

Marcus Borg – On Religious Experiences
from one of his final books [Borg died January 21, 2015]
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Chapter 3

God Is Real and Is a Mystery

MY THIRD CONVERSION was much more experiential than my first two. The first two happened in academic settings and were triggered by ideas, the life of the mind. The trigger for my third was a series of *experiences* that ***began in my early thirties***. They weren't the product of thinking, even though over time they have greatly affected my thinking, perhaps more than anything else has. And ***they made God real to me***.

In retrospect, I understand that they were *mystical experiences* (more about that soon). But I did not know that at the time. I knew nothing about mysticism. It had not been part of four years of undergraduate and five years of graduate study in religion. And whenever I had tried to read books about mysticism on my own, they were utterly opaque. My eyes glazed over. I couldn't figure out what they were talking about.

The *experiences were brief*: none lasted longer than a minute or so, and some only a few seconds. They may not sound like much as I describe them, but I have since learned that this is one of the classic features of experiences like these: ***they are difficult to express in words. Even when words can convey what was experienced, they can only inadequately convey how it was experienced and the transformative power of the experience.***

Aware of that difficulty, I share one of these experiences that illustrates features common to all of them. It happened as I was driving through a sunlit rural Minnesota winter landscape alone in a nine-year-old MG two-seater roadster. The only sounds were the drone of the car and the wind through the thin canvas top. I had been on the road for about three hours when I entered a series of S-curves. ***The light suddenly changed. It became yellowy and golden, and it suffused everything I saw: the snow-covered fields to left and right, the trees bordering the fields, the yellow and black road signs, the highway itself. Everything glowed. Everything looked wondrous. I was amazed. I had never experienced anything like that before***—unless perhaps in very early childhood, and so I no longer remembered it.

“At the same time, I felt a *falling away of the subject-object distinction of ordinary everyday consciousness*—that “dome” of consciousness in which we experience ourselves as “in here” and the world as “out there.” ***I became aware*** not just

intellectually but ***experientially of the connectedness of everything***. I “saw” the connectedness, experienced it. ***My sense of being “in here” while the world was “out there” momentarily disappeared.***

“That experience lasted for maybe a minute and then faded. But it had been ***the richest minute of my life***. It was not only ***full of wonder*** but also ***filled with a strong sense of knowing—of seeing more clearly and truly than I ever had***. For about two years, I experienced more moments like this one. Some were just as vivid, and others were mere glimmerings. Most were visual. A few were ***triggered by music***—a chamber orchestra in a college chapel, a symphony orchestra in a concert hall. The latter were not about a change in seeing, but about a ***change in hearing that again involved a falling away of the subject-object distinction of ordinary consciousness***. During the experience, it was not I listening to the music but something outside myself. Only the music was left.

For about twenty years, I didn’t have any more experiences like those, even as I yearned for them. I occasionally wondered why they had stopped and concluded that perhaps they had been for a season and had served their purpose. But ***what I had known in those experiences had changed me.***

Then, in my ***mid-fifties***, I had the longest and most intense such experience I’ve ever had. It happened an hour or two into a flight from Tel Aviv to New York—in economy class—a detail I add not to establish virtue, but to make it clear that I hadn’t had any before-dinner drinks. I think the experience lasted about ***forty minutes***—not that I timed it, but it began before dinner was served and ended as the flight attendants were removing the dinner service.

As during the experiences of my thirties, ***the light changed. It became golden. I looked around, and everything was filled with exquisite beauty—the texture and fabric on the back of the seat in front of me, the tray full of food when it arrived*** (which I did not eat). ***Everybody looked beautiful***—even a passenger who, as we left Tel Aviv, had struck me as perhaps the ugliest person I had ever seen. He had been pacing the aisle and was so hard to look at that I averted my eyes each time he passed by. Even he looked wondrous. ***My face was wet with tears. I was filled with joy. I felt that I could live in that state of consciousness forever and it would never grow old. Everything was glorious, filled with glory.***

Back to my thirties: soon after these experiences began, a new teaching appointment required that I become familiar with mysticism in Christianity and other religions. That’s when ***I realized that these were mystical experiences***. Especially important was ***William James’s classic book The Varieties of Religious Experience, published more than a century ago***, still in print, and named by a panel of experts in 1999 as the ***second most important nonfiction book published in English in the twentieth century***. The book combines the elements that made up James himself: a psychologist fascinated by the varieties of human consciousness, and a philosopher pondering what all of this might mean.

Part of his book is about mystical experiences. Based on James's study of accounts of such experiences, he concluded that their **two primary features** are "**illumination**" and "**union**." Illumination has a twofold meaning. The experiences often involve **light, luminosity, radiance**. Moreover, they involve "**enlightenment**," a **new way of seeing**. "**Union**" (or "**communion**") **refers to the experience of connectedness and the disappearance or softening of the distinction between self and world**.

In addition, James names four other common features:

Ineffability. The experiences are **difficult, even impossible, to express in words**.

Yet those who have such experiences often try, usually preceded by, "It's really hard to describe, but it was like . . ."

Transiency. They are usually brief; they come and then go.

Passivity. One cannot make them happen through active effort. They come upon one—one receives them.

Noetic quality. They include a **vivid sense of knowing** (and not just intense feelings of joy, wonder, amazement)—a **nonverbal, nonlinguistic way of knowing marked by a strong sense of seeing more clearly and certainly than one ever has**. What is known is "the way things are" when all of our language falls away and we see "what is" without the domestication created by our words and categories. This way of knowing might be called **direct cognition, a way of knowing not mediated through language**.

Reading James and other writers on mysticism was amazing. In colloquial language, I was blown away. **I found my experiences described with great precision.** Suddenly, I had a way of naming and understanding them. Moreover, they were linked to the **experiences of many people**. They are **a mode of human consciousness**. They happen. And they are noetic: **something is known that one did not know before**.

I also learned **other ways they have been named**.

Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) called them experiences of "**the numinous**," **that which is behind and sometimes shines through our experience of phenomena**.

Abraham Heschel (1907–1972) called them **moments of "radical amazement"** when our domestication of reality with language falls away and we experience "what is."

Martin Buber (1878–1965) spoke of them as "**I-Thou**" or "**I-You**" **moments** in which we encounter "what is" as a "you" rather than as an "it," or an object.

Abraham Maslow (1908–1970) called them “*peak experiences*” that involve “*cognition of being*”—*knowing the way things are*.

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986), one of the most influential twentieth-century scholars of comparative religions, called them *experiences of “the golden world,” referring to their luminosity*.

Others have referred to them as moments of “*unitive consciousness*” and “*cosmic consciousness*.”

Mystical Experiences and God

I learned one more thing as I read about mystical experiences; namely, people who had them most often spoke of them as *experiences of God, the sacred, the Mystery with a capital M that is beyond all words*.

It had never occurred to me that what we call “God” could be experienced. For me, the word [God] had referred to a being who might or might not exist, and in whom one could believe or disbelieve or about whom one could remain uncertain. But I realized there is *a cloud of witnesses, Christian and non-Christian, for whom God, the sacred, is real, an element of experience, not a hypothetical being who may or may not exist and whom we can only believe in.*”

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