

BOOK REVIEW

Müller, Sabrina. 2023. *Religious Experience and Its Transformational Power: Qualitative and Hermeneutic Approaches to a Practical Theological Foundational Concept*

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Reviewed by Shaun Joynt

This monograph is based on the habilitation thesis of Sabrina Müller who is Managing Director of the University Research Priority Program “Digital Religion(s)” and researcher and lecturer in Practical Theology at the University of Zurich (see <https://communication.dsi.uzh.ch/member/sabrina-muller/>). Within the research study Müller sets out to “search for traces of how young urban adults understand and interpret their religious experiences and relate them to their everyday lives” in order to “provide impulses for current practical theological theory formation on the horizon of social change” (3). Müller offers the reason for this approach as “personal experiences have become the individual point of reference and orientation for interpreting the world and understanding oneself and God” and “human existence cannot be understood ... without experience [as it] is one of the most central concepts of practical theological research, social science, and humanities theory formation” (4). Her detailed exposition concerning religious experience as a practical theological challenge, sensitizing concepts, methodological choices and implementation, and her discussion and findings, all contribute to the value of the monograph as both a contribution to the current debate on religious experiences from a practical theological perspective as well as an example of a well-executed research study. Müller describes her research as an interdisciplinary study that is inductive, empirical and contextually Western (European and North American), which offers a foundational exploratory contribution to practical theological research by investigating “how and why urban people perceive their experiences as religious and how they categorize them and put them into language” (6). She conducts this in the paradigm of grounded theory by offering two sensitizing concepts, namely, religious experience (chapter 2) and human existence in late modernity (chapter 3) which includes a

focus on social changes with particular consideration of urbanity's influence therein. This is followed by a detailed presentation of the results of the qualitative data analysis (chapters 5–7). Finally, the inductively elaborated theories are discussed theologically (chapters 8–9).

Müller's interest in religious experiences stems from numerous discussions concerning the topic during her ten years as a youth worker and six years as a pastor and she spends considerable time indicating the interaction between faith, research and reflexivity advocating that the "awareness of the interrelatedness of personal religious existence and academic theological work, especially concerning theological preference and difference, does not hinder the necessary self-reflexivity but promotes it" (8).

Next, Müller goes into great detail concerning religious experience as a conceptual approach by considering an etymological definition of the word *experience*, contrasting experience (*Erfahrung*) and lived experience (*Erlebnis*), providing a brief historical overview of religious experience (Aristotle, Monasticism, Luther and Pietism), focussing on 1) sociological (Durkheim, Weber and Taves), 2) religious phenomenological (Schleiermacher, James, Otto and briefly Kant), and 3) theological concepts (Barth and Tillich) of religious experience. Next she covers human existence in late modernity by considering urbanity (Bauman etc.) and digital spaces (Harari, Schulz and Foucault) and how these two aspects contribute to an "individualized and pluralized space of experience" (40). Thereafter urbanity research is discussed and a case is made for its importance which includes the conditions and characteristics of being human in urbanity, for example, freedom and foreignness, individuality and sociality, as well as a section on the theological perspectives on life in the city.

Müller's methodological interlude (chapter 4) includes her selection of grounded theory (leaning towards classic Glasserian), participatory action research (includes 20 co-researchers), case studies (six groups in three locations) and focus group interviews (between two and four participants at a time). She offers particulars of a survey consisting of five phases that is completed in a 90-minute period. These include a welcome and introduction (phase 1), a standardized questionnaire (phase 2), a creative approach to the topic, namely, making a drawing (phase 3), a biographical-narrative explanation of the drawing (phase 4), and a group discussion (phase 5). Next she goes into great detail concerning the data collected from her 20 co-researchers in each of these phases (chapters 5–7) considering religious experiences (chapter 5) "as a snapshot in which a process is triggered" (116), associated with transcendence, "uncontrollability, (God) cognition, new insights, and high emotionality" (117) and that "the changes that come from it are the work of God or experiences of faith" (118). Chapter 6 considers the "inner aspects and basic observations on the religious experiences of the cross-case and cross-group evaluation" (119) which includes the importance of these religious experiences in the lives of the

co-researchers, the role of religious imprinting, and the subjectiveness of the experience. Chapter 7 considers “religious experience and the change of the personal frame of reference [through a] cross-case and cross-group evaluation” (127) which includes changing the frame of reference processually through religious experiences – these religious experiences occur in everyday settings, and transformation “leads to a reinterpretation of one’s identity and position in the world and thus to a changed view of oneself, others, and the world” (169).

Müller’s interpretation of the results (chapter 8) includes practical theological anthropological considerations (Knoblauch, Luhmann, Luckmann, Buber and Ricoeur), the epistemological character of religious experience (Tillich, Schottroff, Fischer, Ward and Gadamer), and “the transformative aspects of such experiences for personal life” (204) (Luckmann, Dalferth, Gräb and Tillich). Within this chapter a comprehensive definition is offered based on the research, namely, “Religious experience is a *Widerfahrnis* with a God experienced as relational (relational event), which can transform the personal frame of reference into the horizon of a Christian perspective of hope, whereby the interpretive and understanding handling of this experience is an integral part of the experience” (196). Chapter 9 provides a practical theological outlook, namely, Christian perspectives of hope. Here Müller shows the link between religious experience and lived theology (Tillich, Astley, Salazar, Luther and numerous others) and concludes that “prioritizing contextual religious experiences brings practical theology into the midst of life ... and leads to the existential, meaning-giving, and liberating perspectives of hope of human life” (223).

An analysis of Müller’s monograph includes the theoretical framework used, methodology selected argument presented, evidence provided, contribution to the current debate and relevance to its intended audience.

The theoretical framework and methodology selected by Müller is grounded theory and this is suitable considering that her intent is to “discover” how and why her 20 co-researchers have religious experiences. Classic grounded theory methodology (GTM) usually begins without a literature review; however, this is found problematic by some from a more traditional research background and thus her use of sensitizing concepts ensures that there is an adequate literature background for the study without compromising GTM’s core values, that is, discovery. One of the outcomes in GTM would be a basic social process which in this case is not too clearly indicated as was done with the phases of the survey. Another outcome would be a substantive theory or even grand theory, with the former being present in the monograph. In GTM, open, axial and selective coding is pursued until theoretical saturation is achieved and no new categories or themes emerge. Various themes are evident in the research study, for example, contingency, transcendence, subjectivity and lived religion.

The argument presented is contained in the comprehensive definition previously mentioned, that is, religious experiences are transcendental in nature and contextually related to God (notably this study is from a Christian perspective) and are experienced relationally (with self and other humans) and often result in a transformation of the personal frame of reference that is associated with hope and “the interpretive and understanding handling of this experience is an integral part of the experience” (196). There is evidence of more than adequate engagement with numerous scholars and schools of thought concerning religious experiences that augment the argument throughout the monograph. This evidence includes engagement with sociological scholars (Durkheim, Weber etc.), theological scholars (Luther, Schleiermacher, Barth, Tillich, Gräb etc.), and philosophers (Aristotle, Foucault, Gadamer, Ricœur). The contribution of this research to the current debate lies in its processual perspective of religious experiences as lived religion. These religious experiences are to be understood as “discursive phenomenon[a] related to everyday life” (204), that they are liquid (not bound to the classical dualisms), that the person is both the subject and object of knowledge (see her exposition of the Hebrew word *ידע* meaning *to recognize*), and that *Widerfahrnis* captures the experience and resulting transformation and is to be viewed as “a relational gift of God” (194). One aspect that seems to be lacking is a legend indicating the convention used to identify the co-researcher’s words. For example, a footnote indicates “1 EZ L.A. 1 Abby, 12.16” (89) and it is not clear what each of these identifiers mean. This reviewer was able to ascertain that 1 = Group 1, EZ = (unclear), L.A. = Los Angeles (one of the three group’s locations), 1 = (unclear), Abby (the co-researcher’s name), 12.16 = (unclear). The monograph’s relevance to its intended audience cannot be over-emphasized. First, it serves as an example of a well-researched and written PhD thesis. Secondly, it is freely available in electronic format via an open access publishing arrangement with De Gruyter which means students and lecturers as well as scholars interested in the topic of religious experience are able to retrieve it without cost (the hardcover is available for purchase). For these reasons it is highly recommended.

In conclusion, the research study succeeds in its aim to “contribute to a better understanding of every day, individual and social religious reality construction, religious imprints, and the emergence of religious identity” (6). At the end of the monograph Müller cautions her readers that “practical theological teaching and learning that does not take the (religious) experiences of students seriously and does not integrate them misses its mission because the goal of theological education cannot be a dissociated contact between personal experience, lived everyday theology, and practical theology” (220). An apt ending indeed.

About the Author

Shaun Joynt, Senior Academic, South African Theological Seminary, South Africa.
shaun@sats.ac.za