

## CHAPTER II

### O'COLLINS' UNDERSTANDING OF SYMBOLS AND EXPERIENCE

In demonstrating the symbolic characteristic of human nature and the role of symbols, symbolism and symbolization in human life, Yves Labbé says:

L'activité symbolique ne serait pas une détermination parmi d'autres de la condition humaine. Elle en constituerait la forme formatrice. L'homme se distinguerait de l'animal en entretenant avec le monde un rapport médiatisé par des systèmes de signes, en particulier ceux du langage et de la culture.<sup>1</sup>

As beings that are both material and spiritual, we, human beings, are essentially symbolic (*homo symbolicus*). We express ourselves through symbols and by symbolic acts. All that we do in relation to the world, to other persons, as well as to God, begins and ends in symbols. It is through symbols that we experience the world and communicate with one another; it is through symbols that we experience God and his self-revelation or communication. Moreover, God's communication or revelation to us, human beings, also takes the form and the road of symbols.<sup>2</sup>

In a religious context, especially a context of religious plurality, it is extremely important to be aware of the existence of symbols and of their work or their function in human life in general, as well as in religions, and to know how they work together with our experience, which is the place of encounter with God and others.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Yves Labbé, *Le Nœud symbolique*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1997, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbole et sacrement, une relecture sacramentelle de l'existence chrétienne*, Paris, Les Édition du Cerf, 2008, pp. 153-158; O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 98-99, 108; Louis Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection, Excursion in the Phenomenology and Philosophy of Religion*, Cambridge, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998, pp. 67-68, 75.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. José María Mardones, *La Vida del Símbolo: La Dimensión Simbólica de la Religión*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 2003, pp. 89-90.

Given the fact that symbols are human products, and that they work through culture, language and history, which are also human products, religious man and woman are challenged to reconcile the objective symbolization and the subjective experience which are two essential components in their religious act and their access to the religious or transcendent reality.<sup>4</sup> One can see that to reduce religious act to a purely psychological or socio-cultural affair, and to reduce religious reality to some kind of social symbols is to impoverish our living act, to discredit the objective characteristic or the role of religious symbols, and to lead to nihilism. On the other hand, neglecting the contingency and subjective factor in religious symbols is the source of fanaticism or religious intolerance.

All kinds of authoritarianism, totalitarianism, absolutism, exclusivism or fundamentalism in religions are, in fact, inevitable outcomes of those persons, groups, or communities that either have no place for symbols or else misunderstand the role symbols play in our human life. On the one hand, all these “isms” and many others, reflect excesses of the human passion for uniformity, for an unchanging constitution, for a control of all the numerous interrelationships within the life of a group or of a community, for a single vision, and for a grand theory. In such cases they are, in fact, the fruit of human attempts to forge absolute claims.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, they reflect, as we have said, the misunderstanding of symbols, their role and their power, or the misidentification of symbols with signs, or even worse, with the reality which they symbolize or represent.

Even though O’Collins does not engage in an extensive study of symbolism and that of experience, his understanding of these subjects, which is some kind of a phenomenological description, responds well to the essential challenges of the Christian life in today’s world, such as relevance of the sacramental life, the *raison-d’être* of the Church, the continuous search for, and the nature of, the divine truth, which is immanent

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, pp. 67-69 and Labbé, *Le Nœud symbolique*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Frederick William Dillistone, *The Power of Symbols*, London, SCM, 1986, pp. 223-225.

in ourselves and in the world around us and at the same time remains always ungraspable mystery. Furthermore, O'Collins' account of symbols and experience can also serve as an invitation to enter into interreligious dialogue, an invitation discover the divine truth or divine message that take other forms or symbols rather than the Christian ones, with the consciousness that what we have of the divine truth is very limited.

In this chapter, I will present O'Collins' understanding of symbols: their definition, their distinction from the reality they symbolize and from mere signs, their historical and revelatory character, their power, and finally their credibility. Then I will proceed to his account of experience, and deal with the subject of experience, experience itself, the aftermath or consequences of experience, and religious experience.

### **1. Definition of Symbol**

While Louis-Marie Chauvet and Dom Miguel take into account the etymological dimension in their understanding of symbols, Yves Labbé shows some essential distinctions in the philosophical history of symbols, Louis Dupré makes a clear distinction between religious symbols from others,<sup>6</sup> O'Collins deals with the reality of symbols in general, which gradually leads his readers to the discourse of "God's symbolic self-communication." He describes a symbol as "something (or someone) perceptible that represents dynamically something (or someone) else." That something or someone can be a story we *hear*, a person we *see*, a hand we *touch*, a fragrance we *smell* or some food we *taste*. We access and discern symbols through and with our senses. No matter what it is, a symbol always discloses and stands for the reality that it symbolizes. There is always a relationship or a link between the symbol and what is symbolized. This relation or link may be conventional; for example, a flag symbolizes a nation. It can be natural and rooted in reality too, such as one's body, which symbolizes oneself. In the latter case,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Chauvet, *Du symbolique au symbole, essai sur les sacrements*, Paris, Cerf, 1979, pp. 38-39; Dom Miquel, *Petit traité de théologie symbolique*, Paris, Cerf, 1987, pp. 13-14; Labbé, *Le Nœud symbolique*, pp. 19-21; Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, pp. 67-69.

according to O'Collins, the symbol is not really estranged or separated from what it symbolizes, but the reality symbolized is not fully expressed by its symbol. One's body can never fully capture his or her entire reality.<sup>7</sup>

O'Collins' definition of symbol is traced back to that of Rahner, especially concerning the symbolic nature of being and the character of symbol, pointing to or referring to another reality.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, even though saying it more concretely with different examples, O'Collins' understanding of symbol is also influenced by that of Dillistone, or more precisely with the ideas which Dillistone favors.<sup>9</sup>

From a religious perspective, O'Collins' above expression concerning the relationship between the symbol and the reality symbolized is much similar with that of José María Mardones who holds that the symbol and the symbolic categories are the unique means that can express the double characteristic of religious relation or religious encounter: the implicative character and the absolutely transcendent and nonobjective character of the Mystery. Likewise, it also corresponds well with Dupré's idea of the objective and subjective elements in every religious act or symbol.<sup>10</sup> For a further

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> In speaking of the basic principle of the ontology of symbolism, Rahner states: "All beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own nature.... Anything could be the symbol of anything else, the orientation from the symbol to the thing symbolized could run the other way round" (Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations, Vol. 4 – More Recent Writings*, trans. by Kevin Smyth, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, New York: The Seabury Press, 1974, pp. 224-225).

<sup>9</sup> In systematizing the ideas of Whitehead, Goethe, Coleridge, Arnold Toynbee, Goodenough and Brown, Dillistone proposes a definition of symbol as follows: "A symbol can be regarded as

1. A word or object or thing or action or even event or pattern or person or concrete particular
2. Representing or suggesting or signifying or veiling or communicating or eliciting or expressing or recalling or pointing to or standing in place of or typifying or denoting or relating to or corresponding to or illuminating or referring to or participating in or re-enacting or associated with.
3. Something greater or transcendent or ultimate: a meaning, a reality, an ideal, a value, an achievement, a belief, a community, a concept, an institution, a state of affairs." (Dillistone, *The Power of Symbols*, p. 13).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Mardones, *La Vida del Símbolo: La Dimensión Simbólica de la Religión*, p. 90 and Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, p. vii.

development of the relationship and distinction between the symbol and what is symbolized we turn now to the next section.

## 2. *The Distinction between the Symbol and the Symbolized*

One may go to either of two extremes in assessing the relationship between the symbol and the symbolized. He or she may merge the symbol with what is symbolized, or radically separate them. The first extreme is an error that can be found, for example, in the confusing of the visible Church with the invisible Christ (ecclesiolatry), and some visually divine demonstration or image with God (idolatry). The second extreme is an error that can be found, for example, in iconoclasm, which refuses to see divine representation in those symbols which refer to, or stand for, the heavenly reality.<sup>11</sup> According to O'Collins, there is a variety of possibilities for the link or the relationship between the symbol and the symbolized. The link between one and the same reality, and different symbols that symbolize it, varies in degrees of intensity. For example, Christ is symbolized, with different degrees of intensity, by rites, images, Scriptures and persons, in the liturgy.<sup>12</sup>

Even though O'Collins goes further in talking of the different degrees of intensity concerning the link between the symbol and the symbolized, one can say that his understanding of the relationship between the symbol and the object it symbolizes is rather close to that of Rahner. For Rahner, it is important to know that the symbol can never be seen as separated from what it symbolizes. The object that the symbol symbolizes comes to express in the latter, and becomes present in it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Craig A. Baron, *Sacraments "Really Save" in Disneyland/ Reconciling Bodies in Virtual Reality*, in *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy*, Vol. 86/4 (2005), pp. 298-299 and Mardones, *La Vida del Símbolo: La Dimensión Simbólica de la Religión*, pp. 33-35.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 99-100 and Gerald O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus*, London, Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2003, pp. 58-59.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4, pp. 224-225, 230.

The “link” between symbol and the symbolized, in O’Collins’ presentation is also close to the “connection” in Dillistone. According to Dillistone, symbol connects or brings together two entities. In other words, they (the two entities) are distinct, but also connected. The connecting and distinguishing process, according to him, is the exclusive capacity or achievement of the human species (not other animals). However, the human person always has a nostalgic desire for, or tends to the apparent simplicity of the direct, the immediate and the equivalent. This can easily lead us to the extreme of identifying the symbol with the symbolized, as O’Collins reminds us above.<sup>14</sup>

Like Dupré who stresses the discrepancy between the presentation and the content of religious symbols despite their unity with the symbolized,<sup>15</sup> O’Collins, on the one hand, affirms the power of the symbol in representing or making present what is symbolized, on the other hand, acknowledges the constant existence of “a certain self-emptying” and concealment on the part of the reality that is symbolized. He explains as follows:

Here, as elsewhere, symbolic self-communication always involves something kenotic. Even though the symbol really symbolizes and makes present what is symbolized, a certain self-emptying and resultant hiddenness arises inasmuch as what is symbolized takes the form of the symbol. To the extent that the symbol does not coincide with that which it symbolizes, a gap opens up and concealment (as well as revelation) becomes possible. The humanity of Jesus, for example, truly symbolized but did not simply coincide with the Logos or the second person of the Trinity. Hence the humanity of Jesus concealed, as well as revealed, the Logos.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Dillistone, *The Power of Symbols*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Louis Dupré, *Symbols of the Sacred*, Cambridge, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000, pp. 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 100. O’Collins’ example or explanation concerning the relationship between the Logos and the humanity of Jesus Christ will be further discussed in Chapter IV which is dedicated to the question of the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue. His distinction between the humanity of Jesus and the second person of the Trinity is great support for Dupuis’ Trinitarian approach to the theology of religion.

One could say that O'Collins somehow overlooks the psychological aspect of symbolic activity, and thus, the constant interaction between the reality, the symbol and the imagination, which often gets much attention by other authors, for examples, by Labbé.<sup>17</sup> However, O'Collins does not fail to point out the union and the gap between the symbol and the symbolized, which could be said as the outcome of this interaction's awareness or analysis in the world of symbols, symbolization and human understanding. This double characteristic of the symbolized or of the symbolic activity is indispensable in the discussion of religious symbols in O'Collins, and throughout his theology. "Certain self-emptying" and concealment on the part of the symbolized reality is important in O'Collins' understanding of symbols and in his theology.<sup>18</sup>

We may notice that even though O'Collins talks about symbols in general, his applications or examples are of a more religious nature. This is so properly because the aim of his work on symbols is to do theology, to take into account the role of symbols in understanding Christian doctrine, experience and revelation. Certainly O'Collins is also inspired or influenced by his fellow Jesuit – Rahner - who focuses on rather exclusively religious or even Christian symbols, as we see in his work "The Theology of the Symbols," in which he speaks of the Logos as the symbol of God, the Church as the symbol of the continuing action of God's grace in Christ, the sacraments as symbols of God's grace in the Church, and so forth.<sup>19</sup> In fact, for O'Collins, there is no such a thing and no experience that are not religious. His recognition of the religious dimension or nature of everything or of every experience is a great openness to the

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Labbé much stresses the interaction between "le réel," "le symbolique" and "l'imaginaire" and the union and the gap between the symbol and the symbolized. For Labbé, the reality (the symbolized) "à la fois se soustrait et s'impose." See Labbé, *Le nœud symbolique*, pp. 190-191 .

<sup>18</sup> O'Collins' idea of the double characteristic of the symbolized or of the symbolic activity would be better viewed in Mardones's language, "presente ausente." Likewise, his remark about the "certain self-emptying" and concealment on the part of the symbolized reality would be better viewed in linking with Mardones' idea of the "ausente" (absent) that is evoked by religious symbol. For Mardones, (religious) symbol is "epifanía de un misterio presente ausente." It seeks to reveal what is profound, hidden, mysterious and absent. It produces some sense or knowledge of an "absent" order. Such knowledge, thus, is not completely conscious or expressible with a clear and distinct form. See Mardones, *La Vida del Símbolo: La Dimensión Simbólica de la Religión*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4, pp. 236-242. See also Dillistone, *The Power of Symbols*, pp. 135-136.

religious and revelatory values in the non-Christian religions. To this we shall come back later.

In brief, for O'Collins, the symbol is not identical with or equal to what it symbolizes. There is always a gap between them. Being limited by nature, symbols can never capture the full reality that they symbolize. The symbol reveals as well as conceals the symbolized. They are not only distinct from the symbolized, but also distinct from their close relatives, signs. Let us now see how O'Collins distinguishes signs and symbols.

### **3. *The Distinction between Signs and Symbols***

According to O'Collins, even though the boundary between signs and symbols is not always clear, one can still recognize that the reality of signs is broader than that of symbols. A symbol is a special class of signs.

(a) Normally, a symbol is different from a mere sign. It is more natural and corresponds more closely to what it symbolizes.

(b) Generally speaking, symbols are more meaningful than plain signs. Signs can be completely conventional, such as road signs, but may also be natural; for example, smoke is a sign of fire. We know more about signs than about symbols because we often make signs and they accompany our agreements. Symbols, on the other hand, are given to us and appear more mysteriously. Their significance is deep and unrestricted. O'Collins mentions, in this regard, the symbolic language of the fourth Gospel as an example of depth and range of meaning, e.g., "I am the bread of life;" "I am the light of the world." (Jn 6:35 & 9:5). In fact, O'Collins does not make any lengthy mention (here or elsewhere) of the symbolic language of the fourth Gospel, but he seems always

conscious of it and pays a good deal of attention to it whenever he refers to Saint John's Gospel, especially in his Christological discussion.<sup>20</sup>

(c) Moreover, symbols, according to O'Collins, contain and make present the reality that they symbolize. Mere signs, on the other hand, simply point to something else without bringing forth its presence.

(d) Mere signs, such as road signs, can be very necessary or useful, but lack the powerful impact on feeling and actions found in symbols. For example, if we burn a mere sign like a highway marker; we do thereby not normally arouse people's emotions as we would if we were to burn a national symbol, such as a flag. One may die for a symbol, but it is hard to think that anyone would die for a mere sign.

(e) Symbols - for instance, church ceremonies, national days - can provoke and facilitate our participation in certain activities. Mere signs, in contrast, are confined to a utilitarian function, namely, that of conveying information.

(f) Unlike *mere* signs, symbols, according to O'Collins, are often *living* persons or things. Referring to the Bible, O'Collins speaks of the abundance of symbols which are living persons or things.<sup>21</sup>

What O'Collins says regarding the distinction between symbol and sign, as well as the relationship between the symbol and what it symbolizes, is much in accordance with that of Dupré and of Tillich. While Dupré especially emphasizes the univocal relation between sign and the signified in comparison with a certain ambiguity of the symbol with the symbolized, Tillich makes a clear distinction between symbol and sign in saying that a sign is univocal, arbitrary and replaceable while a symbol has an intrinsic

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 25, 39, 41, 50, 104, 109, 110-115 (the whole chapter on "An Easter Healing of Memories"). See also O'Collins, *Incarnation – New Century Theology*, London & New York, Continuum, 2002, pp. 3-4, 16, 24, 28 and O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 101.

relationship with the reality it symbolizes or points to. For them, symbols actually participate in the reality to which they are directed and which they represent. Dupré even makes a clearer distinction between symbols and signs when he speaks of symbols as *representing* the symbolized, “making present and taking the place of.” On the contrary, signs simply *point to* or *refer to* the signified.<sup>22</sup>

Even though O’Collins has clearly pointed the nature of symbols in his distinction between symbols and signs is well clear and necessary, it does not seem to be sufficient for many who involve in the study of symbols. Some more essential distinctions, such as, the distinction between symbols and parables, between symbols and allegories, symbols and metaphors, or symbols and myths, would be beneficial.<sup>23</sup>

#### **4. *Historical and Revelatory Character of Symbols***

Symbols are not only *perceptible*, but also belong to the world of time and space, and hence are always, at least in some sense, historical. Talking of symbols, according to O’Collins, entails meanings or events found in history; we are resorting to a frame of reference. The symbolic nature of Jesus’ cross and crucifixion, for example, does not mean the denial of the historicity of the first Good Friday’s events. All symbols which can be persons, things, words, events, and so forth, belong to human history. This short remark of O’Collins on the historical aspect of symbols can be seen as a reminder against thinking that symbols are not real, or that symbols, especially religious symbols, are merely imaginary products, or simply invented, even though images and imagination take part in the work of the symbols. On the other hand, his remark implies other aspects of

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Dupré, *Symbols of the Sacred*, 1-2; Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 2, London and Beccles, 1957, reprinted 1960 & 1964, pp. 125-127 and Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 3, University of Chicago Press, 1964, reissued SCM Press, 1978, pp. 130f. See also Donald F. Dreisbach, *Symbols & Salvation – Paul Tillich’s Doctrine of Religious Symbols and his Interpretation of the Symbols of the Christian Tradition*, Maryland, University Press of America, 1993, pp. 29-30 and Dillistone, *The Power of Symbols*, pp. 123-124.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Miquel, *Petit traité de théologie symbolique*, pp. 16-17 and Dupré, *Symbols of the Sacred*, pp. 61-64.

symbols, such as that they are socially and culturally conditioned or limited.<sup>24</sup> O'Collins's affirmation of historical and human elements in symbols, in fact, invokes the question that Dupré proposes about the credibility of symbols: whether we can consider religious symbols both "humanly constituted as well as transcendently revealed."<sup>25</sup> As we have seen and will see it again O'Collins' response to this question is affirmative, especially when he speaks of the necessity of symbols as means for God to enter into communication with humankind.

According to O'Collins, symbols are necessary forms and paths for God to communicate with human beings. This is so because the human person is not only historical, but also essentially symbolic (*homo symbolicus*). As a being that is both material and spiritual, the human person constantly expresses himself in symbolic acts. O'Collins states:

Human beings reveal themselves to others (and to themselves) when they perform properly human acts which are always symbolic: speaking, working, dressing, love-making, traveling, worshiping, being sick and dying. The divine self-communication "corresponds" to our symbolic nature. If God wishes to communicate with *homo symbolicus*, this revelation must take a symbolic form and road. God the revealer is necessarily God the symbolizer.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, it is through symbols that human beings relate, express or reveal themselves to others and to God. Likewise, it is through symbols that human beings get to know each other and to know God. In fact, what O'Collins wants to tell us here is how God also reveals himself to human beings through symbols. In order to see how God's revelation and symbols work together, we move to the next section.

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 100-10, O'Collins, *Jesus Risen, an Historical, Fundamental and Systematic Examination of Christ's Resurrection*, New York/Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1987, pp. 115-116 and Dillistone, *The Power of Symbols*, p. 125.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Dupré, *Symbols of the Sacred*, p. 124.

<sup>26</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 98-99. See also O'Collins, *Cristo, Nostra Pasqua e Nostro Futuro*, in T. Goffi and B. Secondin (eds.), *Problemi e Prospettive di Spiritualità*, (Brescia: Queriniana, 1984), pp. 203-204.

**a. God's Self-Communication through Symbols**

What O'Collins says of the relationship between the symbol and what is symbolized is applicable to his discussion of the relationship between God's saving revelation and the events, persons, and words through which the divine revelation is communicated. As we have seen, according to O'Collins, there are various degrees of intensity with regard to the link between the symbols and the reality that is symbolized. Images, scriptures, ministers and sacraments, in his understanding, do not all express and realize Christ's presence with the same intensity. These symbols, thus, convey or represent God's self-communication (in Christ) in qualitatively different ways.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the limited nature of the symbol leads to the idea that the humanity of Jesus truly represented, but did not coincide with, the Logos or the second person of the Trinity. This gap between the symbol and what it symbolizes, according to O'Collins, in the case of Jesus or God's revelation, brings in the element of hope, and invites us to look for the plenitude of God's self-revelation to come (Rom 8:24-25; 1 Cor 2:9).<sup>28</sup>

O'Collins' idea of God's self-revelation or communication through symbols is somehow traced back to Rahner's idea of transcendental revelation that every "God-given reality" speaks of God, or transcendently refers to him. For O'Collins, every reality is religious revelatory. But, according to him, there are, of course, differing intensities with regard to the link between each symbol with that same "Symbolized" (God), and saying that there is a gap between them (the symbol and the symbolized or God-given reality and God) even in the case of the Jesus and his revelation.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Gerald O'Collins and Mario Farrugia, *Catholicism, the Story of Catholic Christianity*, Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 97-98 and O'Collins, *Rivelazione: Passato e Presente*, in R. Latourelle (ed.), *Vaticano II: Bilancio e Prospettive* (Assisi: Cittadella, 1987), pp. 125-126.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 100, O'Collins & Farrugia, *The Story of Catholic Christianity*, p. 99 and O'Collins, *Introducing Catholic Theology, Interpreting Jesus*, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 4, p. 239 and O'Collins, *Cristo, Nostra Pasqua e Nostro Futuro*, pp. 204-205.

Being by nature perceivable and historical, those symbols that represent or symbolize God's saving revelation, like all other symbols, are also historical, no matter what form they take, persons, events, words, and so forth. He states:

From the book of Genesis on, God's communication often takes that form. After the flood, heaven and earth are linked by the sign of the rainbow, which reveals and guarantees God's grace and favor. The rainbow symbolizes God's undying friendship. Like a living thing a rainbow comes and goes in the sky. The manna in the desert is gathered fresh every morning; it cannot be stored up like dead produce. The classical prophets constantly reach for living signs and symbols to communicate their message from God: an almond tree in blossom, a woman in childbirth, hearts of flesh, people going into exile, potters busy at their work, shepherds with their sheep, vineyards promising a great yield of wine, fountains bubbling with water.<sup>30</sup>

It should be noted that whereas O'Collins speaks of symbols as being revelatory by their nature, Tillich speaks of the revelatory aspect of religious symbols not as a property they have inherently. For Tillich, revelation is a subjective and an objective event. This means that it needs both something to happen objectively, and someone who receives what happens, subjectively. It requires both the objective occurrence and the subjective reception, and these are interdependent. In fact, O'Collins in no way ignores the subjective reception of revelation. For him, there is no revelation outside human experience, which always presupposes the subjective reception that Tillich mentions. What perhaps makes O'Collins and Tillich differ at this point is that the former pays more attention to the revelatory nature of symbols themselves, while the latter is more concerned with the conditions under which a revelatory event happens.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 101-102. See also O'Collins & Farrugia, *The Story of Catholic Christianity*, pp. 105-106 and O'Collins, *Theology and Revelation*, Cambridge, The Mercier Press, 1968, pp. 13-14.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. 1, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1951, pp.110-111 and Dreisbach, *Symbols & Salvation*, p.37.

In their statement of symbols as means of the divine revelation or of the revelatory nature of symbols, one can see that both O'Collins and Tillich have here a theological approach and a religious conviction, which is different from the philosophical or phenomenological one. In mentioning their difference, Dupré says: "Unless he keeps in mind that the religious believer regards his symbols as in some way 'revealed,' the phenomenologist will miss what the religious believer considers to be essential in faith."<sup>32</sup>

Certainly, not all biblical signs and symbols are living persons and living things, many cosmic images, for example, rock, bush, light, temple, are also important sign or symbols of God or of his presence.<sup>33</sup> However, for O'Collins, one can see the dominance of living symbols in the Bible. Above all, according to him, blood is a rich and sacred symbol that expresses setting free, cleansing, and pledged alliance. Such living symbols are also found abundantly in the New Testament. Referring to the angel's words to the shepherds (cf. Lk 2:12), O'Collins speaks of Mary's child as "the living, visible symbol of the invisible God." The baby, according to O'Collins, made God present for humankind in a new way. His face, eyes, nose, lips, hands, and feet, for example, are the unique and non-verbal expression of God to us. Furthermore, such divine expression started with the body language of this baby Jesus in the manger, and ended with Jesus' body language on the cross. The Christmas story is filled with symbolic people or living symbols.<sup>34</sup> O'Collins states:

It takes no great leap of the imagination to read as God's living signs the people who welcome the newborn Jesus. There are the shepherds roughing it at night and representing the poor of this world who receive God's special blessing. In Bethlehem the shepherds find Mary and Joseph, whose faith and love make them utterly and uniquely open to the divine will. In the temple the aged Simeon and Anna symbolize just what lifelong fidelity to

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<sup>32</sup> Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, p. 8.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Miquel, *Petit Traité de Théologie Symbolique*, pp. 43-45.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 101-102 and O'Collins, *Introducing Catholic Theology, Interpreting Jesus*, pp. 67-68.

God can mean. The wise men from the east signify the pilgrims of this world, who may travel for years before they find him “who was born king of the Jews” (Mt 2:2).<sup>35</sup>

One might expect O’Collins to say more than he does about the significance of the living symbols which he points out as being preferences in the Bible. However, he does not make any comment on this or explain why there is such a preference. He simply mentions this preference for living symbols in the Bible as a fact. Nevertheless, if we recall his idea of the different degrees or intensity concerning the link between each symbol and what it symbolizes, we may see that he properly implies that the living symbols are more powerful, more significant or closer to the transcendent symbolized. Still, for O’Collins, not only human persons, but natural objects and human artifacts can also be symbols of God’s self-communication. He explains this as follows:

Through what they do and suffer all men and women (and not least the sick and the old) present themselves as symbolic beings. This must be so if what we have claimed above is true – that every human being is through and through *homo symbolicus*. Finally, all created things are actually or potentially symbols, whether they are such natural objects as an eagle, a mountain, a stream and the sun, or such human artifacts as a church, a chalice, an icon or a printed copy of the Bible. Like human beings themselves, all other created objects can symbolize and make present what is invisible – in particular, the invisible things of God.<sup>36</sup>

O’Collins’ regard of the revelatory nature of symbols or his statement that women and men, as well as natural objects, can be symbols of God or carry God’s self-revelation, is a big step to acknowledge the revelatory values of non-Christian religions, and hence, their role in God’s plan of salvation. To this we discuss further in Chapter IV.

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<sup>35</sup> O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 102. See also O’Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>36</sup> O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 103. See also O’Collins & Farrugia, *The Story of Catholic Christianity*, pp. 97-98 and O’Collins, *Verso una Teologia della Croce*, in *Rassegna di Teologia*, 1977, N. 4, pp. 358-359.

For O'Collins, there are the symbols that came to exist and entered into the Judeo-Christian tradition thousands of years ago without losing their power or significance, for example, the exodus event, the Babylonian captivity, and the cross. There are also other symbols that have arrived and will arrive along our human history, among which O'Collins especially mentions "the signs of the times" that, according to him, could well be called "the symbols of the times."<sup>37</sup>

This affirmation of O'Collins concerning the abundance and diversity of symbols in general and in Christianity in particular, and his sensibility for the "symbols of the times," is rather compatible with Avery Dulles' idea of the interrelationship among the Christian symbols. According to Dulles, the Christian symbols are imbedded in the Bible and in the living tradition of the Christian community. The Christian symbols, including the Christ-symbol, do not work in isolation, but mutually condition and illuminate one another.<sup>38</sup>

All these symbols, according O'Collins, always express or stand for heavenly realities and give sacred meaning. To see this further, we move to the next section.

### **b.      *The Power of Symbols***

Symbols, according to O'Collins, are vehicles for God's saving revelation or self-communication. They convey cognitive elements, "always say something," "communicate some truth and transmit some information." However, unlike mere signs which can be fully articulated and explained, symbols can never be completely grasped or conceptually expressed. One can never discern once and for all the meaning and truth which symbols convey. All symbols, especially, religious symbols with their explicit

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 103, O'Collins, *Theology and Revelation*, pp. 13-14, O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus*, pp. 58-59, O'Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 87-88 and O'Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, Loyola University Press, 1971, p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, New York, Crossroad, 1992, pp. 18-19 and Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, Garden City (NY), Doubleday, 1983, pp. 139-140.

connection with the infinite character of God, work intangibly and instinctively. Moreover, they encompass a multifaceted power to communicate. Accordingly, O'Collins says: "We experience and intuitively know more than we can express, when confronted with the mysterious, inexhaustible nature of Christ's nativity, crucifixion and empty tomb."<sup>39</sup>

It is notable that O'Collins repeatedly mentions the gap between a symbol and the reality it symbolizes. For him, there is always a discrepancy between the presentation of symbol and its content and the polyvalence of symbols. To use the language of Dupré, there is the "essentially ungraspable mystery" of the transcendent.<sup>40</sup> Acknowledging this gap is important for everyone (Christian as well as non-Christian) to avoid the ambition or the illusion of completely possessing or understanding divine revelation. This also gives us a reason for entering interreligious dialogue, in which one can learn from others and get a better understanding of others as well as of oneself, and ultimately of God.

While Dupré seems to restrain the salvific effect into the sacramental action or rite,<sup>41</sup> O'Collins explicitly affirms the salvific and revelatory impact of symbols in general. For him, although at different degrees of intensity, depending on each symbol and person, symbols have an effect on the whole person. All symbols, and in particular, explicitly religious symbols, enjoy a transforming and saving power. O'Collins states:

The salvific impact of symbols is inextricably bound together with their revelatory power. They affect the whole person in his or her mind, memory, feelings, imagination, hopes and fears. This total impact, which is obviously experienced with varying degrees of intensity, we see exemplified in a massive way by such sacred and secular ceremonies as the inauguration of a new president, a world soccer final, a funeral, a marriage or an ordination to the

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<sup>39</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 103. See also O'Collins, *Theology and Revelation*, pp. 16-17 and O'Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 80-82.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Dupré, *Symbols of the Sacred*, pp. 6-9 and Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, p. vii.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Dupré, *Symbols of the Sacred*, pp. 23-24.

priesthood. Such major symbolic events write large what holds true of all symbols and, in particular, blatantly religious symbols. They enjoy a transformative, redemptive power. Symbols transmit and evoke meaning, and all meaning is transforming.<sup>42</sup>

O'Collins' understanding of the power of symbols is a challenge and also an invitation for theologians to go beyond merely conceptual thinking and propositional view. Symbols invite us to go further than our ordinary objective study. They require our involvement.<sup>43</sup> They open an access to the profound dimension of the reality, and invite us to discover the existential dimension of the reality. They help us to approach to the concealed and impenetrable sides of the reality which they symbolize.

God's self-communication through symbols, according to O'Collins, brings about "meaning, knowledge and truth" (revelatory aspect or power). This meaning/truth transforms us while this knowledge invites us to participate in a new life (redemptive aspect or power). Symbols, thus, help us and invite us to act in a new way, and to live a new life. The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, for example, invites the newly baptized persons "to identify strongly with the biblical story culminating in Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the emergence of the Church."<sup>44</sup> This idea of O'Collins finds strong support in Dulles' understanding of God's self-communication or revelation. According to Dulles, every event of revelation has a symbolic character which evokes what lies beyond the range of explicit statement, and calls for and has the power to effect, transformation, response or conversion.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 104. See also O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus*, pp. 17-18 and O'Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, 60-61.

<sup>43</sup> On this point, O'Collins is very much compatible with Dulles who says that the meaning of symbols is beyond the capacities of conceptual thinking and propositional speech. Symbols, according to him, "evoke a realization of that which surpasses ordinary objective cognition." See Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, pp.18-19 and Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, pp. 136-137.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 104, O'Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 104-105 and O'Collins & Farrugia, *The Story of Catholic Christianity*, pp. 236-237.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, pp. 131-133 and Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, pp. 22-23.

Healing, according to O'Collins, is a dominant character of many symbols' redemptive roles. Many symbols can reconcile hostile groups, restore unity in a community, and relieve tensions, beyond what sheer concepts and reasoning alone can do. Symbols - for example, the cross, the passion story of Christ, and the sacraments - often demonstrate their power in healing or making horrendous circumstances somehow bearable and even productive. Likewise, symbols can help us to accept and live the apparent contradictions emerging from the two classic mysteries of salvation: firstly, the existence of evil and the suffering of innocent people in the world despite the presence of an almighty, merciful and righteous God; secondly, the puzzle regarding the relationship between God's grace and our freedom. Appealing to two parables in the Gospel of Mark, O'Collins explains how symbols make these mysteries bearable. He states:

We would do better here to read the two symbolic stories that Jesus left side by side: one (the parable of the sower) evokes the varieties of human responses to the good grace of God (Mk 4:3-9); the other story (the parable of the seed that grows by itself [Mk 4:26-29]) evokes the power of the divine redemptive activity. To repeat these two stories is not to abandon professional integrity but to make the mystery symbolically bearable.<sup>46</sup>

Here O'Collins regards the function of symbols as unlocking our inner spirit so that we can have the access and relation to ultimate reality. True symbols can expand our human spirit to the transcendental reality. They also enable us to grow in spiritual apprehension and evoke a vital response.

In brief, God's self-communication or saving revelation takes place through various ranges of symbols. It is through symbolic words, events, persons and things that God, who is the symbolizer as well as the symbolized, is present and communicated.

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<sup>46</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 105. See also Gerald O'Collins & Daniel Kendall, *The Bible for Theology: Ten Principles for the Theological Use of Scripture*, New York/Mahwah, Paulist Press, 1997, pp. 112-115.

### c. *Credibility of Symbols*

Symbols of all kinds (religious as well as civil) can be misunderstood, misinterpreted or even manipulated by a person or a group. In this case, symbols might obscure or conceal the reality that is symbolized, rather than reveal it. They can be troublesome and deleterious, rather than freeing, saving, and transforming.<sup>47</sup> Thus, an inevitable question arises: whether in the secular or in the sacred field, what makes a symbol credible? Why should we believe or accept a symbol?

According to O'Collins, historical evidence, to a certain extent, plays a role in verifying a symbol. For him, our personal history and the history of our group, community or society might be indispensable for us in understanding a symbol and in determining its meaning. However, at bottom, it is our personal experience which testifies to symbolic realities, especially in the cases of religious symbols. Living experience is a key for us to verify a symbol. Accordingly, he states: "Lived symbols are believable symbols. By appropriating and entering into the central symbolic realities of Christianity, we allow them to 'veri-fy' themselves and make themselves true. We validate experientially symbolic knowledge, in particular the symbolic knowledge of faith."<sup>48</sup>

It should be noted that lived experience (or "lived symbol" as he mentioned above) is essential in O'Collins' theology even though he is in no way an empiricist. Throughout his theology, O'Collins tries to present a kind of integral theology that takes into account all aspects of human life and that uses all faculties (reason, experiences, senses, and so forth) of the human person. One could say that he does theology to live and he lives to do theology. His life and his theology support, serve, and need each other.

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. Miquel, *Petit traité de théologie symbolique*, pp. 23-25.

<sup>48</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 106, O'Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 112-114, O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus*, pp. 86-88, O'Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, pp. 28-29 and Gerald O'Collins, *Come Nasce la Fede nella Risurrezione?*, in *Rassegna di Teologia* (Settembre – Ottobre 1975, N. 5), pp. 416-417.

One may wonder, if symbols have been verified, and their role or significance is always available in human life and in religion, why, then, does religion nowadays seem to lose its plausibility and popularity in many parts of the world? With regard to the case of Christianity, according to O'Collins, the impact of symbols has been somewhat reduced because of the privatization of symbols and their partial loss of meaning. It is a privatizing of religion that makes many symbols lose their public hold. The resulting lack of familiarity with many fundamental symbols and the dominance of many trivial symbols, at a certain point, have reduced Christian plausibility. Christian symbols not only establish, strengthen and maintain our Christian identity, but also allow us to access or receive God's self-revelation, to share our Christian faith with each other and to transmit our faith in Christ to other generations.<sup>49</sup>

One would add a pastoral reason for the decreasing of the Christian symbols' impact or plausibility in today's world that O'Collins mentions above. There is a lack of a fundamental reformation of the way Christianity expresses, preaches and interprets its symbols.<sup>50</sup>

Symbols, as we have seen in O'Collins' presentation, are part of human life, human history. They are indispensable means for human beings to express themselves, to communicate and to relate with others as well as with God and to take part in the divine life. They carry God's self-communication or revelation and have a power of transforming us and evoking a vital response to God and to others. Human beings, however, do not simply deal with symbols in a vacuum or in isolation. Experience, in fact, is essential to our existence. Moreover, as we have seen, according to O'Collins, it is experience that finally legitimates the credibility of symbols and the symbolic realities. The question, then, is how symbols and experience work together in our life. To answer this, we now proceed to O'Collins' discussion of experience. We shall start with the

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 106 and O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus*, pp. 105-107.

<sup>50</sup> See Mackenzie Brown (ed.), *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue*, London, SCM, 1965, p. 88.

subject of experience in general, and then experience itself, its outcomes or consequences, and religious experience.

## 5. *The Subject of Experience*

### a. *Experience, Sense, and Knowledge*

O'Collins does not construct an explicit definition of experience. He rather makes a sharp distinction between experience and the conclusions that we may draw from rational analysis. Experience, for him, cannot be identified with the process or outcome of a rational investigation. Nevertheless, according to him, one should not view experiencing and reasoning as detached from one another. They are indeed distinct, but not really separable. Reasoning makes explicit what is implicit in experience. In fact, O'Collins asserts strongly that no experience can truly precede knowledge.<sup>51</sup> He states:

There is a concrete particularity about experiences which differentiates them from universal concepts, discursive thought, general judgments and dictionary definitions. We use concepts and judgments to communicate our experiences. But they do not simply coincide with those experiences. Here we might adapt and adjust Kant's dictum: "Thought without experience is empty; experience without thought is blind."<sup>52</sup> On the one hand, experiences make us think and lead us to understand.... On the other hand, thought may help to explain some experiences and to prepare us for new experiences.... Thought can clarify what we have experienced and prepare us to understand and interpret what we are going to experience.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 34 -35.

<sup>52</sup> O'Collins refers to Immanuel Kant's statement: "Thoughts without content are empty, institutions without concepts are blind" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith, London, 1933, p. 93). See O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, Chapter 9, p. 168.

<sup>53</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 113-114.

According to O'Collins, there may be a lot of things that we experience without being fully aware of them or being able to grasp their significance. In many cases, we even see that our experience of the same thing, after years, becomes very much different from what we experienced beforehand. An example might be the experience of childhood, the experience of Jesus' disciples before and after his resurrection, and so on. However, for O'Collins, every experience must contain at least some cognitive element. The disciples had not understood what Jesus meant when he spoke about a temple that would be destroyed and rebuilt, when referring to his coming passion and resurrection. They only recalled and understood this after Jesus' resurrection. But in order to understand the significance of what Jesus said and did, they first had to know him.<sup>54</sup> Another example of the distinguishable but inseparable relationship between experience and knowledge can be the development of doctrine in the early Church. According to O'Collins, it follows that:

On the one hand, the apostolic and post-New Testament experience of Christ prompted his followers to think about him in certain ways. Clarifying their experiences led them to produce the christological teachings of the first general councils. On the other hand, that conciliar teaching about Christ as one divine person in two natures enriches our experience of him in prayer and daily life - or at least should do so.<sup>55</sup>

Experience, according to O'Collins, should not be identified with knowledge. It is not merely, or even primarily, cognitive. Nor can experience be reduced to mere sense. Experience is not just an assemblage of raw materials appearing or being gathered before actual cognition takes place. Experience cannot be taken as merely *sense* experience, but as *human* experience in all of its many facets. Thus, O'Collins disagrees with those who downplay the cognitive dimension of experience. Experience is not just the action or reaction of an organism, having nothing to do with knowledge. For him, these two

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<sup>54</sup> O'Collins refers to the story in Jn, 2: 22. See O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 34 -35.

<sup>55</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 114. See also O'Collins, *Cosa si Dice di Gesù Cristo?*, pp. 176-177 and O'Collins, *Introducing Catholic Theology, Interpreting Jesus*, pp. 172-174.

reductionist tendencies must be avoided. Experience should not be reduced to either mere sense or mere cognitive experience.<sup>56</sup>

One can see that O'Collins is trying to avoid the two extremes, namely, empiricism and rationalism, which fail to recognize, or undermine, the roles of cognition and sense in experience. In order to better understand this idea of O'Collins it might be beneficial to refer to two representative figures of rationalism and empiricism; namely, René Descartes and David Hume, respectively.

Descartes, a rationalist, was suspicious of past philosophy, of traditional beliefs, of authorities or standards, even of his former beliefs. He does not admit anything which is not necessarily true. Certain beliefs may be true, but as long as their basis is doubted they are not accepted by Descartes as certain or entirely certain. It is possible that one's perception of his or her activities is mere illusion. Sense-perception gives a very uncertain ground for genuine apprehension. Yet, even if one's senses are totally deceptive, according to Descartes, he or she may still know many things which do not depend on sense perception, for example, that  $2 + 2 = 4$  or that a triangle has no more than three sides. However, even in these cases error may still occur, because of his or her intellectual ability and the interference of an all-powerful being or an evil spirit. The only thing which can be certain is the thinking thing or thinking being. As long as one thinks or doubts, then he or she is, he or she exists: "*Je pense, donc je suis; cogito, ergo sum.*"<sup>57</sup>

For rationalists, experience is intrinsically deceptive. It must be examined, analyzed or interpreted by the use of basic certainties: general principles and intuitions. All (independent) knowledge, which is inferred from basic certainties, is achieved or gained by chains of deductive reasoning. Deduction derives logical consequences from indubitable fact or certainties. It gives us a better understanding of reality and tells us

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 36 and O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. René Descartes, *Méditations métaphysiques avec une notice biographique, une analyse et des notes par Paul Lemaire*, Paris, Librairie Hatier, N° 139, pp. 6-8 and Bruce Aune, *Rationalism, Empiricism, and Pragmatism: An Introduction*, New York, Random House, 1970, pp. 7-10.

something new. We are able to have knowledge of ourselves and of the world thanks to our possession of general ideas, with which we can interpret our experience, construct other ideas and notions of ourselves and even of imaginary beings such as centaurs. Experience may sometimes be needed to stimulate our use of these ideas which, however, are in no way formed by experience. Without these general ideas we could not even understand our experience. In brief, rationalism bases itself on the belief that our knowledge is attained by the use of reason and that our senses are intrinsically defective and unreliable.<sup>58</sup>

With regard to empiricism, for example, in the case of David Hume, our perceptions are divided into two general classes, namely, “impressions” and “ideas.” *Impressions* are our raw experiences such as feelings, emotions, and desires, while *ideas* are the thoughts which are built up or come from impressions. Hume would agree with Descartes in saying that we build up our complex ideas on the *simple ideas*. However, he would not agree with the latter about the origin of simple ideas as innate to our understanding. For Hume, *simple ideas* are produced by experiences. These *simple ideas*, on which complex thoughts or ideas are built up, are copied from feelings or sentiments that we have already had. We would not be able to have the corresponding idea if we have never experienced a given impression. For example, a person born deaf or blind does not have simple ideas of sounds and colors. In order to have a simple idea he or she needs first to actually experience the impression of which this simple idea is a copy.<sup>59</sup>

O’Collins tries to make a more integral understanding of experience, rather than exclusively rationalism or empiricism. Referring to the German verb *erleben* (to experience), O’Collins speaks of experience as being in relation with the entire subject.

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<sup>58</sup> Cf. Bryan Magee, *The Story of Philosophy: The Essential Guide to the History of Western Philosophy*, New York, DK Publishing, 1998, pp. 86-87, Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, 82-85, Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, pp. 19-26, Aune, *Rationalism, Empiricism, and Pragmatism*, pp. 26-36 and Ted Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 189-191.

<sup>59</sup> C.f. Aune, *Rationalism, Empiricism, and Pragmatism*, pp. 40-42 and Honderich (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, pp. 226-228.

He states: “‘Er-leben’ is to be alive when something happens - to be alive to what is happening to us. This catches up the active (‘to be alive’) and passive (‘to what is happening to us’) moments of experience.”<sup>60</sup> This is much compatible with Dupré’s idea the active intervention in the religious symbolization and the “fundamental passivity” of the believers with regard to the transcendent message.<sup>61</sup>

O’Collins also refers to another German word for experience – *Erfahrung* (its corresponding verb is *erfahren*), in speaking of, and highlighting, the realities that we encounter or the objective pole of experience.<sup>62</sup> For O’Collins, experience is not something related simply to sense or cognition, but to the whole of our existence. He states:

With varying degrees of intensity *the whole person* is involved in and revealed by his or her experiences. Every experience, even the most trivial one, enjoys at least a minimal “totality” by affecting the entire person. Any experience whatsoever is “my” experience and not simply that of my arm, my eye or my imagination alone.... Objectively as well as subjectively, the whole of reality is involved in every experience. In and through experiencing parts of reality, nevertheless, as whole persons we stand in contact with the whole.<sup>63</sup>

In brief, our life expresses itself in experience. Experience also uncovers what our life is. Moreover, every authentic experience involves or has an effect on the whole of our existence. Our lived experiences of love, joy, fear, guilt and so on, touch all aspects of our life such as imagination, emotions, mind, will, and memory. O’Collins points out here the multi-leveled structure of human experience. Affirming this multi-structure of

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<sup>60</sup> O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 35.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 110.

<sup>63</sup> O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 113. See also O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 35, O’Collins, *Experience*, p. 308, O’Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 58-60 and O’Collins, *Come Nasce la Fede nella Risurrezione?*, pp. 416-417.

human experience does not hinder O'Collins to speak about immediacy as a part of the nature of experience, even in the case of religious one.

**b.      *The Immediacy of Experience***

According to O'Collins, experience implies *immediacy* or a direct contact between the subject (experience's agent) and the object (some reality) that can be persons or things. Experience may be more active (when the subject reaches out to the object) or more passive (when the object comes to the subject). This active-passive nature of experience can correspond well with Dupré's statement of "the symbolic creativity of the human subject" and "the essential passivity" he or she holds in experiencing the transcendent in religious symbols.<sup>64</sup> In fact, for O'Collins, there is no absolute and purely passive or active experience. In each case, either more passive or more active, experience takes place only when the subject is in some direct contact with persons or things that are experienced. A person does not experience a reality just by learning or hearing about it, but by having actual contact with it. O'Collins states: "We shift, for instance, from merely reading the books of some author to meeting that man or woman for ourselves. It is the move from knowing about that person to knowing him by acquaintance."<sup>65</sup>

For O'Collins, there may be different degrees of intensity in the encounter with what is experienced. The intensity depends on each of us - the subject of experience - and on the time, space and the other factors of the situation, in which experience takes place. Some people may enjoy "more intensive experiences" than others. Even the same person, for example, a poet, may have an intense experience at one particular moment, and a faint one at another moment, of the same reality which he or she encounters.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless,

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, pp. 8-10.

<sup>65</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 33. See also O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 110 and O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 33-34, O'Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 44-45 and O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus*, pp. 61-63.

no matter how intense it may be, experience requires an actual and direct contact between the subject and object. In a strict sense, there cannot be a “second-hand experience.” O’Collins opines:

Experience necessarily involves some direct contact between the subject experiencing and the object experienced. Somehow the object is or becomes present, so as to be immediately encountered. An indirect or second-hand experience by proxy is a contradiction in terms. Experiences are either first-hand and immediate or they are not there at all.<sup>67</sup>

According to O’Collins, other people and experts may inspire or encourage us and even teach us how to experience, but we can never literally make their experience our own. Experience requires our personal involvement and our direct contact with what is experienced. He gives an example in saying: “No one else can learn to swim, fall in love, get married, visit Rome or receive the Holy Spirit for us.”<sup>68</sup> This sounds much similar to the necessity of the direct participation that Dupré insists from those who want to access to religious insight or experience. He states:

The phenomenologist must in some way enter into the religious act, either through present or past faith, or also through an actual acquaintance with religious acts and experiences analogous with the ones he attempts to analyze. At any rate, a purely external description, accompanied by *general* theories about religious attitudes and feelings, never yields the kind of intuitive insight that is the goal of phenomenological analysis. From this it follows that the philosopher deprived of empathy with religion is incapable of successfully analyzing its acts, meanings, and symbols.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 110.

<sup>68</sup> O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 34. See O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 33 and O’Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>69</sup> Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, p. 8.

It should be noticed that, in affirming and emphasizing the immediacy of experience, O'Collins is in no way denying presuppositions and influences of the situation on every experience. In his own words, O'Collins writes: "Such immediacy does *not* mean that experiences are presuppositionless. Social, historical, and religious factors of all kinds condition and make possible our experiences."<sup>70</sup> He makes the point more strongly in the following statement: "Here I simply wish to insist that acknowledging the immediate nature of experience in no way implies the assertion that we bring a clean, presuppositionless 'state' - a kind of *tabula rasa* - to our experiences."<sup>71</sup>

With regard to the religious sphere, O'Collins also warns against a misunderstanding of the way in which we experience and encounter God. By acknowledging the immediacy of every experience, including the experience of God, O'Collins does not mean that we could have some kind of face-to-face encounter with God or that we could directly experience God, without any means or mediation. For him, we experience and encounter God "in, with and under" other experiences and encounters. He articulates this accordingly: "God deals immediately with human beings. We can and do experience God, and that means that we immediately experience God. Yet it is always through 'other' experiences that God is symbolically communicated to us."<sup>72</sup>

One could hardly reconcile O'Collins' idea of this immediacy of experience (even in religious experience) with his affirmation of the necessity of symbols for us human persons to express ourselves, to communicate with others, with the world and with God. How can we experience God or his revelation directly when have to use all kind of human or natural means? How can God express directly to us when his communication always takes the form or the road of symbols? Edward Schillebeeckx even says that it is dangerous to declare an "immediate experience," given the fact that every experience is

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<sup>70</sup> O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

<sup>71</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 110-111. See also O'Collins, *Cosa si Dice di Gesù Cristo?* in *Rassegna di Teologia* 22, (Maggio – Giugno 1981, N. 3), pp. 175-176.

<sup>72</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 111. See also O'Collins, *Theology and Revelation*, pp. 34-36.

socio-culturally mediated, and that its expression takes the form in language, and is carried by images, concepts, references, emotions, which have already a long history and are the product of a socio-cultural group in which we live.<sup>73</sup>

A certain adjustment of the term or expression, however, can make O'Collins' above-idea comprehensible. This can be found in John Smith's idea of "encounter" in experience. Experience, according to Smith, is a product of multidimensional encounters. Experience is seen as a "revelatory constitutive encounter." As a product of encounters, experience, in Smith's view, has both objective and subjective aspects. It is objective because it serves the objective disclosure of the reality encountered. It is also subjective, or more precisely, inter-subjective, because it depends on both the person experiencing and what is being experienced.<sup>74</sup>

The idea of O'Collins regarding the immediate experience of God and his communication to us through symbols might be better understood if we use Smith's expression. The latter regards our human experience of God as "mediated immediacy." In giving an account of human experience and pointing out its revelatory characteristic, Smith, in fact, wants to go further in trying to see how we can speak of experiencing God. According to Schlitt, Smith disallows "any pure empiricism's idea of immediacy" or any claim of "simply immediate experience of God." For Smith, an immediate experience of God is not really available. He, however, holds that our experience of God cannot be merely inference or rational inquiry. In his understanding, our experience of God is a "mediated or interpreted experience." He goes on to say that interpretation is the prolongation of our initial and simpler stage in experience. Thus, he argues for both

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *L'Histoire des hommes, récit de Dieu*, (originally published in Dutch as *Mensen als Verhaal van God*, Baarn, Uitgeverij H. Nelissen, 1989), trans. by Hélène Cornelis-Gevaert, Paris, Cerf, 1992, pp. 48-49.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. John E. Smith, *Experience and God*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1968, pp. 23, 26-28, 41-45 and Dale M. Schlitt, *Fundamental Theology and the Experience of God*, in *Église et théologie*, 24 (1993), pp. 231-233.

directness and mediation in our experience of God. Any experience of God, in his view, must be some kind of a “*direct encounter as mediated experience*.”<sup>75</sup>

In fact, O’Collins’ position on the immediacy and the means of experience is further explained in his view of experience as having both subjective and objective aspects. He says: “The active and passive elements are inseparably there in all experiences.”<sup>76</sup> In some experiences, the subjective element is more dominant. In other experiences, it is the objective element that dominates. In some, or even many cases, we (the subject of experience) may misunderstand or misinterpret the object or what we encounter in experience. However, according to O’Collins, purely subjective experiences would be a contradiction in terms. We can never have either a purely subjective or purely objective experience.<sup>77</sup>

### **c. *Individual and Collective Experience***

What we have seen in O’Collins’ discussion above concerned mostly individual experience. He also speaks of collective experience, which is the experience of a community, of a group or of a nation. Collective experience, according to O’Collins, is

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<sup>75</sup> Cf. Smith, *Experience and God*, pp. 52-54 and Schlitt, *Fundamental Theology and the Experience of God*, pp. 236-237.

<sup>76</sup> O’Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 111, O’Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

One could better understand O’Collins’ idea of “immediate experience” in the case of experience of God in the way Smith speaks of this experience. Smith’s understanding of experience of God as encounter with God includes a place for judgment or reflection on the truth of what we encounter in that experience. Smith, in speaking of the “*mediated immediacy*” of the experience of God, means that we encounter and experience God through experiential encounters mediated by signs and languages. We experience God who transcends the world, which is taken as containing signs of God’s presence, intention, and concern.

“Mediated immediacy”, according to Smith, does not necessarily hold that our every affirmation in experiencing God is in fact true. Experiencing involves interpretation. Experience, in Smith’s view, is comprised of interpretation and judgment. Thus, such interpretation and judgment are not exempt from error. See Schlitt, *Fundamental Theology and the Experience of God*, pp. 238-239.

“an experience not only *of* others but also *with* others.” In this case, the community itself is the subject of experience. The community’s members share the same historical experiences, express and transmit them from one generation to another through symbols, practices, customs, memorials, and so on. In some cases, the community holds on to some special experiences which are regarded as its “very *raison d’être*.” Referring to the history of the people of Israel, O’Collins speaks of the call of Abraham as the commencement of their collective history. One can find acts of worship and confession in different places of the Old Testament. Such acts, according to O’Collins, express the community’s sense of living and sharing many common experiences that followed that call. Some passages in the Old Testament demonstrate the solidarity of the whole people of Israel. Other passages narrate the experience, important events and facts which make up the nation. In other words, they reflect the collective experiences that create and support their common hope.<sup>78</sup> The following biblical passage is an example:

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Dt. 26:5-9).<sup>79</sup>

According to O’Collins, the community was regarded as “the natural subject of experience” both in the Old Testament period and during the time of Jesus. The individual appeared only secondarily as the subject of such experiences. The whole group shared or lived the same experiences, such as that of the Babylonian captivity, of the return from exile, of Jesus’ ministry, passion and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit’s gifts.

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 35-37, O’Collins, *Theology and Revelation*, pp. 14-16 and O’Collins & Farrugia, *The Story of Catholic Christianity*, pp. 108-109.

<sup>79</sup> These Deuteronomy verses are quoted in O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 37. See also O’Collins, *Theology and Revelation*, pp. 24-25.

O'Collins points out that nowadays, however, it is the individual as the subject of experience that is mentioned in the first place; the collective subject or community being considered only secondarily. Moreover, in some cases, or for some people, mentioning collective experience may create difficulties and cause different reactions. This happens even in a small group meeting where some participants feel bored while others are delighted. People may participate in the meeting in a variety of ways with different emotions. The difficulties may become more challenging when we apply the idea of collective experience not only to contemporaries, but also to successive generations spreading out over the years. For example, what would be the collective experience of American posterity with regard to the national event of July 4, 1776, or that of descendents of the Russians who participated in the Winter Palace event on October 24 - 25, 1917, or the later Christians in relation to the events of Jesus' passion and resurrection (A.D 30)?<sup>80</sup>

According to O'Collins, many Americans and Russians may no longer place a high value on these events. And perhaps not all Christians embrace the passion and resurrection of Jesus as the foundation for their life. Nonetheless, the impact of such events is unquestionable. From generation to generation, people as a group, a community or a nation will still recall and reenact these events, holding them as their own experience. They do that in repetitively reading the same text, hearing the same address, singing the same hymns or national anthems. O'Collins states:

By enacting or re-enacting an event, the community stands in a direct contact with it, knows it at first-hand, and does not simply accept its existence as the mere conclusion of some process of reasoning. The community reveals its life in the common experience - be it a committee meeting, a Church council or a service of worship - and lets that experience affect in major or minor ways its whole existence.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 37 -38. See also O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

<sup>81</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 38. See also O'Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp 55-56 and O'Collins, *Introducing Catholic Theology, Interpreting Jesus*, pp. 109-111.

Thus, although the individual responses of people in a given group may be different in quantity and intensity, O'Collins thinks that we can still legitimately speak of the collective experiences not just of the group of contemporaries, but also of successive generations. This is somehow also affirmed by Dupré in his insistence of the participation in religious act of a religion in order to able to analyze, or to understand its symbols or faith. Likewise it is also compatible with his view on the time in ritual, in which it "ceases to be irreversibly successive," as it does by nature. Time in ritual implies, in fact, the common history or the collective experience of the religious community.<sup>82</sup>

For O'Collins, depending on their personal backgrounds, the individuals of a given group may participate in the common experience in a variety of ways. What we say of the individual subject of experience may also apply *mutatis mutandis* to the collective subject of experience.<sup>83</sup>

Given the fact that experience, both individual and collective, is always conditioned by multiple factors, such as, history, religion, culture, ethnic, and so forth, one may ask what would be the meaning, the objectivity or the credibility of experience. For the answer we now move to the next section which speaks of the experience itself.

## 6. *The Experience Itself*

### a. *The Meaning of Experience*

According to O'Collins, every experience must have a meaning or different meanings. It may be difficult to point out the meaning of an experience, but it is there; it is related, if not simply identical with, the experience. In many cases, it takes an individual or a community years to recognize or discover the significance of an

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. Dupré, *Religious Mystery and Rational Reflection*, p. 8-10.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 38, O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 116-117 and O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus*, pp. 58-59.

experience or of an event. O'Collins, accordingly, would disagree with those who speak of a total hopelessness. For him, it is impossible to sustain the idea of a complete absurdity. He writes: "A meaningless experience - an experience that lacks all meaning and is literally 'absurd' - seems as impossible to conceive as a totally negative experience. Every experience has some meaning."<sup>84</sup>

All experience, either of an individual or of a community, carries meaning and makes sense. However, according to O'Collins, in many cases, in order to discover the meaning of our experience and of the world, we should not insist on "a simple and immediate sense." We may encounter many situations which seem meaningless and disordered. We may be disappointed by pointless violence. In such cases and many others, the meaning is not easily to be found. Nevertheless, there is always meaning to be discovered and it should not be overlooked or missed. He states:

The meaning or at least the full meaning of an experience may call for years of exploring before we find (and so in a sense also create) its meaning. This is particularly true of some periods; it can seem that some wounds will never be healed and some experiences will never make sense. However, time cannot only heal all but also help to make sense of all.<sup>85</sup>

Referring to the First Letter of St. Paul to the Church of Corinth (1: 23), O'Collins speaks of St. Paul's acknowledgment of the difficulty in accepting and in finding the sense or significance of Jesus' crucifixion, the Christian central symbol. To many people, it appeared to be scandalous and absurd, rather than a meaningful and saving truth. This is even true in the case of St. Paul himself. It took time for him to understand and discover the meaning, or to make sense of certain afflictions that he endured (cf. 2 Cor

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<sup>84</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 115. See also O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 39 and O'Collins, *Come Nasce la Fede nella Risurrezione?*, pp. 416-417.

<sup>85</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 115. See also O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 39 and O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 112-113.

12:7-10).<sup>86</sup> In brief, for O'Collins, meaning is there in every experience. Meaning is essential in our understanding, interpreting or in any discussion of experience.

**b. *The Purposefulness or Finality of Experience***

For O'Collins, every experience has a certain purposefulness or finality. It leads us in some direction. In the case of genuine love, for example, experience brings into being a relationship that is mutually enriching and liberating. Likewise, some common concern or effort for justice brings people of a group together and produces among them a strong solidarity and friendship. It is not so difficult to recognize the purpose or finality in such encouraging and enjoyable experiences. However, it is not easy for us to see the possible finality of our sad or frustrating experience. Nevertheless, according to O'Collins, finality exists in every experience. Unfortunately, he does not develop this point much in detail.<sup>87</sup> He simply states his own conviction as follows: "All experiences, whether 'positive' or 'negative,' enjoy certain directedness. They all lead us somewhere, no matter whether their impact is enormous or - as with most things and persons we experience - it almost thins to nothing."<sup>88</sup>

**c. *The Concreteness of Experience***

According to O'Collins there is no such thing as experience in general. Experience does not exist if it is not concrete. People do not speak, for example, of the deliverance of a nation in general, but from something concrete, such as an oppressing power. Likewise, no one would fall in love in general, but with a particular person.

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<sup>86</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 115-116 and O'Collins, *Verso una Teologia della Croce*, in *Rassegna di Teologia*, 1977, N. 4, pp 349-351.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 39-40 and O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 307.

<sup>88</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 40.

Equally, there is no such thing as sickness in general, even though it may be difficult to identify one's precise illness and find out the remedy. O'Collins states:

Particularity characterizes all experiences. They are always concrete and specific, never general and universal. An experience means *this* specific reality at this time. Despite the phenomenon of the "professionally ill," people cannot be sick in general. They experience this or that specific health problem.<sup>89</sup>

The concreteness or particularity of experience, according to O'Collins, also holds true for religious affairs. The experience of God happens only at particular times and spaces, and to particular persons.<sup>90</sup>

#### **d.      *The Newness of Experience***

According to O'Collins, it may often be the case that what we count as experiences are the very ordinary things and actions which we encounter and repeat every day. However, whenever these occur, the experience always brings about something new, "at least in degree if not in kind." Such newness opens the subject to other new experiences. This is why we normally observe that "experienced" persons can more easily confront a new situation and cope with unexpected things.<sup>91</sup>

New elements may remain at a minimum in our experiences of the routine things such as our breakfast, or in our daily activities, which are somehow predictable. Referring to the two German words for experience, O'Collins speaks of the possibility to distinguish "Experiences" from "experiences" depending on the intensity of the novelty

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<sup>89</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 111. See also O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 40 and O'Collins, *Experience*, pp. 307-308.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 40.

<sup>91</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 40, O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 110 and O'Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 102-103.

in each experience. According to him, one can use the word *Erfahrung*, which corresponds with the verb *erfahren*, for the common and repeated experience. On the other hand, he uses the word *Erlebnis*, which corresponds with the verb *erleben*, for the uncommon and moving Experience. This does not mean that O'Collins ignores the significance of the ordinary or routine things.<sup>92</sup> In fact, he reminds us that such a distinction should not lead us to overlook or even disallow the mystery of what is happening in our daily life. What regularly happens can always provoke fresh experience. He says:

A respect for newness should not make us overlook the proper role of repetition. An experienced pilot has repeatedly made "normal" take-offs and landings and has not been constantly coping with extraordinary storms and other unusual situations. An experienced conductor or liturgist will use successfully a well-known text without modifying it at all. In the hands of experienced persons, the flight, the symphony and the Eucharist will be literally repetitious but never dull. Such persons have not only learned *from* experience, but have also learned both *how* to experience and *how* to communicate experience to others. What is different comes in on top of what is the same. The new blends into the old.<sup>93</sup>

One can see that O'Collins' remark of the newness in each experience approximate with the ideas of Gadamer. For Gadamer, experience is a continuing dialogue in the direction of truth, an unending progression of experiences. It always entails newness and renders the experienced person open to new experiences. It has the character of an event and is not repeatable.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 40-41. In fact, O'Collins also regards *Erfahrung* as an experience that highlights the realities which we encounter in experiencing or the objective pole of experience. On the other hand *Erlebnis* is seen as presenting the subjective pole of experience (See O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 110).

<sup>93</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 41.

<sup>94</sup> C.f. Schlitt, *Fundamental Theology and the Experience of God*, pp. 227-228; Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1965), pp. 329, 344 and 449-452/ *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised ed., trans. revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, New York, Crossroad, 1990, pp. 346-362, 474-477 and Benoît Garceau, *L'herméneutique philosophique de H.-G. Gadamer et la recherche de la vérité*, in *Église et Théologie*, 10 (1979), pp. 275-288.

*e. Positive and Negative Experience – An Ambiguous Classification*

According to O'Collins, one can describe experience as good/bad, pleasant/sad, enlightening/puzzling, or simply positive/negative. But such a categorization seems ambiguous. For him, it is difficult to determine the standards for judging and classifying experiences as positive and negative. If we take pleasure and pain as criteria in doing so, then, sadness, sickness, painfulness, poverty and so forth, would be seen as negative experiences. However, a painful experience, for example, may have a great significance and a positive outcome. On the other hand, an enjoyable experience can lead us to a destructive situation. In view of that, O'Collins writes:

In general, it is obvious that sickness and death assault our personalities, erode our bodies and threaten us with annihilation. Yet it may be only the experience of sickness that will convince us of our limits and only the threat of death that will bring home to us our contingency and state of radical dependence.<sup>95</sup>

And, in another place he says:

Obviously we are threatened here with a facile reductionism that assesses experiences according to a calculus of pleasure. In those terms sickness, physical handicaps and pain of all kinds would be dismissed as “merely” negative experiences, to be avoided as far as possible. However, in their full context and for their long-term consequences, such experiences can turn out to be highly beneficial, humanly and spiritually.<sup>96</sup>

Referring to a passage in the Letter to the Hebrews (5, 8), concerning what Jesus learned from his sufferings, O'Collins speaks of the crucifixion of Jesus as a positive experience, at least by its outcome or effect.<sup>97</sup> In this way, O'Collins asserts that

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<sup>95</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 41. See also O'Collins, *Verso una Teologia della Croce*, pp. 358-359.

<sup>96</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 112.

<sup>97</sup> O'Collins particularly refers to the passage Heb 5, 8: “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to

Christians can learn much through what they suffer. He then draws the conclusion that even though some experiences seem to be very negative, there can be no such things as purely negative experiences. There can be no absolute evil, or a total absence of goodness. In his own words:

The Jewish-Christian faith and classical metaphysics assure me that there neither is nor can be *pure* unadulterated evil or, in equivalent terms, the absolute negative. Everything has come from the hands of the infinitely good God. Not even the ultimate in human or diabolic perversity can totally undo that fact. One can cling to the delusion that certain persons or events are the epitome of evil. But absolute evil would be pure absence, a total lack of the good which should be there – in other words, just nothing.<sup>98</sup>

Given the fact of the complexity of every experience, its object, its mediations, an important question should be raised up: how can we recognize the authenticity of an experience, its meaning, its objectivity...? Let us now see the answer from O'Collins.

## 7. *The “Aftermath or Consequences” of Experience*

By using the words “aftermath” and “consequences,” O'Collins does not at all mean to suggest some optional extras. In his discussion of the “aftermath” of experience, O'Collins speaks of discernment, interpretation, expression and commemoration, which are the indispensable parts of our experience. They are present from the very beginning of every experience, as we shall see.

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all who obey him.” (See O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 41 and *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 112.

<sup>98</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 113.

a. *The Discernment of Experience*

As we have seen, for O'Collins, experience entails immediacy. According to him, there is no doubt that we are in direct contact with what is experienced whenever experience takes place. However, for him, to discern the reality that is or was experienced may be not easy at all. Experiences, according to him, are "self-imposing but not self-authenticating." What we experience, or its origin, is not always obvious. An accurate recognition of what is experienced sometimes gets away from us. Thus, discernment of experience is crucial for us, both as individuals and as a collective subject of experience, in order to recognize the authenticity of experience.<sup>99</sup>

Referring to religious affairs or experiences, O'Collins proposes some moral criteria to discern the authenticity of experiences for them to be seen as truly coming from God. Such an experience, according to him, must build up or promote the subject's sense of responsibility. It must help the subject to deal with the complications and limitations or weaknesses of human existence. Likewise, it should lead his or her life in a good direction. With such criteria, one can recognize an experience as reliably originating from God or not. For O'Collins, it is in this line that Jesus in Matthew's Gospel appeals to one's submission to the will of God, and to his or her good works, as criteria for the community to discern the genuine prophet. Accordingly he cites the following passage:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 42-43, O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 116-117 and O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

<sup>100</sup> Mt 7, 21-23. See also O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 42, O'Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 82-83, O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus*, pp. 62-63 and O'Collins, *Come Nasce la Fede nella Risurrezione?*, pp. 417-418.

What are found in Matthew's Gospel, as criteria to discern something which we experience as originating from God, are also found in Paul's letters. In both Matthew's Gospel and Paul's letters, as well as in other biblical sources, there is a strong emphasis on one's service as one of the important criteria for discerning his or her experience as reliable or trustworthy. According to O'Collins, St. Paul, to defend his apostolic authenticity, invokes certain moral criteria, such as his concerns for the churches, his commitment in building the communities, his conversion in the service of Christ. With such criteria, the Christians at Corinth were able to experience and to ensure that he (St. Paul) was an apostle genuinely sent by God.<sup>101</sup>

For O'Collins, these criteria are normally invoked to help the process of discernment. However, they may also hinder that process. Thus, in some cases, experiences which are not in accordance with pre-existing expectations should not be seen automatically as inauthentic. In his own words, O'Collins writes:

The criteria can help or hinder the process. On the one hand, discerning a fresh experience calls for some criteria which have a certain priority vis-à-vis this new case. On the other hand, experiences which do not properly conform to pre-existing expectations are not necessarily and always inauthentic. We need to allow for criteria that have a certain freedom over and against our clear presuppositions.<sup>102</sup>

With regard to the role of tradition in discerning experience, O'Collins speaks of the subtle relation of tradition to experiences. On the one hand, tradition helps us to discern and express new experiences. On the other hand, tradition is, or should be, challenged and modified by new experiences. He says:

As human beings and as believers we live through the tension between inherited traditions and contemporary

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<sup>101</sup> O'Collins refers to 2 Cor 11, 28; 1 Cor 9, 1; 2 Cor 3, 2. See O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 42-43, O'Collins, *Theology and Revelation*, pp. 62-65 and O'Collins, Gerald, *Verso una Teologia della Croce*, pp. 358-359.

<sup>102</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 43.

experiences. On the one hand, tradition enables us to understand, evaluate and express our new experiences. On the other hand, new experiences challenge and modify past experiences, in that way altering the shape of the tradition we transmit to the coming generation.<sup>103</sup>

For O'Collins, tradition and our experience mutually affect each other. Neither is perfect or self-justifying. They both need to be discerned and re-discerned, and to be considered in their interrelationship. Accordingly, he writes:

Ideally we are at ease with the tension, neither misusing tradition to protect ourselves against new experiences nor ignoring tradition as if our human and Christian experience began yesterday. Talking about tradition (in the singular) should not be taken to imply that we inherit a monolithic block. Traditions that we receive can vary in value and may be in tension with each other. There can likewise be a tension between contemporary experiences, which in any case also vary in value. Both our traditions and our experiences invite choice and discernment. It would be a delusion to imagine that either our inherited tradition or our contemporary experience constituted a clearly unified and self-justified whole.<sup>104</sup>

One can see that O'Collins' understanding of the relationship between tradition and experience, calls our mind to the negative, dialectical and dialogical character of experience. In some ways, the newness in each experience always contradicts and goes beyond what we have previously experienced. Likewise, both experience and its objects have linguistic and cultural aspects and involve ongoing dialogue.<sup>105</sup>

While paying much attention on the linguistic nature of experience O'Collins is in no way falling into any sort of linguistic reductionism. Despite the fact that language is

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<sup>103</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 116-117. See also O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308 and O'Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, p. 16.

<sup>104</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 117. See also O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308 and O'Collins & Farrugia, *The Story of Catholic Christianity*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>105</sup> See Schlitt, *Fundamental Theology and the Experience of God*, pp. 228-229 and Hans – Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) Tübingen, 1965, pp. 361-373.

indispensible for experiencing and for expressing or communicating experience, experience itself cannot be reduced simply to linguistic affaire. Experience is influenced or conditioned by language as well as by thought, gender, tradition, culture, religion, and so on.

**b.      *The Interpretation of Experience***

We may authenticate our experiences by discernment, but we can still miss their meaning, their truth and their value. In order to be able to capture such values, according to O'Collins, we must also interpret fully and appropriately such authentic experiences. One should not take experience and its interpretation as successive and separable events. The interpretative process takes place at the very beginning of our experience. To put this in O'Collins' own words:

Instinctively and unconsciously we choose and interpret what will be encountered in the experience itself. Right at the outset large parts of reality may be blocked off or modified in ways that decisively affect the quality and range of the experience. From the start a selective and interpretative process will be at work to determine the data which we later interpret consciously.<sup>106</sup>

O'Collins, in fact, does not explicitly speak of what we have to do in order to interpret fully and correctly either experiences or what we encounter in experiences. Instead, he points out the complexity of experience and its interpretation which, according to him, are shaped and colored by culture, religion, and society. They are also conditioned by both collective and personal factors such as the history and language of society, our attitudes, memories, thoughts and sensibility, which are always present. We need to take into account all these factors in understanding our experience. O'Collins states: "There is no such thing as unpremiered experience. Presuppositions, settled beliefs

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<sup>106</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 43. See also O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 114 and O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

and pre-conditioning of all kinds will determine - at least partially - how we receive and interpret our experiences.”<sup>107</sup>

For O’Collins, when we experience something or someone, we encounter a new reality within a particular context that is made up of our questions, prospects, beliefs and prior experiences. Such a context, as we have seen in O’Collins’ discussion of the subject of experience, may reduce one’s vision and fashion circumstances or conditionings for other experiences. Like experience, the context also has both collective and personal or individual levels. The former is what one shares with his or her group, such as history, culture, religion and so forth. The latter is of oneself as an individual. At both levels, mind-sets, value-systems and the like have a strong influence on one’s discernment and interpretation of experience, as well as its range and quality. There are always elements that enter into one’s experiences, modifying the way he or she discerns them and what happens in them.<sup>108</sup>

Again regarding the collective and personal horizons that influence one’s experience and interpretation, O’Collins speaks of interpretative elements which arise from outside as well as from within experiences. According to him, in some cases such elements come more from outside, as for example from scientific experiments. Those found more within the experience itself include profound experiences of love and fear. However, for O’Collins, in any case, both the collective horizon of the group and the personal horizon of the individual always have their influences in shaping and coloring one’s experience and interpretation.<sup>109</sup>

O’Collins’ view on those factors that form or condition experience and its interpretation is very much like John Smith’s idea of experience as a multidimensional

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<sup>107</sup> O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 43. See also O’Collins, *Experience*, p. 308, O’Collins, *Cosa si Dice di Gesù Cristo?*, pp. 175-176 and O’Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>108</sup> Cf. O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 43-44 and O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 114-115.

encounter and a product of that encounter. For Smith, experience is both subjective and objective. It depends on both the person who experiences and the person or thing that is experienced. It is, thus, also subject to all kinds of interventions, controls from both sides of this experiential equation. For Smith, there is recurrence in experience which is temporally and socially conditioned.<sup>110</sup>

For O'Collins, a purely "objective, neutral and non-interpreted experience" never exists. It is never fully and purely given to us. He states:

Experience is always *interpreted* experience. "Experience" without interpretation would be a mere sensation. We should denounce and banish the delusion that there could be non-interpreted experiences. It is curious how much this fond delusion lingers, as if, for example, the twelve first met Jesus and only later began to interpret him for themselves. In reality there never was a non-interpreted Jesus. It is impossible for us as thinking and speaking beings to have non-interpreted experiences. Right in every experience itself the process of interpretation begins, a process that may not run very long for trivial experiences, but that may last a lifetime for such profound and transformative experiences as Paul's encounter with the risen Lord.<sup>111</sup>

O'Collins, of course, points out that people with different horizons, presuppositions and expectations will receive and interpret experiences differently. Such differences can even cause disagreement and conflict between different members of a group that is experiencing or encountering the same reality. The experience of the Second Vatican Council could be seen as a good example of this. People have different reactions, evaluations or even conflicts with each other about the meaning of the Council, even though they all experienced the same Council. Their different backgrounds, presuppositions and expectations affected both their experience and interpretation of the

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<sup>110</sup> Cf. Smith, *Experience and God*, pp. 37, 58-60 & Schlitt, *Fundamental Theology and the Experience of God*, pp. 231-232.

<sup>111</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 114-115. See also O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 44 and O'Collins, *Cosa si Dice di Gesù Cristo?*, pp. 175-176.

Council. For O'Collins, presuppositions or pre-conditionings often make us fail to recognize what a new experience tells us. Sometimes it is even impossible for us to let our pre-conditioning be questioned by new experiences. In such cases, what new experiences say to us is just like a knock on a "deaf man's door."<sup>112</sup> Accordingly, as already noted, experienced people comprehend a new experience better or easier than others. They may, on the other hand, have more difficulty in opening themselves to new experiences than others.<sup>113</sup>

What has been said of the relationship between tradition and experience concerning the discernment of experience is also true in the case of its interpretation. According to O'Collins, in order to be able to open ourselves for new experiences, there is a need for dialogue between tradition and experience. Sometimes it is necessary to have a horizon shift, or a conversion, to receive and interpret new experiences. This has happened to many persons and groups when profound and striking experiences provoked transforming decisions that reshaped the course of their lives. The conversion of St. Paul is an example. With the experience of the Damascus event, St. Paul did some sort of a horizon shift to understand the meaning - what this experience was saying to him. He had allowed his former understanding of mission and that of the law to be questioned, to be changed or reformed by what he experienced on the Damascus road. This brought him to a new understanding and even horizon shift which allowed him to see the world and face other new experiences and even live a new life.<sup>114</sup>

One might say, therefore, that St. Paul did not give up his former faith; rather, his faith was deepened and he achieved a better understanding. This was the result of his openness to new experience and his reconciliation of it with tradition. What St. Paul did,

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<sup>112</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 44-45, O'Collins, *Theology and Revelation*, pp. 7-8, O'Collins, *Come Nasce la Fede nella Risurrezione?*, pp. pp. 416-417 and O'Collins & Kendall, *The Bible for Theology: Ten Principles for the Theological Use of Scripture*, pp. 33-35.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 115.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 45, O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 116-117 and O'Collins, *Cristo, Nostra Pasqua e Nostro Futuro*, pp. 203-205.

however, is not easy for all of us. According to O'Collins, there is always an ambiguity. Tradition facilitates us in discerning and interpreting new experiences, but it may also prevent us from opening to new experiences and from appropriately understanding or interpreting them.<sup>115</sup>

### *c. The Expression of Experience*

Discerning and interpreting are not sufficient for us in having an experience. According to O'Collins, it is necessary for us to objectify and express that experience. An experience would not have meaning and would be incomplete if such expression does not take place. We cannot discern or think of embracing an experience unless it is somehow objectified and expressed. Certainly, it is impossible for any person to fully and adequately express, articulate or communicate any experience, especially a deep one. However, some measure of its expression is always included in every experience. Much close to Schillebeeckx's view on the complexity of experience's process, and the manifold means or mediations of experience,<sup>116</sup> O'Collins states: "The self cannot live through an experience without in some way conceptualizing, exteriorizing or expressing - whether in language or otherwise - that experience."<sup>117</sup> Thus, our expression of an experience does not necessarily happen after we have had that experience. Language, the normal means of expression, in O'Collins' view, not only expresses experience, but also forms and shapes it.<sup>118</sup>

According to O'Collins, in expressing, articulating or describing one's experiences, a person moves from "the immediate and particular level of experience" to

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 45, O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 116-117 and O'Collins & Farrugia, *The Story of Catholic Christianity*, p. 104.

<sup>116</sup> Cf. Schillebeeckx, *L'Histoire des hommes, Récit de Dieu*, pp. 45-50.

<sup>117</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 46.

<sup>118</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 45-46, O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 113-114 and O'Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, pp. 8-9.

“the mediate and generalized level of language,” the means of expression. In doing so, a certain vitality of experiences can be lost. However, such articulating and expressing allows the person, as well as others, to apprehend his or her experiences and recognize aspects of it which otherwise could not be known.<sup>119</sup> He states: “The verbal account makes experiences and their meaning public. The flesh of personal experience becomes a word to others. Our language thus makes the experiences amenable to being passed on and inherited.”<sup>120</sup>

For O’Collins, language has a special role in our expression of experiences. Like the relationship between experience and thought, the relationship between experience and language is a distinguishable but inseparable one. He states: “Language without experience is empty; experience without language is mute.... Without experience, language remains abstract and lifeless. Without language, experience remains confused and largely unintelligible.”<sup>121</sup>

Verbal language is the important, but not the sole medium of our experiences’ expression. According to O’Collins, experience can also find its expression, communication or articulation in arts, symbols, rituals, life-style and so forth. Thus, it would be a mistake to overemphasize the role of the spoken or printed word. In many cases, non-verbal symbols and rituals can express and communicate experience better than can a merely verbal description. Such expression or communication can happen at different levels, through different means, with different degrees of our awareness, intention and achievement. However, their roles or effects are undeniable. O’Collins states: “In communicating our experiences we enjoy the great benefits of many symbols. We can tell our story and use other symbolic language. Our style of life and body

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 46 and O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>120</sup> O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 46. See also O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 116 and O’Collins, *Introducing Catholic Theology, Interpreting Jesus*, pp. 1-4.

<sup>121</sup> O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 114.

language (in the broadest sense of that term) can effectively symbolize what we experience.”<sup>122</sup>

Schillebeeckx would totally agree with O’Collins on the indispensable role of language in experiencing as well as in the expression of experience. But Schillebeeckx seems to be more conscious of the limit of language given the fact that the language itself is also conditioned by many factors, such as, history, socio-cultural context, personal and collective situations.... Thus, for him, there is always a gap between reality, experience and language.<sup>123</sup>

As we have seen, for O’Collins, at both the collective and individual levels, all the subjects’ experience of the same reality is different from one individual to another. The same is also true of the subjects’ expression or communication of experience and its meaning. Moreover, according to him, no one (at the individual level) and no group (at the collective level) can fully express or interpret an experience or exhaust its meaning. Thus, at both levels there is a variety or plurality of experience’s expression and its meaning.<sup>124</sup>

#### **d. Memory and Experience**

Having *had* an experience does not mean that everything is over. According to O’Collins, experiences, especially profound experiences, remain and continue to live in the memory of the subjects (both as individuals and as a group or a community). The exodus experience, for example, for the Jewish community was not something that was finished or a matter simply of the past. Jewish men and women of every generation will continue to remember and live that experience as if they themselves had been in the

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<sup>122</sup> O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 116. See also O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 46, O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 115-116 and O’Collins & Farrugia, *The Story of Catholic Christianity*, pp. 294-295.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. Schillebeeckx, *L’Histoire des hommes, récit de Dieu*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 47 and O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 116-117.

group that departed from Egypt. The same is also true for Christians with regard to the experience of Jesus' death and resurrection. O'Collins states:

As crucified and risen, Jesus remains uniquely active and present. The experiences of the exodus and the paschal mystery endure. No individual or community has or ever will interpret once and for all what such events meant or mean, as if we could be finished with and forget them. They continue to be remembered, ritually re-enacted, reinterpreted and re-expressed.<sup>125</sup>

Speaking of the memory and the actuality or continuation of experience, according to O'Collins, is not some pro forma statement provoked simply by religious piety or spiritual need. Naturally, those persons and things that we experience deeply will be remembered. Our lives are not simply series of separated events or periods. Experiences of the past remain and continue to live in our memory. Moreover, it is necessary for us to continuously reflect on, reinterpret and re-express those experiences that formed "our personal and collective past." Extending Gabriel Marcel's observation on the relationship between experience and reflection,<sup>126</sup> O'Collins states: "The richer the experience itself, the richer will be the continuing reflection sustained by memory."<sup>127</sup>

## **8. Religious Experience**

According to O'Collins, we all instinctively try to avoid fatality and absurdity. We want to live and to search for our life's meaning and truth. We want "to love and to

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<sup>125</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 47. See also O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus*, pp. 60-62, O'Collins, *Rivelazione: Passato e Presente*, pp. 125-127 and O'Collins, *Introducing Catholic Theology, Interpreting Jesus*, pp. 115-117.

<sup>126</sup> O'Collins, in fact, quoted Gabriel Marcel: "The more we grasp the notion of experience in its proper complexity... the better we shall understand how experience cannot fail to transform itself into reflection, and we shall even have the right to say that the more richly it is experience, the more, also, it is reflection." (O'Collins refers to Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, G. S. Fraser, trans., Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1960, p. 102. See O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 47-48).

<sup>127</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 48.

be loved.” This search for the experience of meaning and love in life is innate to human beings. It implies and comes to its climax in our search for God who is life, meaning and love in their fullness. Moreover, for O’Collins, those who really live a contemplative life and try to find God in every moment and in all things make their whole life a constantly and richly religious experience. In doing and being so, they experience divine reality and find his presence symbolically in all things. Everything and every moment could be for them a sign or indication of the divine presence.<sup>128</sup> On the other side, referring to the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:15-35), O’Collins speaks of religious experiences as what gives us life, meaning and love. He describes this as follows: “The disciples know Jesus ‘in the breaking of the bread.’ His scripture lesson illuminates the sense of what they had just been through and had taken to be a meaningless tragedy. His words, actions and presence set their ‘hearts burning’ within them.”<sup>129</sup>

What we have seen in O’Collins’ discussions concerning the subject of experience, the experience itself, and the aftermath of experience, is largely based on everyday speech and meanings. Occasionally, however, the examples he uses to point up his ideas are actually religious ones. His overall target is to provide some usable scheme for theological reflection on revelation. In fact, he also makes a distinction between “the religious dimension implicitly present in all experience” and “conscious religious experiences which belong to historical revelation and salvation.” Referring to the latter, he states: “Only some human experiences are consciously religious: that is to say, situations that let us sense the revealing and saving self-communication of God and which invite us to make or renew a faith commitment.”<sup>130</sup> Accordingly, O’Collins speaks of transcendental experience that constitutes transcendental revelation and religious

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<sup>128</sup> Cf. O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 117-119, O’Collins, *Experience*, p. 308 and O’Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, pp. 28-29.

<sup>129</sup> O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 119.

<sup>130</sup> O’Collins, *Experience*, p. 308. See also O’Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, p. 28.

experience that makes up historical revelation.<sup>131</sup> For these we now proceed to the next section.

**a. Transcendental Experience - “Lower Case” Religious Experience**

For O’Collins, there is always a universal aspect, an infinite and spiritual horizon, in all our experiences. “An ultimate element” is present in every human experience. Such ultimacy relates human persons to God in and through all their experiences. He states:

Always and everywhere human life realizes and enacts a saving dialogue with God. The religious dimension is a plus-factor in our entire experience, a primordial given in all acting, reacting, knowing, willing, feeling and symbolizing. There is an absolute and ultimate (as distinct from a relative and proximate) ground, horizon and concern found in all human activities.<sup>132</sup>

In our experiences, thus, we not only experience ourselves and the direct objects of our experience, but also, to a certain extent, we experience the absolute horizon of being or God himself, who is revealed in all our activity. O’Collins further explains this: “We can explicitly experience God because every human experience reveals its openness toward the infinite.... We are able to encounter God because all human experiences are already primordially religious. In any experience whatsoever we experience at least minimally ourselves and God.”<sup>133</sup>

This ultimate horizon, for O’Collins, is not one among the determined objects that we know and experience. Knowing or experiencing the horizon is a separate occurrence of knowledge and experience. It is an “unthematized and unreflective element” that is

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<sup>131</sup> Cf. O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 48, O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 117-119, O’Collins, *Experience*, p. 308, O’Collins & Farrugia, *The Story of Catholic Christianity*, pp. 97-98 and O’Collins, *Theology and Revelation*, pp. 13-14.

<sup>132</sup> O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 48.

<sup>133</sup> O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 118. See also O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 48 and O’Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

there in all our knowledge and experience. It is always affirmed, even in one's action of disallowing it. Such horizon, in O'Collins' view, is the precondition of all our experience. However, even though it may become an object of our explicit attention, it can never be fully and adequately grasped and objectivized.<sup>134</sup>

This universal, spiritual and ultimate element or aspect in all human experience, in fact, is regarded by O'Collins as transcendental experience. It is called transcendental experience of the human subject as it "goes beyond all particular acts" of the human subject. Moreover, its horizon cannot be controlled or determined by any particular content of the human acts.<sup>135</sup>

O'Collins speaks of it as part of human nature. He states: "The human subject displays an openness and tendency toward an ultimate horizon of unconditioned being, that furthest limit which circles and encloses all our human experiences."<sup>136</sup>

In fact, O'Collins takes up the theme of transcendental experience which was developed by Karl Rahner. For Rahner, a human being or a human self is a historically conditioned and unitary reality. There are two sides, aspects or levels of that self and of the human experience of God, namely, *categorical* and *transcendental*. Categorical refers to the more everyday or ordinary side, aspect, or level of human experience, in which the self functions in a thematic or reflexively conscious way. At this level or side, the human person experiences reality within a subject-object structure. Transcendental experience, on the other hand, refers to a pre-thematic or non-reflexive aspect of human experience. It is prior to and more fundamental than the categorical aspect or side of experience. It is from this transcendental side that Rahner argues for and speaks of the human experience of God as well as of revelation and grace. According to him, it is on this level that the human person is pre-reflexively aware of the priority of God who is intimately present in

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<sup>134</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 49.

<sup>135</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 49 and O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

<sup>136</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 49. See also O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

every human self. It is on this level that God is experienced as a subject-to-subject, and not reduced to an object among other objects.<sup>137</sup>

For O'Collins, because it is "the absolute fullness of being, meaning, truth and goodness," the ultimate horizon in our experience "is to be identified with God." Accordingly, one can see transcendental experience as transcendental revelation. He states:

We can speak of transcendental experience as transcendental revelation. This is the primordial form of God's self-communication. In every transcendental experience (which means in fact the transcendental aspect of every particular experience), we encounter the divine mystery and God's saving presence, even if this dimension of the experience is not explicitly reflected upon. Hence the so-called proofs for God's existence are not ways that lead us to know and experience God for the first time, but are secondary reflections on our basic, transcendental experience of God.<sup>138</sup>

Again we see that O'Collins' understanding of transcendental experience or transcendental revelation is akin to that of Rahner. For both of them, transcendental experience can happen, can be mediated and expressed in and through everyday historical activities, of the human self and group or community, by the reflexive consciousness (which is of the categorical side or level). Divine revelation (transcendental or natural), thus, is not from outside the experiencing self, but in the depth of his or her own heart. Such revelation, in and through categorical experience or historical words and deeds, does not impose on the self, but just re-sounds or recalls what has already occurred in the

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<sup>137</sup> Cf. Rahner, *The Experience of God Today*, in *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 11, New York, Seabury, 1974, pp. 149-165, Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, New York, Crossroad, 1978, pp.170-175 and Schlitt, *Fundamental Theology and the Experience of God*, pp. 239-240.

<sup>138</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 49. See also O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

depth of the self. Thus the human person just discovers and recognizes what has already taken place in him or herself.<sup>139</sup>

While transcendental experience is a part of human nature or a reality of human existence, God's self-communication, found in this experience, is, according to O'Collins, a true gift from God. This divine self-communication is not something that belongs to us, but to God's grace. Nevertheless, this divine self-communication, or God himself, is not foreign to every human person. For O'Collins, God is not unknown to us, because the ultimate horizon is required for any human experience to occur. He writes: "Whether or not they realize this consciously and accept it willingly, all human beings receive the transcendental experience of God's primordial self-communication. This self-communication sets up the conditions for men and women to decide consciously for or against God."<sup>140</sup>

For O'Collins, transcendental experience or transcendental revelation and historical revelation are distinctive and relational. The former is *a priori*, whereas the latter is *a posteriori*. However, the former is a necessary condition for us to receive the latter and salvation. He states:

Transcendental experience/revelation establishes the presupposition and condition for receiving divine revelation and salvation in the specific forms of historical existence - above all through the historical experience of Israel and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Transcendental revelation assumes the shape of historical revelation in and through the concrete experiences and free decisions of communities and individual persons.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Cf. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, pp. 172-173, Rahner, *The Experience of God Today*, p. 156, Schlitt, *Fundamental Theology and the Experience of God*, p. 240 and DiNoia, J.A., *Karl Rahner*, in Ford, David F. (ed.), *The Modern Theologians, An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. I, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990, pp. 190-192.

<sup>140</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 50.

<sup>141</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 50. See also O'Collins, *Experience*, p. 308.

O'Collins, in fact, also calls "transcendental" experience "religious" experience of "lower case" in distinction to "Religious" experience of "upper case," as we shall see below.

**b. "Upper Case" Religious Experience**

What Rahner calls transcendental experience or transcendental revelation is regarded by O'Collins as a primordial religious dimension of every human experience. Admitting this transcendental experience or revelation as precondition for the possibility of any experience, O'Collins goes further, speaking of consciously religious experience as historical revelation. This, according to him, can be called "upper case" religious experience as distinct from transcendental experience or revelation which is called "lower case religious experience."<sup>142</sup>

According to O'Collins, there are certain profound moments in every life. There are certain special experiences or situations, for example, that of extreme danger, of absurdity and of suffering. In such profound moments, special experiences or situations, one can, on the one hand, easily come face-to-face with his or her own limitation or finitude. He or she can, on the other hand, also acknowledge certain power, significance, love and care as supports on which he or she depends. In fact, for O'Collins, as human beings we all are limited and live dependently on "what is graciously given to us." In such special moments or situations we would encounter surprising experiences that are beyond our prediction, planning and control. Such deep experiences can change the way of our life and help us to enter into some relation and dialogue with God. In such profound experiences "we sense the ultimate dimension of our life" more than elsewhere. O'Collins calls such experiences religious. The term "religious," according to him, can be applied to "all those experiences of depth which consciously concern our ultimate purposes and relationship with the holy God." Such experiences characterize our life,

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<sup>142</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 50-51.

even though they might not always and necessarily be recognized or classified as religious.<sup>143</sup>

For O'Collins, what has been said of experience in general regarding the necessary involvement between the subject and object, is also true of religious experiences. He says that explicitly religious experience involves co-experiencing God and ourselves. These two aspects of explicitly or consciously religious experience are inseparable.<sup>144</sup> He asserts of religious experience that:

(a) It puts us in conscious touch with the totality of things, that is to say, with God as the ground of everything and the all-determining reality. (b) In knowing God, we also know that it is we who know. We experience ourselves, in our radical dependence and contingency. We face God in our profound need but fundamental trust that, in its heart, the world holds together and our existence finally has worth.<sup>145</sup>

Any partiality or bias in understanding experience can lead to confusion and make it difficult to speak of religious experience. O'Collins unequivocally rejects all kinds of reductionism in understanding experience in general as well as religious experience in particular. He writes:

Those who confine experience to the domain of the senses will obviously have difficulty in understanding what is meant by religious *experience*. Like human beings, animals are bombarded with sense data. Those who reduce experience to sense knowledge should logically speak of animals as experiencing. However, they probably draw back from attributing religious experience even to dogs, not to mention less favored animals. In brief, talking about

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<sup>143</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 50-51. See also O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 118.

<sup>144</sup> O'Collins tells us that Karl Jaspers, David Tracy, Abraham Maslow, and Paul Tillich have named explicitly religious experiences in a *spatial* way, as occurring in "boundary-situations," as being "limit-experiences" or "peak experiences," or as associated with "the ground of being and meaning," respectively. See O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 118.

<sup>145</sup> O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 118.

“religious” experience entails a non-reductionist view of what experience in general entails.<sup>146</sup>

While asserting a religious element in all human experiences, O’Collins, however, prefers to see *religious experience* as the experience that goes further than “the minimal, unthematized awareness of God and ourselves involved in every act of knowing and willing,” that is to say, transcendental experience. According to him, we may speak of such awareness of God or the universal horizon in all experiences as *lower case* religious experience and call those experiences which “consciously concern with God and our ultimate destiny,” *upper case* religious experience. In order to avoid the confusion of the lower/upper case distinction, he reserves the term “religious” for those particular experiences in which we *consciously* experience “the depth and ultimacy in life.” Such religious experience gives us an explicit awareness of God as the holy and powerful one who transcends us and leads us to fullness of life while calling to mind our creature-feeling.<sup>147</sup>

### ***c. Primordial Faith and Self-Conscious Faith***

For O’Collins, there are always *active* and *passive* components in every experience. The subject not only experiences, but also undergoes something. Referring to the case of Jesus and his audiences, O’Collins says: “The symbolic language of Jesus’ parables invites their hearers not only to receive them but also to actively respond to this experience.”<sup>148</sup> Such active component or our response to religious experiences is what O’Collins calls faith. According to him, both transcendental experience/revelation and conscious religious experience give us the claim or awareness of God and of ourselves. They also address to us a call to faith or a response to what we encounter in those

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<sup>146</sup> O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 51.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. O’Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, p. 51 and O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>148</sup> O’Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 111.

experiences. The former leads us to a response in the form of a primordial faith, while the latter invites us to reply with a self-conscious faith. Briefly, O'Collins explains it as follows:

In all knowing, willing and acting we experience the reality of God and ourselves. A primordial divine self-communication takes place. This self-communication summons us to "obey" and hear with a primordial faith the reality, truth and goodness we encounter. We can call this dimension of every experience the primordial revelation which invites our primordial faith. This revelatory/believing aspect, found in every human experience, need not be expressly identified as such. It is otherwise with consciously religious experiences where the divine revelation comes through some historical word and event to summon us to a self-conscious faith.<sup>149</sup>

Faith is an important factor in O'Collins' theology. It is involved in both our human experience of God and our understanding and receiving the divine revelation. We shall come back to O'Collins' discussion of faith with more details after presenting his thoughts on revelation in the next chapter.

## 9. *Concluding Remarks*

For O'Collins symbols or symbolization and experience are dialectically related. According to him, as we have seen, symbols are part of human life and human history. They are indispensable means for human beings to express themselves, to communicate and to relate to others and to God and thereby to take part in any divine-human relationship. They are real and historical, but not identical with the realities that they

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<sup>149</sup> O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 51-52. See also O'Collins, *Theology and Revelation*, pp. 59-61, O'Collins, *Foundations of Theology*, pp. 8-9 and O'Collins, *Experiencing Jesus*, pp. 82-84.

symbolize or represent. They carry God's self-communication or revelation and have a power to transform us and to evoke a vital response to God and to the other.

O'Collins refers to many authors in speaking of symbols. However, one can see that his understanding or presentation of symbols is more compatible with, or even influenced by, the work of K. Rahner, L. Dupré and F.W. Dillistone, and occasionally by that of P. Tillich, P. Ricoeur, J. Smith and Schillebeeckx. Still, it bears his own style and intention. O'Collins' study of symbols seems to be a part of a larger discussion rather than a study per se. In fact, it is developed within the context of a religious discourse, or more precisely, a theological discourse. But any theological discourse must deal with pre-theological language in religion, which is the language of mythology. One might say that, in interpreting symbols and distinguishing them from the reality that they symbolize or refer to, O'Collins – to use the language of Rudolf Bultmann and John Macquarrie – indeed practices a sort of *demythologization*. Thus, O'Collins' study of symbols would be better understood and appreciated if it were elaborated together with a study of myths and metaphors, elements which are found in great abundance in all religions.<sup>150</sup>

Even though his discussion of symbols is not exhaustive, O'Collins' theology is able to highlight and respond to some of the major challenges posed by postmodern theology and philosophy, such as the issues of divine absence, relativism and historical consciousness. On the other hand, his discussion offers a framework that allows us to avoid any grand or universal claims about truth and reality in religious discourse. It enables us to establish a balance between the extremes of traditionalism and relativism.

By distinguishing a symbol from what it symbolizes, O'Collins is able to avoid the idolatry and ecclesiolatry that are the consequences of merging symbols with what they symbolize. Idolatry and ecclesiolatry literally mean worshipping an idol, or the church, or a religious association. They identify God with his symbols, signs and sacraments. By doing so, they confine God's universal presence and work to certain

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<sup>150</sup> See John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, Revised Edition, London, SCM Press, 1977, pp. 130-134.

things, such as the visible church or human associations. This easily leads to an absolute claim in religious discourse, such as a grand narrative, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, absolutism, exclusivism, fundamentalism and the like.

By stressing the link between the symbol and what it symbolizes, O'Collins, on the other hand, is able to avoid the iconoclasm which derives from a radical separation between the symbol and what it symbolizes. Iconoclasm denies or, at least, undermines the role or significance of icons, symbols, and rituals in religions and in religious life. "Religion without the church" or "believing without belonging" and "belief in God that is devoid of religious practices" could be among the consequences of iconoclasm. Iconoclasm could be seen as another form of individualism and rationalism since it ignores the social or collective aspect of human nature as well as the role of rituals and the senses in knowing, expressing, communicating and relating. Moreover, by undermining the symbol and its value, iconoclasm can lead to nihilism and relativism, since it ultimately undermines every religious claim and the credibility religious symbols language.<sup>151</sup>

One can say that O'Collins would never separate the act of knowing, expressing, communicating and relating from that of experiencing. His account on symbols, thus, continues and is further developed in his discussion of experience. Like his emphasis on the religious aspect of symbols, O'Collins' study of experience is a religiously phenomenological description. He begins by presenting a universal account of experience, and then investigates how his understanding could apply to different individuals, in different spaces and times. He also speaks briefly of the relation between experience and faith. Moreover, he wants to show the relationship between human experience and the religious dimension of our existence.

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<sup>151</sup> Cf. Mardones, *La Vida del Símbolo: La Dimensión Simbólica de la Religión*, pp. 33-35, Radcliffe, *The Contribution of Christianity to the Future of Europe*. See also Dinesh D'Souza, *What's So Great about Christianity*, pp. 1-5.

Being aware of the many thinkers who have contributed to the study of experience, O'Collins, however, seeks to avoid adopting any one version. Neither does he attempt a critical survey of the major contributors to the discussion about experience. His purpose is to reflect on ordinary speech instead of elaborating a technical account. In fact, he does not provide an explicit definition of experience and religious experience. Rather, he explains what happens in experience, how it happens, how one 'gets' it, expresses it and interprets it, all the while showing a real sensitivity to the role of language, history, culture and so forth. He presents the various aspects of experience in general by means of three main themes: the subject of experience, the experience itself, and the consequences.<sup>152</sup> He also discusses religious experience and faith, which he views essentially as responses of human beings to what they encounter in experience.

For O'Collins, the notion and the reality of experience are polyvalent. Any reduction in describing and understanding experience is one-sided, biased or partial. His entire discussion of experience ranges across the orders of being, knowledge and language. The reader should bear this in mind and be alert to the way he speaks of experience at each point and at each moment. He might speak of experience from the ontological, epistemological, or linguistic perspective, or even of all three of these together.<sup>153</sup> His point of view on symbols or experience is always "both/and" rather than "either/or," so to speak.

Greeley says that Catholics emphasize the analogical and sacramental image or presence of God in the world, whereas Protestants stress the dialectical image of God who is radically other than the world.<sup>154</sup> O'Collins, as we have seen, graciously acknowledges the importance of taking into account both of these tendencies. The analogical or sacramental image or presence of God in the world is well explained in his discussion of the revelatory character of symbol, and the religious dimension of all

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<sup>152</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Fundamental Theology*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>153</sup> Cf. O'Collins, *Retrieving Fundamental Theology*, p. 109.

<sup>154</sup> Cf. Michael J. Donahue, *Catholicism and Religious Experience*, in Ralph W. Hood Jr. (ed.), *Handbook of Religious Experience*, Birmingham, Religious Education Press, 1995, pp. 40-41.

experiences, while the otherness of God is adequately explicated in his distinction between symbol and the reality that it symbolizes, and in his view of the complexity of experience and its interpretation. Experience and its interpretation, according to him, are shaped and colored by cultural, religious, and sociological influences of all kinds. They are influenced by both collective and personal factors such as the history and language of society, our attitudes, memories, ideas and sensibility, which are always there. In other words, epistemologically speaking, we can never exhaustively ‘get’ the reality (including God) of what we encounter in experiencing.

One could say that O’Collins’ study of symbols and experience is essentially apologetic. It is developed in defense of theism. However, his affirmation of the directness of experience might evoke some critique as regards his understanding of religious experience or the experience of God, and it seems to be in conflict with his affirmation about the symbolic character of reality. Nevertheless, he nowhere says that religious experience or the experience of God is epistemologically comparable with sense experience, even though he acknowledges the important role of the senses in every experience. For O’Collins, God deals immediately with human beings, and we can therefore be said to immediately experience God. However, this self-communication is always mediated symbolically through ‘other’ experiences. Thus, his idea of “immediate” experience of God could be properly understood as this is a “real” and “personal” experience of God, rather than directly “face to face” encounter with God. The experience of God in O’Collins’ study would be better expressed (by using Smith’s term) as “mediated immediacy.” This is to say, it is real experience which is mediated by all kind of means: Bible, tradition, nature, people...

While he affirms the cognitive character of experience and the important role of sense experience in our knowledge, O’Collins is certainly not an empiricist. For him, experience is not reducible to sensation. It is not just about sense data. What a human person (a fully developed adult) experiences depends on a complex interplay between what is presented to him or her, and the concepts he or she has already formed. Thus, O’Collins would not agree with Schleiermacher that religious experience is an immediate

consciousness which is not shaped by concepts and beliefs. For O'Collins, as we have seen, there is no such thing as raw or uninterpreted experience.<sup>155</sup>

Even though doing sociology or the sociology of religion is not really part of O'Collins' work on experience in general and religious experience in particular, one can say that he is well aware of, and is able to bridge the gap that is commonplace in the sociology of religion, namely, between religion regarded as private experience and religion as a social phenomenon, i.e., between religion's experiential side and religion as institution and ideas.<sup>156</sup> O'Collins is able to resolve this dualism by means of his assertion of the interplay between personal or individual factors, on the one hand, and social, cultural or religious factors or contexts, on the other. By doing so, he offers the possibility of developing an integrative study of religious experience. What distinguishes O'Collins from sociologists, one might say, is that the latter regard the social context as the origin of religious experience, whereas for the former, this is but one element, factor or condition in our experience.

O'Collins is also well aware of the role of psychology and its influence or impact on every experience, including so-called religious experience. Thus, he would accept the role or influence of the unconscious and the Oedipus complex (which are central to Freud's critique of religion), but not as the substantial cause or origin of religion. He regards psychological factors, instead, as one among many that shape or condition religious experience. Moreover, in view of his assertion of the religious dimension of every experience, especially the experience of symbols, O'Collins would agree with Jung regarding the meaning and numinous value of dreams. To use Jung's own term and ideas, one might say that O'Collins also promotes and works for the "Self." However, the "Self" in O'Collins' understanding of the human person is more comprehensive than the Self as archetype in Jung's perspective. It includes all aspects of human life, such as the

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<sup>155</sup> For more information concerning empiricism, see Herbert Burhenn, *Philosophy and Religious Experience*, in Ralph W. Hood Jr. (ed.), *Handbook of Religious Experience*, pp. 149-151, 155.

<sup>156</sup> Cf. Margaret M. Poloma, *The Sociological Context of Religious Experience*, in Ralph W. Hood Jr. (ed.), *Handbook of Religious Experience*, pp. 171-179.

personal, historical, cultural, social and the like. It is more than the personal wholeness to which Jung refers.<sup>157</sup>

In a religious context, especially, a context of religious plurality, it is extremely important to be aware of the existence of symbols and their work or function in human life as well as in religions. Even though O'Collins does not engage in an extensive study of symbolism, his understanding of symbols offers an important tool or principle for all those who are involved in religious studies in general, and the theology of religions or interreligious dialogue in particular.

By acknowledging the symbolic character of religious language, narrative and revelation, and thus, the distinction between the symbol and that what it symbolizes, the gap between reality and its expression, or between reality and our experience as well as understanding, O'Collins is able to invalidate the claim of any religion to possess the absolute truth about God, or to constitute the absolute way of salvation, and the like. In other words, he undermines the foundations for exclusivist claims in religious discourse or in the encounter with other religions.

By affirming that every experience is religious experience or has a religious meaning, that symbols are vehicles for God's revelation and saving self-communication, that they have a cognitive content, that they always say something, communicate some truth and transmit some information, and that they have a transformative and historical impact, O'Collins is able to claim or appreciate the divine presence, work, and communication or revelation in all religions. By doing this, he opens the door to the recognition of the validity of all religions or, at the very least, displays great reverence for them. This is an encouragement to enter interreligious dialogue with, or to engage in the study of, other religions.

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<sup>157</sup> Cf. Edward P. Shafranske, *Freudian Theory and Religious Experience* and Fredrica R. Halligan, *Jungian Theory and Religious Experience*, in Ralph W. Hood Jr. (ed.), *Handbook of Religious Experience*, pp. 200-225, 231-250.

George D. Lindbeck would classify O'Collins as an experiential-expressivist theologian because O'Collins' view of both symbols and experience indicates that different religions "diversely thematize the same experience." Lindbeck who seems to have a cultural-linguistic approach to religions, states rather that religions "do not diversely thematize the same experience; rather they have different experiences."<sup>158</sup> Apparently, O'Collins seems to be contrary with Lindbeck. But by saying "the same experience" O'Collins, who is strongly conscious of the particularity of each experience, refers, in fact, to the ultimate object of religious experience, that means God-himself, who is presented by different forms depending on the particularity of each religion which is inevitably socio-linguistic-culturally conditioned. O'Collins would never mean to claim an uniformity of religious experience. While this experience, for him, is conditioned by multiple factors, it can never be reduced to a any of these factors . Furthermore, for O'Collins, while each experience is experience of God (whatever form it may takes), there exists no experience or revelation (we shall see in the next chapter) that captures the whole of what God is, or no experience and revelation which is identical with God. This is a good reminder for all those who engage in interreligious dialogue that no one or no religion that can possess the whole truth of God, and that different religious adherents, in fact, can be enriched by sharing and leaning with each other their "different" experiences of God.

By asserting the different degrees of intensity of each symbol in carrying, communicating, or expressing reality, and their power of transformation and redemption, especially in the case of religious symbols, and the different degrees of the closeness to reality in each experience, O'Collins is able to disengage the claim that all religions are equal (a claim made by many pluralists). As we know, for some modern philosophers and theologians such as Ernst Troeltsch, Arnold Toynbee, and John Hick, all religions are relative and essentially the same. We cannot establish that one is superior to the other. It would be wrong, offensive, and narrow-minded to hold that a particular religion is better

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<sup>158</sup> Cf. George D. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine, Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 1984, pp. 40-41.

than another.<sup>159</sup> O'Collins would agree with John Hick in asserting that all religions have the same ultimate goal, but for him, as we have seen all religions are not equal or the same. This affirmation of O'Collins is important for the adherents of every religion to enter into dialogue and to learn from other religions than their own.

O'Collins' understanding of experience is a useful tool for those who work in a Buddhist context. Of course, there are different sects in Buddhism and they differ from one another. So, for example, Mahayana Buddhism focuses on the collective salvation by means of the *bodhisattvas*, whereas Theravada Buddhism emphasizes individual salvation by more or less exclusively individual efforts.<sup>160</sup> However, both of them find their place in O'Collins' understanding of experience, which covers or includes both the individual and collective aspects of human life, and even insists on their interdependence. Moreover, O'Collins' view of negative and positive experiences is very similar to the Buddhist view of suffering or the Truth of Suffering.<sup>161</sup> For O'Collins, as we have seen, there is an ambiguity in defining an experience as negative or positive. A painful experience might be of great significance and have a positive outcome. On the other hand, a pleasurable experience can turn out to be destructive. But all experiences have a meaning and can be good for us as long as we know how to 'manage' them, so to speak. Similarly, the Buddhist concept of suffering is neither optimistic nor pessimistic. Suffering is a part of life. It is a given reality that we must encounter and which, once we have encountered it, can enable us to see or experience something that had not been seen or experienced prior to suffering.<sup>162</sup>

Descriptions of interreligious dialogue are many and varied. However, interreligious dialogue undertaken by those who are dedicated to their own religious

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<sup>159</sup> Cf. Knitter, *No Other Name*, p. 23.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. Gui-Young Hong, *Buddhism and Religious Experience*, in Ralph W. Hood Jr. (ed.), *Handbook of Religious Experience*, 1995, pp. 92-93.

<sup>161</sup> The Truth of Suffering is one of the four noble truths in Buddhism, namely, the Truth of Suffering, the Truth of Cause, the Truth of Extinction and the Truth of the Path.

<sup>162</sup> Cf. Gui-Young Hong, *Buddhism and Religious Experience*, pp. 96-97.

tradition, can provide an opportunity to discover both the role (or even the 'special' role) of their own religions in the divine economy of salvation for humankind and the validity of other religious traditions in that same economy. O'Collins' understanding of symbols and experience, as we have seen, can serve as demonstrating and acknowledging the real value of the experiences and symbols of other religions, and, more generally, of the manifold works of God and his universal presence in all religions. In other words, while his discussion is circumscribed, O'Collins has opened the door to a new appreciation of other religions and their role in God's plan for humankind. What remains is to discover the role or special role of his own religion, Christianity. This will be the subject of the next chapter that deals with his understanding of revelation.