

URBAN ENCOUNTERS WITH GOD

When God Lends a Hand

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1. Introduction

The early socio-cultural anthropologists such as Edward Burnett Tylor, James George Frazer, *et al* were not directly concerned with religion in as much as they were interested in what they perceived as the ‘cultural other’ whom they encountered in their explorations. They were also obsessed with finding ‘rationalistic’ explanations of the (‘supernatural’) phenomena in the worldview of the so called ‘native’, all of which appeared to them radically different from the monotheistic Christian religion of Victorian British England. The early anthropological gaze in the social sciences was thus almost voyeuristic and offered theoretical commentary in evolutionary terms on practices that were termed animistic and ‘savage’. Later ethnographic interest in what was perceived as ‘primitive religion’ reveals the anthropologists’ intrigue in religious expressions like trance, shamanic visions, and dreams as events of altered states rather than mystical experiences. Much later the term ‘mystical experiences’ comes to be used within the context of the overtly theistic traditions that spoke to ‘personal’ and ‘direct’ religious experiences with God in terms of the normative frameworks of those particular religious traditions themselves.

Within the social sciences and religion studies as a whole, much of the early work on the experiential aspects of religion have, as Poloma and Pendelton¹ point out, focused on mysticism and the normality or abnormality of mystical experiences. Mystical experiences were perceived as extraordinary by their very nature, and these happen in the lives of those we would associate more often with intense and sustained devotion, asceticism and penance. Religious experience is elastically understood in this study, however; not only ‘visions,’ ‘tongues,’ and ‘prophecy’ but also events/acts perceived and accepted as religious interventions by believers are also included in religious experiences. Such an approach allows us new avenues in theorizing about religion as an everyday social practice.

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¹Margaret M. Poloma and Brian F. Pendleton, “Religious Experiences, Evangelism, and Institutional Growth within the Assemblies of God,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, 4 (1989), 415-431.

2. Phenomenological Approach and the Conceptual Lens of ‘Flow’

For many believers, God is undeniably real and actively involved in their daily lives. To them, God is alive in a quite literal and palpable way. It is these people that this study is concerned with. These are not so much people in the tribal jungles and islands visited by early anthropologists but people in the concrete jungles of today, the urban jungle of everyday metropolitan spaces, whose narratives or ‘God-talk’, give us a unique look inside their experiences. It is not about debating whether these individuals have necessarily cognitively different (or cognitively the same for that matter) experiences from the people that the early anthropologists studied, but more about the manner in which people are now studied by the contemporary anthropologists.

However, whether studying the experiences of shamanic trance, or Pentecostal rapture, these experiences are understood to be outside the cognition of the researcher. I maintain that the way one attempts to gain a measure of access to these experiences is through the (subjective) narratives that the participants share with the researcher and through a phenomenological approach. Narrative structures are accordingly understood as being able to serve as interpretative guides to the communications of a personal experience with God. The experiences captured in the narratives of the participants are in turn approached through the conceptual lens of ‘flow’. The term ‘flow’ refers to a particular type of experience characterized by feelings of fusion, effortlessness and fluidity. The concept of flow was introduced to social science discourse in the early 1970s and has since been employed in a variety of theoretical contexts, each of which has tended to draw on some particular dimensions of this relatively complex concept that happens to be relevant to the context at issue. In this study the notion of ‘flow’ is used to conceptually elucidate the effortless connection and in certain instances, the (momentary) fusion that the participants feel between them and their God.

Another term that can be considered as related and having conceptual congruence is that of ‘peak experience.’² Maslow described peak experiences as self-validating, self-justifying moments with their own intrinsic value. For Maslow there are two types of peak experiences, relative and absolute. Relative peak experiences for Maslow are not ‘true’ mystical experiences, but rather inspirations, ecstasies, and raptures. For Maslow, more probably the majority of peak experiences fell into this category. Absolute peak

²A. Maslow, *Religion, Values and Peak-Experiences*, New York: Penguin Books, 1976.

experiences are characteristic of mystical experiences that most of us are familiar with in our readings, and are comparable to those experiences of awe and ‘enlightenment’ of great mystics in history. They are said to be transcendent, timeless, characterized by unity, in which the subject and object becomes one for that moment.

It is the relative peak experience which has also has some elements of transcendence and transcending the boundary of the world, that concerns us, as experiences that are potentially available to the average believer and not only the mystic and ascetic. Theorists such as the anthropologist Victor Turner³ was concerned in exploring boundary-transcending qualities that can be approached through the hermeneutic of ‘flow.’ Turner relates flow to liminal experiences, characterized by the temporary dissolution of normal distinctions. While liminal experiences are associated with traditional societies, and are conceived as contributing in a basic manner to the confirmation of existing social order on an emotional level, liminoid experiences are conceived as occurring in modern societies. Both forms are found in modern society, but while liminal experiences are collective experiences, liminoid experiences are meant to refer to experiences of the individual and as having a polymorphic character structured by symbols that are closer to the psychological or in this case religious worldview of the individual. Turner’s concepts have since acted as a source of inspiration for the analysis of a range of phenomena characterized by emotional and boundary-transcending dimensions. For the purposes of this study I use the concept of ‘flow’ in understanding the narratives of the participants.

Bloch⁴ points out those studies of the various aspects of the heightened instances of human experience have been given very limited attention in mainstream social scientific discourse. I think Bloch is quite right. While a lot of work has been done on mysticism and mystical traditions and mystical experiences in social sciences, there are not many studies on everyday religious experiences. One is thus inclined to agree with Bloch that the inclusion of experiences of flow may yield more nuanced and qualified concepts of experience than those current in the

³Victor Turner, “Liminal to Liminoid in Play, Flow and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbolology” http://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/63159/article_RIP603_part4.pdf?sequence=1, accessed on 5 September, 2012.

⁴Charlotte Bloch, “Flow: Beyond Fluidity and Rigidity – A Phenomenological Investigation,” *Human Studies* 23, 1 (2000), 47.

discourse regarding experiences of everyday life and thus warrant further analyses in the social contexts within which they arise.

The current emphasis in anthropology of religion is thus not on the so called tribal or rural, but on urban religion and urban expressions of religious life, and this is where this study is also positioned. It is not so much a shift in how religion articulates in rural versus an urban context that I refer to here, in as much as referring to the manner in which anthropologists now work with religion and religious followers. While the anthropological interest and anthropology has appeared to shift from the so called exotic aspects of pre-industrial communities to religion in an urban setting, in many ways the phenomena under study, as in this paper, remain very much the same, in other words; trance, tongues, visions and dreams.

I began this section by claiming that the way one can try and to gain some measure of access to the peak experiences of the believers is through the subjective narratives that they as participants in the study, share with us as researchers, which we work through via a phenomenological approach. Since the publication of Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy*⁵ and Gerardus Van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*,⁶ the 'phenomenological' approach to the study of religion has become popular. It has to be admitted that much of this fascination with phenomenological tools has found a happier home and place in disciplines other than anthropology; in sociology, psychology, comparative religion, history, etc. However, anthropologists today are fascinated more than ever before by the 'religious strange' in the 'culturally familiar.' Contemporary anthropology of religion and contemporary anthropologists, see the value in the so called 'practicalities'⁷ of religious experience and religion on the ground so to speak. The search for origins has fallen out of favour in anthropology, and urban anthropology has become increasingly about the study of human beings in their local contexts. Within this understanding, 'religion' is understood as a category of human activity and experience that has also equally diverse local and situational contexts. I believe that the phenomenological approach holds much promise for anthropologists working in religion, especially for those working with narratives, and more especially with narratives about the deep underlying structures and

⁵Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford: Oxford, University Press, 1923.

⁶Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, Princeton: Princeton University, 1938.

⁷William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: Longmans, Green, 1916.

subtexts around subjective experiences, such as relative peak experiences that speak to Victor Turner’s ‘liminoid’.

3. Background to the Study

While most entry level introductory Anthropology courses at University open with a study of religion from an anthropological standpoint that acknowledge seminal thinkers, such as Edward Tylor, James George Frazier, Max Müller, and Rudolf Otto,⁸ their ideas are now regarded as quaint and outdated. More contemporary post-functionalist and post-structuralist studies in the anthropology of religion are Geertzian in their interpretive approach to religious phenomena. Clifford Geertz propounded more a methodological approach rather than a theoretical unpacking to religions and the symbols and actions embedded in the matrix of religions. Doug Padgett⁹ notes that later studies attempt to be revisionist, with more fluid, contingent, and I add, more elastic and shifting definitions of religion that actually fit the observable and communicable phenomena in the community being studied, unlike the rigid straitjacketed normative labels used by early anthropological scholars in religion.

As someone with a Geertzian interest in religion, that is, not so much what religion is, (which must necessarily be multifarious in a plural society), but what religion does for those who choose to believe, I am fascinated by the powerful meaning that religion has in the lives of people. I am also fascinated in what it does for them and what they in turn, do. Religion as a cultural phenomenon has likewise emerged as a critically important area of study.

However, religion studies is itself a vast landscape with much interdisciplinary (feminist, sociological, anthropological, theological) work in both the various religions, as well as the various aspects of religion (beliefs, doctrine, rituals, myths, institutions, ethics, etc.) and these studies have been ethnographic, exegetical as well as theoretical. Many studies are qualitative studies that have an ethnographic component and work with an identified sample of participants, and most anthropological studies attempt to base their theoretical analyses directly on the material collected through in-depth qualitative interviews, and on both participant and non participant observations within the sample community.

⁸Thomas J. Csordas, “Asymptote of the Ineffable Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion,” *Current Anthropology* 45, 2 (2004), 163-185, 165.

⁹Padgett Doug, “Anthropology of Religion,” <http://www.indiana.edu/~wanthro/religion.htm> accessed on 12 September, 2012.

For this study, the sample of 35 Christian participants were identified through making contact with various churches representing different denominational backgrounds and approaching the pastors in charge for permission to attend the congregational gatherings and speak to and interview some of the congregants. From that point, potential participants were identified and an acquaintance was struck with them. These potential participants, if identified as suitable, then the snowball sampling technique was used to lead to other prospective informants and included individuals who could also be outside that particular congregation. The idea was to get a wide and a diverse sampling of male and female adult participants as possible. In some instances individuals that the pastor pointed us to were not approached. This was simply because we wanted to elicit and hear the stories of the so called ‘average person,’ who may have had ‘simple’ but extraordinary stories to share.

The final group was thus a purposive sample, who identify themselves as Christians and who could claim to have had some personal experience of God. An interview schedule was used, however the questions were unstructured and the interview was set up to be casual and intimate as it was important that the participants were comfortable with the interviewer. The interviews themselves were largely unstructured and tended to be fairly free flowing narratives.

Narrative analysis was employed and this method allows the stories to be told as they wish, rather than making any claims for the accuracy, reliability or veracity of the narratives. While pseudonyms are used in communicating the narratives in most instances, here, the actual names have been retained as the participants indicated that they did not require anonymity. In most instances I have preserved some of the verbatim sections of the narratives, intentionally, in a methodological effort to keep the descriptions thick and evocative of what the believers were attempting to share, and to help us more fully ‘see’ and ‘hear’ the believers in the context of their stories.

In order to approximate, in methodological terms, this ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing’ of the believers’ stories, this paper works through a phenomenological understanding of religion and seeks to show through the narratives of the participants, that their experiences speak to a form of religious experience of God. As mentioned earlier, these experiences were not necessarily heady mystical and dramatic experiences, but rather smaller intimate yet powerful experiences of God’s interventions in their lives. The phenomenology of religion helps us gain an insight into the

experiential dimensions of religion and the experiences that the participants share. More importantly, the phenomenological approach allows us to describe religious phenomena in terms of the believers’ own understanding and acceptance.

The research is not about quantifying individuals’ experience and perception of God and their religious activities that stem from their perceptions, given the nature of some of the encounters communicated. Some of the participants report personally receiving a divine healing, eagerly sharing that, “miraculous healings occur today just as they did during Jesus’ days on earth.” Other participants share experiences of receiving an answer to a specific prayer request and receiving a personal confirmation “of the truths of Scripture.” Yet others have experiences of speaking in ‘tongues.’ There appear to be, embedded in the narratives of the participants, ongoing personal religious experiences, including glossolalia, prophecy, healing, deliverance, and what are perceived to be little acts of miracles. Phenomenology of religion is also descriptively oriented. This means that evaluative judgments are not their concern but they seek “accurate and appropriate descriptions and interpretations of religious phenomena.”¹⁰

4. The Believers

4.1. Thabiso is a 27 year old Black African male who lives with his elderly mother. Thabiso says that he accepted Jesus Christ as his saviour in 2002 after having attended his friend’s funeral where he says he was confronted by his own mortality. He claims that he has had a powerful “spiritual experience” and “seen the power of God” in his life as God has “protected him against evil spirits.” Thabiso’s account reveals a specific awareness of the presence of divinity:

I felt His hand upon me a few years ago. I had fasted and attended a night-long prayer with some of the people from my church the weekend before. That day an old lady who lived 30 minutes away from my house sent her granddaughter to call me ... and when I got to her house she told me that she hadn’t had a chance to sleep for two months as there were noises in her house. She told me that the noises start at 12 midnight every night and that she is the only one who hears them. To protect her family she had moved everyone to the

¹⁰Emeka C. Ekeke and Chike A. Ekeopara, “Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Religion: A Historical Perspective,” *European Journal of Scientific Research* 44, 2 (2010), 266-274, 271.

other bedroom. She said these noises sounded like animals fighting. This shocked me as I had never heard of such a thing, and I didn't know what to do.

I promised to come back that same night to pray for her. I went there at 11.30 pm. I was really scared that night. As I got to through the gate a heavy thunderstorm started and it came straight in my direction and I turned my back. That moment I felt a hand on my back, in the exact spot that the lightning would have struck. I couldn't believe what happened. I went into that lady's house and I started praying at 11.55 and at 12 midnight the noises started and I could hear them. I prayed harder as it continued until the old woman started screaming and saying 'there's a snake in the house.' When I turned I saw the snake but I heard the Holy spirit saying I should pray so I started saying 'you devil I rebuke you' maybe I kept saying this for 10 minutes; ... the snake didn't move; ... then suddenly it started changing its colour from green to brown then finally it spat a black liquid and died. I then burnt that snake. That day I realised that the Holy Spirit really is always with me and that He has the power to protect me from anything and everything.

Communities of faith and the sacred scriptures of the believer's faith tradition are generally considered the necessary media of prayer¹¹ and this was Thabiso's reflex response when confronted by what he considered was 'evil.' His expectation was for a suitable response from a higher power, which he says he received, in the form of the Divine voice or Holy Spirit guiding and giving him strength and physically laying a hand on his back.

4.2. Peter was a forty three year old male from Nigeria who arrived in South Africa in 2007. His story, which he narrates from vivid memory, is a muscular appeal to God. The healing that he says he witnessed in response to his appeal and challenge to God, is what he sees as an expression of an encounter with and a response from God. Peter starts to talk about being distraught about his strong fear that his mother was 'possessed', which he says presented with the recognizable pathology of been 'disturbed' or 'psychologically unbalanced'. Peter tells his story:

In June 1999, my aging mother was demonically attacked with sickness that made her not to talk to anybody, eat or drink anything for two weeks. The look of her eyes will quickly tell you that she

¹¹Brock Kelcourse, "Prayer and the Soul: Dialogues That Heal Felicity," *Journal of Religion and Health* 40, 1 (2001), 231-241.

was mentally disturbed and possessed. Everybody’s advice centred on taking her to psychiatric hospital. Having decided to do so the following morning due to all round pressure and her terrible state, I got up and went into the chapel of God in St. Joseph Catholic Church back home in Nigeria... I spoke to God directly and I said to Him... “If you allow me Lord to take my mother to a hospital for a human being to take the healing glory that is supposed to belong to you, Lord, please do not then blame me.” And I then left the church. At night of the same day, my mother started talking, drinking and eating and was completely healed till today. When people came in the morning to take my mother in the car to the hospital, she was the one who opened the house door and welcomed them. They couldn’t explain what happened overnight, but I alone could tell them...that it was God’s answer and God’s healing.

According to Poloma and Pendleton,¹² religious experiences can be conceptualized as

1. Confirming – sense of sacredness/specific awareness of the presence of divinity;
2. Responsive – salvation, miraculous and sanctioning experiences;
3. Ecstatic – those involving an intense emotional, and personal relationship with God.

While Thabiso’s narrative fits number 1 on the list, Peter’s experience, which he calls a ‘religious experience’, appears to fit number 2 on the list, as a kind of strong response from God with a miraculous and salvific (in a healing sense) outcome for the mother, and a vindication of sorts for Peter.

4.3. Mpilo Mbambo is a twenty four year old female, who shares that she has been ‘saved’ for ten years, meaning that she was converted to Christianity ten years back. Mpilo belonged to a Charismatic Pentecostal Church. Scholars maintain that every so often, religious enthusiasm seems to crest. Historians have called these periods of religious excitement “great awakenings.”¹³ Certainly for Christianity in South Africa, there does appear to have been a wave of interest in particular kinds of charismatic religious activity over the last decade that captures the shift toward experiential and evangelical Christianity. As mentioned, the participants are all Christians, some were Pentecostals, others Catholics and a few were

¹²Poloma and Pendleton, “Religious Experiences, Evangelism,” 418.

¹³Nils G. Holm, “Mysticism and Intense Experiences,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21, 3 (1982), 268-276, 274.

Hindus who were converted to Christianity and were part of the Assemblies of God Church. And while some participants' narratives spoke to and referenced distinctly charismatic or Pentecostal phenomena, similar experiences were experienced by non-Pentecostal believers as well.

Glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, is, however, the most distinctively Pentecostal of the experiences. Mpilo, who belonged to one of the Pentecostal Churches, shared a story that illustrates an experience of glossolalia that appeared to be a common occurrence for several of the participants interviewed. Mpilo shares her story which contains elements of prayer and appeals to God in the context of illness and healing;

I experienced the Lord's power through healing. You know there are illnesses that you can't easily share with people. From the age of 16 I had severe menstrual pains. I got used to the pains as there was nothing I could do; ... the doctor said everything was clear in my body. During this time I would dream of being intimate with men that I did not know...

Whenever our pastor called for those who needed prayer I'd go to the front of the altar and he would pray with me. But still I'd feel the pains and these men would come to my dreams. One day when we were having a Holy Communion, our pastor asked for those who are sick and I went to the front. I was not ashamed on that day and I stood up before he could even finish his sentence. I stood and waited for him to serve the Lord's body and His holy blood. When I went to the front I was having the worst pains, but I needed to be delivered, so I went there. He served it and I ate and drank. The next minute I was on the floor, I was told I spoke in tongues.

The charismatic practice of "resting in the Spirit," is a state in which a person is overwhelmed by divine power/presence and falls into a sacred swoon.¹⁴

Mpilo continues:

My pastor prayed for the demon of lust to leave my body and it finally did. Since that day I have never felt any pain or had any evil dreams. On that day God answered a prayer I had for many years. He healed me. This made me trust Him with everything. I now pray before I sleep because I know that the devil is always looking for a body to use for his evil agenda.

¹⁴Csordas, "Asymptote of the Ineffable Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion," 169.

4.4. Nomvelo is in her late thirties and works as a high school teacher. She had turned to Christianity and had an experience that confirmed her belief in God.

I got saved when I was 17 at a revival at school. I have ever since given all my troubles to God. I remember when I was 23 and my mother came back from work and slept as she had a severe headache. I tried to wake her up but she wouldn't. She was cold, yet still breathing. I prayed for my mother, I had already turned the heater on but she was still cold. That moment my pastor called on the phone and said he was praying and he had a vision of me crying in a place that looked like a desert. That moment I knew that God hadn't forgotten me or my family. I told my pastor that I was feeling so alone as if I was in a desert a place where nothing positive can happen as I had lost my father a month back. I also told him that my mother was lying in bed unconscious. He was shocked and he started praying for her. Ten minutes later he called again and asked me to put the phone on her ear so that he can pray for her. He prayed for five minutes and the next I saw my mother's fingers move... Her eyes still couldn't open and her whole body couldn't move. My pastor ended the call and said he would see her the next morning and I should call should there be any changes.

The next morning the pastor finally came and started praying for her and after 30 minutes of praying she coughed. She finally woke up and started regaining consciousness. Finally, she managed to start talking. She explained that she did not know where she was but there were dead people there, she said even my dad, her dead husband, was there. My pastor explained that she was trapped by the devil, that's why she was unconscious for such a long time. This is my greatest testimony. My mother has been well ever since. Before this happened I had known that there is a God and that he fights our battles. Through this I learned that God is always watching over us.

Quite often believers may perceive God as similar to their primary caregiver¹⁵ and this is certainly the manner in which many participants spoke about their relationship to God. Certainly this was palpably evident in both Nomvelo's demeanour, as well her narrative ... where she ends her story by saying... “Through this I learned that God is always watching over

¹⁵Jacqueline L. Noffke and Susan H. McFadden, “Denominational and Age Comparisons of God Concepts,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40, 4 (2001), 747-756.

us.” Perceptions of God as compassionate, benevolent, or wrathful vary in tandem with doctrinal descriptions embedded in the particular religious affiliation.

4.5. Zethu Nkosi was a young twenty seven year old who says she found Jesus seven years ago. Her story points to what she perceives as a direct intervention by God (Jesus Christ) that allowed her to protect the integrity of her faith, and in so doing provided an overriding vindication of the Christian path she had chosen. Zethu, initially in her younger days, like the rest of her large extended familial and affinal kinship network was a follower of African traditional religion. African traditional cosmology gave great credence and respect to the ‘ancestors’ and sacrifices to the ancestors. Zethu’s story shows that her conversion was initially caused grave concern amongst the elders in her family. Like many other participants, illness and healing are also strong features in her story;

I keep hearing people saying there is no God but I know there is a God... Anyone who saw me in hospital a year ago would agree with me. You see three years ago I was diagnosed with TB and the doctors said my lungs were affected. People were saying all things about me. Some said I had HIV and others said I had been bewitched. I refused to believe all that they were saying, and instead I prayed to the Lord.

I remember my family wanted to perform a cleansing ritual for me, according to African traditional customs. So they bought two cows and 6 chickens as they needed to apologise to the ancestors on my behalf as, according to my relatives, I had ‘forsaken’ them and turned away from my beliefs, which they said caused my sickness. I didn’t want that ritual to be performed; ... it’s not Christian you know, but I couldn’t disobey my grandfather so I agreed to go to a sangoma [traditional healer]. When we got to the sangoma’s house we all went into his house. The sangoma didn’t even look at me in the eye. He started lighting his candles and none of them lit. After many attempts he gave up and gave each of us candles to light up, my mother’s and grandfather’s did but mine didn’t. He furiously asked me to stop praying in his hut as my [Christian] prayer was disturbing him. I don’t know how he knew because I was praying in my heart, not aloud. I nodded my head in approval of what he had said but I continued to pray in silence.

He then started throwing the animal bones; when he threw them the first time, three of his important bones didn’t fall out of the bag. The

next time they all came out but they were all on top of each other. In disbelief he called his wife who was also a sangoma. She saw what had happened and shook her head as she went out. The sangoma asked my mother and me to go out while he spoke to my grandfather. We waited for 15 minutes and he finally came out looking rather disappointed as the sangoma had told him that there was nothing he could do to help as I had an unknown spirit protecting me. The sangoma even refused our payment as he said it was going to affect his medicines negatively.

When we got home we found everyone looking rather depressed. They explained that the goats had died. No one understood how and why they died. The chicken had untied themselves and ran away and the Zulu beer was full of ants and flies. None of the things that were prepared for the traditional ritual could be eaten. My grandfather was angry at me as he believed that it was my fault that all this had happened. The following Monday I had to go for my medication and to do tests. The doctors found that TB was no longer in my body. I got all teary when he told me and I started thanking God. Since this my whole family had been saved. Sometimes God allows things to happen to us, just so we can see His power and people can experience His greatness.

These kinds of narratives speak to what the believers perceive as a direct and intimate intervention in their lives; they see these occurrences as ‘God’s hand in their lives.’ The narratives appear to, in the eyes of the participants, reference an increasing intimacy of acquaintance with God. Other participants speak about their experiences of God as someone “who is always there, yet only seen at certain points.”

4.6. Thembani is a thirty two year old male. Like many others, tragedy and subsequent redemption and salvation appears to have provided the means for him to fully accept and ‘see’ what he refers to as the Truth: “It’s not a question of whether there is a God or not, rather whether you are wise enough to see His presence in your life.”

4.7. Nelisa was a young single mother with one child. She prefaces her story with exuberant exclamations:

I experience God’s presence in my everyday life. God gives me life, the energy to move, protects me, provides for me and my little angel even though her dad is dead. The instance of God’s presence in my life is when I experienced God’s miracle and power. I had an

encounter with him. I was sleeping and in the middle of the night I heard a voice saying to me to wake up and pray. I immediately got up and worshiped God very powerfully. The next morning my brother called me and told me he was stabbed, but the wounds were not deep but just a scratch. I realised that this stabbing happened at the precise time as I heard the voice telling me to wake up and pray. I was overjoyed and thanked God for what he had done. He is mighty and great. I am completely open to the Lord. There is no difference and distinction between Him and me. If I had not listened to the voice of the Spirit and prayed, my brother might have been stabbed to death. But the God that I serve, the miracle worker, protected my brother. It is true ... God will never forsake me no matter what.

4.8. Elizabeth, a forty four year old transnational migrant mother of three children came from the African country of Rwanda. Elizabeth explained that despite going to church all her life she only experienced God in her life personally, more than within the walls of the Church. Elizabeth told me that she had a powerful religious experience of God in a vision. She said she encountered God directly and felt that it was God who had saved and intervened for her when the war broke out in Rwanda. She shared that her parents and siblings were all killed during the war. Elizabeth shares that she was meant to have died that day too ... but she had a vision that day and God told her that she needed to go to her fiancée. She explained that she had gone to her fiancée and on her return had discovered that her entire family had been slaughtered. She shares:

I don't even know why I would want to see him that afternoon when it was a working day. But the vision was so strong that I obeyed. I did not even find him at his home, but when I came back to my home I was shocked, they [the family] had all been slaughtered. I ran back to my fiancée's work place in my state (seven months pregnant) and we did not even bother to go back and fetch anything for we were too scared. We fled from the country. We prayed and asked God to be with us and to lead us to where we will be safe. It was really a difficult time for us, we begged for food on our way as we went through neighbouring countries. I gave birth to our first child in Congo. The only thing that kept us going was the powerful sense and fact that we knew that God was with us and we had faith and trusted that he will provide for us every day. I would have given up all hope, killed myself and my unborn child; ... but that vision saved me and I know it was because I needed to be safe for my unborn child.

Elizabeth narrated that, this was not the only instance where she has experienced God’s power and intervention in her life, as God has performed miracles in her life specifically on many occasions and now she knows that nothing is impossible with God. Her second narrative is evocative of a ‘forgetting’ and a subsequent reminder of God’s power.

While in Congo we [the husband and her] both found jobs and we were living very well. And the other refugees were even envious of us. We were still going to church but we did not let the Holy Spirit to work in us and to lead us as we had done in times of crisis. I guess God was angry at us and decided to punish us again. One day just as it had happen in my home country, there was a problem in Congo and they were taking all refugees back to their home countries. We knew that if we are taken back to Rwanda, we will be killed. Soldiers had blocked the entrance to the refugee camp where our houses were, to take everyone who was seen around there. We could not go there to fetch neither our proper documents nor the money we had saved. All was gone. We had to run for our lives. And that is how we ended up in South Africa. We had forgotten to remain faithful to God who had saved us, and he decided to show us that He is the Supreme One, when He says “yes,” nobody can say “no” and when He says “no,” nobody can say “yes.” I guess that is why the Bible says that ‘it will be as difficult for a rich man to go to heaven as it is difficult for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle.’ You see Christians tend to trust in God more and to pray harder, when they are in trouble or in difficulty. From that time we decided to ask for forgiveness from God and we promised Him that never will we abandon Him again or stray away from His commandments. We feel strong and powerful in His faith and our faith in Him. I feel connected to his creation! Again through the mercy of God, we were saved and here we are today and nothing can touch us.

Many of these narratives can be described in the sense of the person having a sense of functioning optimally (feelings of strength, power, endurance, bodily presence) and a sense of being above and beyond oneself as though guided by some higher power. In her study with experiences of ‘flow’, Charlotte Bloch describes how some individuals have the feeling that they are overflowing with an existential bodily power that extends beyond themselves and brings feelings of power, freedom and greatness, while others experience a fusion or blending with the outer world that presents itself with a new intensity and clarity. Although Bloch studied

various flow experiences in secular contexts, music, art, etc., the experiences she described as shared by her participants, find many points of congruency with the participants in this study. In both cases there are instances of belonging to a totality that is characterized by depth and connectedness. These experiences are associated with feelings of some measure of transcendence.¹⁶ In discussing her study, Bloch states that “these phenomenological structures are based upon an empirical sample of so-called ordinary people in a certain phase of their life.”¹⁷ For Bloch, the “fundamental principle in undertaking the phenomenological interview” was to focus upon the concrete course of experience as this presents itself to the interviewee. This is something that finds congruence with my own study.

Thus, the focus on flow experience as a medium for transforming chaos into order is something that emerged in many of the narratives. In the same way, according to Bloch, a similarity can be hypothesized between the focus on the dimension of self-transcendence in Turner’s usage of the concept of flow, and the structures of experience identified in this analysis as unity/totality and as other structures of meaning, structures characterized by openness and identifying one’s self with an outside force, which in this study, the participants identify as God. The particularity of flow experiences is that it is an experience both of boundary transcendence and of order. Thus, in flow experiences, the traditional distinctions between subject (participants) and object (the Lord), chaos (illness and misfortunate in their lives) and order (healing and resolution of the problem), are transformed into the ordered experience of flow.¹⁸

Maslow said that all individuals are capable of peak experiences or different flow experiences.¹⁹ Peak experiences are also able, as evidenced in some of our participant’s narratives, capable of rendering therapeutic value as they foster a sense of being graced and capable of reaffirming the worthiness of life, as well as being able to change an individual’s view of himself or herself. Peak experiences fulfil on a personal level what myths historically have fulfilled for whole peoples. Both embody truths that are independent of factual knowledge, and bring about attitudinal changes. Maslow cautioned against seeking such experiences for their own sake,

¹⁶Bloch, “Flow: Beyond Fluidity and Rigidity,” 45.

¹⁷Bloch, “Flow: Beyond Fluidity and Rigidity,” 45.

¹⁸Bloch, “Flow: Beyond Fluidity and Rigidity,” 68.

¹⁹Abraham Maslow, “Religious Aspects of Peak-Experiences,” *Personality and Religion*, New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

and in so doing echoes the advice of the mystics who have pointed out that the sacred exists in the ordinary.

5. Conclusion

The position that this paper adopts is that there are experiences that are less dramatic, but no less religious and meaningful in terms of being understood and perceived by the believer, as experiencing a contact with or an intervention from God. Such experiences, I maintain, are important areas of research within religion studies and qualitative social sciences interpretive research as a whole. The paper by Peter Willis²⁰ explores some of the ways in which phenomenological approaches have been linked to contemporary social science inquiry into human ways of knowing, and the relationship between phenomenology and contemporary forms of qualitative and interpretative research. It explores some of the ways phenomenology has mutated and been reshaped by scholars to meet various research needs in different disciplines.

This particular paper has looked at the phenomenological approach in the context of everyday religious experiences, in turn refracted through the conceptual lens of ‘flow’. For me the most important aspect of the study was that these legitimating experiences were everyday religious experiences and these were everyday or average people, as opposed to mystics and sages and such. For the number of believers that are lay followers are millions. While the founding figures and mystics have informed and inspired such a following in the respective religions, ultimately, the true value is in the lay person who is the adherent in that particular religion. Thus for me, his or her religious experience is of immense value. According to Taylor,²¹ prior to the nineteenth century, the term ‘religious experience’ was used primarily within a theological context. Religious experience was supposedly something that happened within the framework of established religions, (and by a small segment of the population, mystics, etc.) and as such was not investigated by social scientists as a distinct phenomenon.

As this scholarly landscape changed, the phenomenologist of religion aimed to develop a genuine understanding of the experiences of the

²⁰Peter Willis, “‘The Things Themselves’ to a ‘Feeling of Understanding’: Finding Different Voices in Phenomenological Research,” *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 4 (2004) 1-13.

²¹Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

worshippers and so gain first hand information of the experience²² (in as much as can be gathered through what is shared by the experience). To do this, the phenomenologist of religion avoids reductionism. Reductionism is a method where scholars try to reduce religious phenomena to purely sociological, psychological, anthropological, economic, or ultimate units of any kind. Such reductions would ignore the deeply textured and rich complexity of the human experience and ignore the unique intentionality of the religious participant. This is because ‘good phenomenologists’ do not seek a bird’s eye view but, ‘a worm’s eye view’ on the ground.²³ William James followed a phenomenological approach in compiling the narrative accounts of religious experiences in his classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. For James,²⁴ personal experience, the so called ‘worm’s eye view’, therefore, lies at the heart of religion and not in doctrine or theological speculation, which is the position point of my study as well, in choosing to go to the lay believer and asking about what they had to share. The narratives shared by the lay participants, a sample of which form part of the body of this paper, appear to vindicate James’ assertion and draws to our analytic attention, the observation that these narratives, when approached through the phenomenological approach, can provide rich contexts for studying some of the motivations behind adherents’ continuing faith in their God.

Phenomenology²⁵ refers to the meaning of the ‘lived experience’ of several individuals on a particular concept, in other words, a particular

²²S. A. Moreau, “Phenomenology of Religion,” Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 2001.

²³Ekeke and Ekeopara, “Phenomenological Approach to the Study of Religion, 273.

²⁴William James was one of the first to discuss religious experience from outside theology. To James religious experience was a distinct class of experience²⁴ which could be studied through phenomenological methods. In James’ view, religious traditions developed around individuals who had encountered religious experiences directly. The distinctive feature of phenomenology of religion is that it ‘suspends’ questions of validity and truth for the sake of developing insights into the essence of religious experience, whether theological or not, one adds. Thus even though I have looked at religious experiences that are also overtly theological, the study is aware that there are also religious experiences that are outside the purview of established religions, like Christianity.

²⁵The role of theory in phenomenology, considering the explanations associated with its origin and definition is complicated and yet interesting. It is explicit that applying formal theory contrasts with Husserlian Phenomenology; however, the assumptions and principles of Husserl’s phenomenology actually form a

phenomenon.²⁶ Through phenomenology, the researcher can attempt to understand the experience that several individuals have had on a certain phenomenon. Peter Willis raises discussion in his paper, of what has been termed ‘new’ phenomenology as opposed to the (older) ‘classical’ phenomenology. Willis unpacks ‘new phenomenology’ as ‘empathetic’. This ‘new’ phenomenology, according to Willis, focuses on the meanings and significances given to an experience by those experiencing it. He claims that the researcher working in the ‘new phenomenology’ approach works hard at gathering people’s subjective meanings, and the sense they make of things. This also resonates with my understanding of the work of the eminent comparative religionist Ninian Smart. Smart explains that eidetic vision is the capacity to grasp the essence of religious phenomena by means of empathetic and intuitive research processes.²⁷ These are also qualities that feminist ethnographers’ attempt to bridge the distance between themselves and those they wish to study, while at the same time balancing a critical distance so as not to compromise the research process.

Although ‘new phenomenology’ is not an approach or label I consciously carried into the study and employed, in looking back I contend that in terms of methodological approach, the research has worked hard at really listening and hearing the participants and giving due value to the meaning that the participants ascribed to their subjective experiences. Research requiring ‘objectivity’ which is probably still the dominant discourse surrounding ideas of research, has become associated with the positivist approach to research. Accordingly alternative approaches have sought to legitimately admit forms of human subjectivity into academic writing and to portray the personal as both political and socially relevant. The aim in phenomenological approach was to find a way to name and portray subjective human experience, but reported on and analysed according to the norms of social science scholarship.

However, in terms of the objectivity and subjectivity debate, the argument is that when scholars study religious experience, we cannot

kind of theory in themselves. In Transcendental Phenomenology, theory is invisibly linked with methodology, and as a result the researcher consciously tries to avoid any sort of influence that theories could possibly have on his/her mind which inevitably leads to a predetermined path, while the invisibility of theory demands him/her to be objective through the research process.

²⁶J. W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2007.

²⁷Ninian Smart, *The Phenomenon of Christianity*, London: Collins, 1979.

study the ‘experiencing,’ as we are not in that ‘space’. This is because religious experience happens in real time (for the believer) with its physical, mental, and emotional constituents. As researchers we thus end up studying retrospective accounts which are but linguistic representations of religious experiences.²⁸ Perhaps a ‘new phenomenology’, allows us a more empathetic ear in accessing some of these experiences.

Such a new phenomenological approach was unconsciously used in this study, in listening to and gathering the narratives or the ‘God-talk’ of the participants, that are embraced the linguistic representations of such religious expressions. These allow us to get close(r) to a religiously resonant account of the concept of God’s presence (as experienced by the participants). It is not the veracity of the narratives that are important, but the meaning they hold for the participants. The research pursuit with interviews, thematic analysis and clustering of interview transcripts looking for the common meanings and experiences had for the participants, represents a major way of working in qualitative social science research. These experiences are in turn also not presented as veridical proof of God’s existence, nor did the participants take them to be proof in God. They took God’s presence as a *fait accompli*. Rather it served to reaffirm their faith in God and their chosen faith, and in some instances, to remind and re-invite them into the faith.

²⁸David Yamane, “Narrative and Religious Experience,” *Sociology of Religion* 61, 2 (2000), 171-189.