the cosmos. Therefore, Zoroaster as well as biblical prophets denounced such orgiastic possession and practice as devilish. They fought against orgiastic cults and ecstatic magicians because their practices offended God's commandments and order. Although biblical prophets were psychologically ecstatic men, they did not seek such an extraordinary state *as such*. Prophets rarely mentioned their ecstatic experiences unless it revealed God's will and commandment. They did not take for granted such ecstatic states *as such*, but concentrated the meaning of such ecstatic experience. From religious experience, I also exclude the collective religious practices such as ritual ceremony and group conversion. Religious experience holds the feature of charisma; it usually comes to an individual, not to group. Genuine religious experience, in general, has no mediator such as priests, magicians or cultists since it always involves the experienced's charismatic gift. The collective religious experience usually uses the means such as music, dance, meditation and other stuffs to induce the special psychic states. Although sacrament might give the satisfaction of religious need of salvation, inducing the euphoric feeling in the here and now, it gives little understanding of the meaning and value of life and the world. Rather, such participations are a break from ordinary life. Rationalized religion has often sublimated the magical "orgy" into the religious "sacrament" (Weber [1946C: 279](#)). Dream would become a religious experience only if it gives the meaning of life and the world. Thus whole religious experience is concerned with the meaning of life and the world, or the salvation from inner destruction of the worthiness of life and the world. Any experience that gives the understanding of the subjective meaning may become religious experience. Even daily experience would become a religious experience as long as it gives insight into the subject meaning of the life and the world. Jeremiah, for example, received God's revelation through daily activity such as boiling water of the pot ([1:13](#)), buying land ([32:7-15](#)) and watching a bud of an almond tree ([1:11](#)) and the immigration of birds ([8:7](#)). From the sociological point of view, important thing is not religious experience as such but its meaning to the religious value and its relation to social action. In other word,

religious experience is not the goal as such, but a mere means that gives the concept of religious idea and world view. From this point of view, any religious or magical practice that aims to induce a psychological state of extraordinariness using the means of intoxication, music, dance, sexual practice and so forth are not genuine religious experience.

4. Constructed Experience

Religious experience, at certain point, goes beyond this world, and goes the realm of mystic experience. Mystic experience is incommunicable yet knowledgeable. This religious knowledge is not a new recognition of virtue and fact but the integral grasping of central meaning of life and the world (Weber [1946C: 282](#)). For such mystic experience, contemplation has been used as the ultimate religious means of purely cognitive comprehension of the world and its meaning. Mystic experience by contemplation presupposes the tranquillity and immobility of the sacred. The mystic recognizes the possession of subjectively holy value in herself or himself, which state of mind is psychologically called euphoria or apathetic ecstasy. In the end, the pure mystic served only himself, and often concluded to self-deification. In this process mystics experience is constructed by contemplation. The intended and articulated psychological quality of mystic experiences have directed by the images of the cosmos (Weber [1946C: 280](#)). Yoga and Jesuit's "spiritual exercise" are among the methods and the techniques attempt to induce such constructed experiences. In this sense, the history of religion is a technical and methodical development of the means of the sacred.

5. True or False ?

Is then religious experience true or false? Biblically speaking, there is true religious experience and also false one. Sociologically speaking, however, true-and-false formulation should be free from value-judgement on behalf of objective understanding. Sociologists of religion should not be involved in value-judgement, even if it is quite difficult to be neutral from value-judgment since the very nature of religious study is concerned with what is true, what is false, what is right and what is wrong. Experiencing rich revelations from God, Jeremiah fought against the false prophets who claimed their experience of God and their authority of the oracle of God. Jeremiah claimed that his prophecy was true because he prophesied doom without seeking profit, and that his opponent prophets were false because they prophesied fortune and sought profit from their clients. The ethical prophet distinguished himself from false prophets by the ethical consequences of the revelation. He did not care his religious experience as such, but was concerned with what the revelation meant. Religious experience was the privilege of the prophet, that is to say, his charisma. Not everybody could experience it. The charisma of prophet could not be induced by artificial technique, compulsory method or sacramental practice. The charisma was not the routinized activity.

6. Experienced and Researcher

As I discussed above, the understanding of religious experience depends on its outcome into social action. To grasp the value-relationships of such social action, in turn, depends on the

ideal-typical construction of the subjective meaning of the social action or inaction. This is a task of the researcher to interpret the meaning employing the thinking experiment and the empathic imagination toward the experienced and its outcome in social action (Weber [1968: 10](#)). Empathic interpretation requires the researcher's capacity to feel herself or himself empathetically into a mode of the experienced's emotion and situation which requires to turn aside from researcher's own habits of emotion and sentiment (Weber 1949: 41). If the subjective meaning of the experienced's value is familiar with our psychological and societal value and knowledge, the empathic understanding would be easy. However, if it is unfamiliar with our value and the surrounding conditions, it would be difficult to understand empathetically the subjective meaning of such religious experience and its social outcome. For those who does not have holy spirits (religious experience), the value of the experienced are stumbling block and foolish ([1 Corinthians 1:23](#)). The more a religious experience is distant from our familiar sense of sympathy and value, the more difficult is to understand it through empathic interpretation. In this case, we have to content with a purely intellectual understanding of such experience and its outcome through the idea-typical construction of the causal relationship between the subjective meaning and the social action. Purely theoretical and logical construction of concept can still give a significant degree of understanding of their meaning and can interpret intellectually their influence on the course of action and the selection of means (Weber 1968:5-6/544-9).

7. Conclusion

Religious experience is the subjective recognition of the sacred value. From the viewpoint of sociology, the meaning of the religious experience is primacy, and the extraordinary state of religious experience as such are at best secondary. Religious experience is not magic or the state of self-satisfaction, but the inspiration to the religious value and the world view. Therefore, orgy, ecstasy and euphoria as such are excluded from the categories of religious experience. Further more, collective experiences such as the sacrament and the group conversion were also excluded from the genuine religious experience. Religious experience is charisma and thereby individual talent, not institutional grace or the product of induction or construction. The criteria of true and false in religious experience was measured with the interests of the experienced. If the experience is connected with the self-interests such as economic benefit, psychological satisfaction and ideologies pride, it would be false experience. If the experience causes the loss of economic benefit, the burden of psychological state and the abandonment of self-esteem, it must be true since it reduces self-interest. This distinction sets the limit of religious experience to the means and not the goal. Sociologically speaking, religious experience is understandable with the combination of its subjective meaning and social outcome. In order to understand the subjective meaning, however, the empathic experiment of the subjective meaning and the ideal-typical construction of causal relationships are required. Concepts without experiment are empty, but experiences without meaning are blind. In the sociology of religion, religious meaning is decisive, not religious experience as such.

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