

ANNUA NUNTIA LOVANIENSIA
LIII

A-2.-878

Encountering Transcendence

Contributions to a Theology of
Christian Religious Experience

Edited by

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Stijn Van den Bossche

PEETERS
LEUVEN – PARIS – DUDLEY, MA
2005

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology (4th: 2003: Louvain, Belgium)
Encountering transcendence: contributions to a theology of Christian religious
experience / edited by Lieven Boeve, Hans Geybels, and Stijn Van den Bossche.
p. cm. -- (Annua nuntia Lovaniensia ; 53)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 90-429-1674-5 (alk. paper)
1. Experience (Religion)--Congresses. 2. Knowledge, Theory of (Religion)--Congresses.
I. Boeve, L. (Lieven) II. Geybels, Hans, 1971-III. Van den Bossche, S. (Stijn) IV. Title.
V. Series.

BR110.L48 2003a
248.2--dc22

2005052025

Cover: Felix De Boeck, "Zelfgave", 1979
Collectie Vlaamse Gemeenschap
Photograph: Hugo Maertens
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© Uitgeverij Peeters, Bondgenotenlaan 153, B-3000 Leuven (Belgium)
ISBN 90-429-1674-5
D/2005/0602/108 UB03729507

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Introduction

Diverse sample studies taken from the extensive field of religion, theology and religious studies reveal that 'religious experience' is today clearly a pivotal issue. More specifically, this is made evident in modern theological hermeneutics and in the anti-modern and/or post-modern reactions thereto, the theology of world religions and inter-religious dialogue, the contemporary resurgence of religiosity in Western society and culture, and the so-called turn to religion in contemporary continental philosophy. It would appear from such studies that the category of 'religious experience' is frequently called upon to clarify or explain the phenomenon of religion and religiosity on the one hand and to support and legitimise religious positions or the critique thereof on the other.

Because of the loss of plausibility of tradition-bound religiosity and of foundational, so-called onto-theological schemes, 'religious experience' has come to constitute, for many, the last (or latest) point of departure and anchor for religion and religious thinking. This is certainly the case with respect to tendencies within contemporary Christian traditions and theological reflection. In a multitude of ways and from a variety of different perspectives, 'religious experience' and 'experience of transcendence' or 'of the divine' have gained a prominent place in philosophical and fundamental-theological conceptual schemes. In reaction to this, other authors have denied the very primacy given to religious experience in reflecting upon faith, pointing to the constitutive role of tradition and narrative without which there is no religious experience. From all this follows that the category of religious experience is in great need of reconceptualisation, not least from a theological point of view. On the one hand, religious experience is all too easily called upon to legitimise religious claims (often against 'tradition') and on the other hand, the category has become misleading in so far as it is tainted by the modern scientific understanding of experience – in reaction to which 'tradition' is then too easily invoked to protect the core of religion.

This volume consists of several contributions to a refined understanding of religious experience in view of a contemporary theological epistemology. They constitute a selection of offered papers delivered at the Fourth International L.E.S.T. Conference (Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology), 5-8 November 2003. Both young scholars at the