

## A RESPONSE TO ELLEN LEONARD

Experience is such an elusive yet evocative term. Presumably, the term refers mainly to the actual living through of an event, the actual enjoyment of suffering and, hence, the effect upon our human judgment and feelings produced by direct and personal knowledge through impressions. We speak of a special knowledge *by experience* of pain, delusion, joy, love as opposed to inference or hearsay or mere external authority. We also use the term, experience, to refer to practical knowledge and practical reason, the skilled knowing of embodied, "tacit," knowledge. The resonance of experience turns Newman's *notional* into *real* assent. Yes, of course, we know there is no unmediated, unthematized or unsymbolized experience but experience adds something to the themes, symbols and languages which are its necessary medium.

In some sense, all of theology, as wisdom, is reflection on experience. Indeed, experience is the foundational test of revelation and tradition because the latter claims to bear a universal message to humanity, to represent the normatively human. Hence, theologians speak of a necessary method of mutual critical correlation between experience and revelation. And when revelation and the tradition do not jibe, something is a-kilter.

Perhaps if we did not divide spirituality and theology in the artificial ways we often do, we would have long since mined the personal experience of our own prayer and discerned feelings and faith narratives and that, too, of the saints and mystics as theological test and source. Recently, one of our members, William Thompson has carefully and brilliantly appealed to this religion of experience in his new book, *Fire and Light: The Saints and Theology*, to show how experience in prayer does more than merely confirm or illuminate by giving depth to what we already really know.<sup>1</sup>

Ellen Leonard asserts in her very good paper that "the recovery of *present* experience in its full social and political dimensions" is foundational for theology. Leonard's emphasis on experience as primarily communal (for what would private experience or a private language really mean?) is very salutary against pervasive tendencies in the United States (I do not speak of Canada) to equate experience with the individual, the personal, the psychological. We have William James' classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, to blame for this individualistic aberration.<sup>2</sup> James also too much—following the pattern set in the United

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<sup>1</sup>William Thompson, *Fire and Light: The Saints and Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

<sup>2</sup>William James, *The Variety of Religious Experiences* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1923).

States by the evangelical revivalistic tradition—stresses experience as extraordinary, as “peak” experience, as opposed to the much more mundane, ordinary experience in which God is mainly found. In a healthy reaction, Ellen Leonard stresses the contextual—for all experience is contextual so that we need to ask, “whose experience” and experience from what place and social location?—so Leonard illustrates her point by drawing on women’s experience and Canadian contextual experience.

*Experience is communal.* Even as individuals we mainly live off of the great collective symbols to make sense of life. Moreover, most experiences are contrast experiences! Without contrast, our experience remains unreflected, unnoticed like the air we breathe, the experience of the primitive people which the anthropologist Edward Stanner calls “in the dreaming.” Conflict—or, at least, contact—with the other—precisely as other—is the pre-condition for any experience at all. Leonard speaks of the contrast between the dominant and the muted groups in speaking of women. The latter are a species of “deviant insiders”—like Jews, classically, or other pariah people (as Max Weber noted) or gays, women, too, see the world of patriarchal domination with double eyes, with a two-fold language, with divided loyalties, belonging to two communities, two narratives. Perhaps one reason for the modern infatuation with experience is that we *all* (in the global village) now belong to multiple traditions, loyalties, communities, narratives. We all feel like deviant insiders within our churches, universities, communities. For all of us, modernity—with its pluralism of traditions made available—means that, like Ghandi, we have to “experiment with truth.” Hence, the upgraded saliency of experience in theology.

Leonard stresses the contrast experience of marginalized and dominant communities. But another, perhaps, even more ordinary source of contrast experience comes from what Alfred Schutz, the sociologist refers to as the world of everyday life (the life-world of direct, pragmatic coping in the world through the maxims of common wisdom) and the more specialized domains of science and other “second” (second because reflective) languages such as theology, aesthetics, the social sciences.<sup>3</sup> Second languages raise the issue of experience since all second languages, such as theology, are always derivative, a bit conjectural, need testing in and by experience.

Usually, as Thomas Kuhn reminds us in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* changes in a scientific paradigm (in any second language) comes less from individual experiences (as in and through controlled experiments) than from communal changes in the life-world of scientific communication.<sup>4</sup> On his part, Michel Foucault thinks that contrast experiences (as personal experiences) do little more than uncover and recognize the decay of epochal cultural thematics and hasten their demise.<sup>5</sup> So, contrast experiences, too, are largely contextual, communal, generational.

<sup>3</sup>Alfred Schutz, “Of Multiple Realities,” *Collected Papers I* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1962).

<sup>4</sup>Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>5</sup>Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

It will be in Leonard's emphases on experience as communal and contrast experience that we will find clues to help us sort out authentic from inauthentic, humanizing from de-humanizing experiences. I would have liked a bit more attention to this issue in Leonard's paper. Experience, to be sure, tests the received traditions. If they do not ring true to the received traditions, either the experience is flawed or parts of the tradition have been forgotten and need retrieving or been truncated and need expanding. Experience as a category and expectation challenges all closed systems and too universal claims, even for revelation!

Ellen Leonard asks, rightly, whose experiences shall count and answers, pluralistically, everyone's, in a non-coerced communication and listening. Well and good. But what of the delusions in our experience or the narrow range to it? How are we to engage in that active and critical listening to our own experiences and that of others which Leonard calls us to? We have various therapies (psychological and spiritual) to help us discern personal experiences and correct, overcome and/or affirm them. We need something like Jonathan Edwards' treatise on the nature of true religious affections—i.e., a discernment model—to bring to the issue of experience.

So, too, we will need various criteria to help us know what from local context is to be affirmed, what opposed. Without expounding on them, I think the moves we find in Robert Schreiter's little gem of a book, *Constructing Local Theologies*—especially his section on "criteria for Christian identity"—might help us discern where context is enrichment, even deeper revelation, of the gospel and where deformation.<sup>6</sup> For after we have discussed Ellen Leonard's distributive justice criterion, "whose experience counts in theological reflection," we will need to press a bit more than she does toward more substantive questions: not just whose but what sort of experience will count as authentically Christian experience?

But, to avoid any too quick foreclosure on this question, we will need to heed the kind of humility Leonard calls for in the end of her paper. The experience of the other—the boat refuge, the holocaust survivor, the recovering alcoholic, the AIDS patient, the welfare mother—humbles and corrects my own limited and biased experience. But also the experiences of past generations relativizes our *present* experience (although, of course, it can only come alive again by becoming embodied in our experience). And, finally, the mysterious God who can not be, as mystery, defined or encapsulated—yet, perhaps, she can be experienced—puts in question marks any easy closure of human experience. That, it seems to me, is what those who sleight human experience as a locus for theology implicitly do. As always, the denial or minimization of any authentic human experience is an implicit denial of the mystery of God. And for this very reason—as Leonard reminds us—looking to experience as a source for theology is no luxury for those traditionalists, like myself, who insist that theology is, ultimately, about the experience (as limit and disclosure) of the mysterious God.

JOHN A. COLEMAN  
The Jesuit School of Berkeley

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<sup>6</sup>Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985) 117-23.