THE GESTALT CONCEPT IN PSYCHOLOGY
AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Divinity, New College
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in partial fulfillment of the
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Doctor of Philosophy

by

Philip Algot Anderson, Jr.

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The subject of this thesis was formulated in the Fall of 1946 during a conversation with Principal John Baillie, to whom I am indebted. The Senate of the University of Edinburgh graciously granted me a leave of absence, which stretched into four and a half years of work in the United States. Besides theoretical work during these years, participation in two summer workshops on group dynamics and some practical experience in counseling and the ministry gave increased meaning and substance to the subject. These were formative years which gave depth and a vastly increased scope to the thesis.

My purpose has been to explore and demonstrate the usefulness of the Gestalt concept in psychology for the interpretation of religious experience. The thesis is in no sense an exhaustive study of Gestalt psychology nor criticism of it. It is limited for the most part to Christian experience with implications for religious experience in general. For each theological book or statement quoted others could have been substituted, but space would permit me only to establish the trend of thinking. It is obvious that there are other psychological interpretations than Gestalt, but my purpose has excluded consideration of or comparison to these other systems. The interrelatedness of all parts in a Gestalt interpretation often left me with a feeling that everything must be said at once, an obvious impossibility. The adequacy of
the interpretation, therefore, will best be understood as a whole.

The spelling and diction is according to current American usage. Two German words, Gestalt and Pragnanz, have been used throughout the thesis without italics because they are an integral part of the text and idea.

My grateful thanks go in many directions to many different people. Dr. Charles S. Duthie as my first supervisor and a close personal friend, gave of his knowledge and his spirit without stint, sustaining me at all times. My second supervisor, Dr. William B. Inglis, carefully read much of the rough draft and offered valuable suggestions. Out of his long experience in the psychology of religion, Dr. J. G. McKenzie raised penetrating questions and suggested many useful references. The Reverend W. E. J. Martin was a friend indeed and read the manuscript in its entirety.

I am indebted to the people of the Glenview Community Church, Glenview, Illinois, U. S. A., who granted me a leave of absence during the spring of 1952 to complete the thesis and residence in Edinburgh. I sincerely appreciate the work of my secretary, Mrs. Burton Schulz, who not only faithfully typed the manuscript but did so with great interest and enthusiasm.

Last, but most important, the thesis was only possible because of the support of my wife, Phoebe, through her con-
stant encouragement, intellectual stimulation, and willingness to remain alone in the United States for four and a half months during the Spring of 1952 while the thesis and residence were completed in Edinburgh. Thus, the thesis is a testimony to the interdependence of all our lives, and I am grateful for the help and opportunity that has been mine.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## Chapter I. THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Introduction</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B. A Brief History of Religious Experience in Christianity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. The Problem of Definition and Interpretation</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Conclusions</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter II. THE GESTALT CONCEPT IN PSYCHOLOGY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. The Historical Setting of the Gestalt Concept</th>
<th>39</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B. The Gestalt Concept</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Summary of the Gestalt Instrument</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Chapter III. THE GENERAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE GESTALT CONCEPT FOR RELIGION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Religion Must Consider the Person as a whole</th>
<th>73</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Religion Must Recognize the Individual Person as Authoritative for Himself</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Religion Must be Equally aware of the Process as Well as the Content of Religious Experience</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Religion Must Determine and Understand the Nature of the Field of the Individual Which Includes the Self as the Organizing Center</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Religion Must Understand Behavior as Determined by the Forces of the Field</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Religion Must Understand the Principles Which Organize a Field into a Meaningful Whole--a Gestalt</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Religion Must Recognize and Facilitate the Reorganization of the Individual's Field into a new Gestalt when Tensions Introduce Disequilibrium</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Religion Must Seek the Good Gestalt for All Individuals and for the Total Field</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>RELIGION AS RELATIONSHIP</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>The Nature and Origin of the Self</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>The Self in Relationship to Other Selves</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>The Self in Relationship to the World</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>The Self in Relationship to God</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.</td>
<td>Can the Self Change its Relationships?</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V.</th>
<th>BASIC EXPERIENCES OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE</th>
<th>147</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>The Experience of Estrangement or Sin</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>The Experience of Nurture</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>The Experience of Conversion</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>The Experience of Reconciliation or Salvation</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F.</td>
<td>The Experience of Faith or Belief</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.</td>
<td>The Experience of Fellowship</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.</td>
<td>The Experience of Worship</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>The Experience of Prayer</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VI.</th>
<th>TYPES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE</th>
<th>214</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A.</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.</td>
<td>The Evangelical Experience</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.</td>
<td>The Mystical Experience</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.</td>
<td>The Church-Type of Religious Experience</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E.</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VII.</th>
<th>CONCLUSIONS</th>
<th>249</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

A. Introduction

The history of Christianity testifies to the importance of the religious experiences of individual men and women. Indeed, all other disciplines of the Church are essentially efforts to interpret, foster, enhance, clarify, and conceptualize the primary experiences which man has termed "religious." These experiences have come as man has struggled to make adjustment to his situation--immediate and universal--and to find ultimate meaning and destiny in his existence.

It may be that this primary experience is one of belief or faith in God, as D. M. Baillie suggests, when he says that "faith and the religious experience are essentially the same thing." Even if this is the basic experience of religion we are still left with the task of trying to interpret it. However the experience is finally described, it has been the basis of man's religion. As A. N. Whitehead said, "The dogmas of religion are the attempts to formulate in precise terms the truths disclosed in the religious experience

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Again and again, Christianity has returned to consider the basic experiences of the religious man. In our own generation such concern with the raw data of an experience is the central idea of interpretative method in many fields of knowledge. An illustration of the theological concern with religious experience is found in the general introduction to The Library of Constructive Theology. The editors say that the authors,

... desire to lay stress upon the value and validity of religious experience and to develop their theology on the basis of the religious consciousness. In so doing they claim to be in harmony with modern thought. The massive achievements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been built upon the method of observation and experiment, on experience, not on abstract a priori reasoning. Our contention is that the moral and spiritual experience of mankind has the right to be considered, and demands to be understood.2

This attitude does not absolve us from thought, but rather it should act as a stimulus. "No experience can be taken at its face value; it must be criticized and interpreted."3

The task of our thesis, therefore, is to explore the usefulness of the Gestalt concept in psychology as an instrument for the interpretation of religious experience. The present chapter will set the stage for that exploration by sketching briefly the history of the concern for religious

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3Ibid., p. ix.
experience, and the problems involved in its definition and interpretation. Our survey cannot be exhaustive but it will be suggestive of the major points of emphases which any instrument must consider if it is to interpret religious experience.

B. A Brief History of Religious Experience in Christianity

When we seek for the origins of Christianity, we are driven back to the religious experiences of the disciples and the early Christians. Dr. Hopwood has documented this viewpoint very well,¹ and concludes that the start of the historical processes viewed as "Christianity" are to be found in "the religious experience of the primitive Church."² The theologian and the historian must finally face "the religious facts which in the first instance produced the phenomena."³ A new religious community sprang into being because of the creative religious experiences centering in Jesus.

The central fact in Paul's life was his religious experience, which he interpreted mystically as actual union with Christ, the Crucified and Risen Lord. The indwelling spirit of God is the basis of religious faith.⁴ The individual is saved by faith in Christ, and not through belief in an

²Ibid., p. 324.
³Ibid., p. 325.
⁴Cf. Gal. 4:6 f.; Rom. 8:14-18, 26 f.
intellectual system. Thus, the important thing is an actual experience of the Christ. The Fourth Gospel continues to stress the authority of the indwelling Holy Spirit in the experience of each individual.\(^1\) We find further testimony to the importance of individual religious experience in the testimony of these early Christians which rings with a vivid personal quality of authentic freshness and spontaneity.

With the passing of time, the Christian community began to formalize and finally dogmatize their conceptions of religious experience. The guidance of the inner light was subordinated to ecclesiastical authority. Religious experience became a mechanical process of redemption mediated through the Roman Church in western Europe. In the East salvation was regarded as a partly magical affair, in which the sacraments played an important part. In general, we can say that religious experience had come to be viewed legalistically, with the Church structuring the relationship to Christ which must exist, if the individual was to be saved.\(^2\) Obviously, such a generalization is too sweeping to do justice to all the historical exceptions and variations, but for our purposes it indicates the progression from primary religious experiences to a dogmatic interpretation of these experiences.

A new impetus to individual self-authenticating experience was given by the Renaissance. The Renaissance, by

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\(^1\)Cf. John 16:13 f.

its exposure of ecclesiastical forgeries, helped to undermine the authority of the Church; and by its literary criticism of the Bible paved the way for the historical relativism which was to treat the Bible as a record of former religious experiences rather than as an authoritative rule of faith and practice. At the same time the humanism of the Renaissance increased men’s confidence in themselves; partly by a sentimental revival of the lusty vitality of the Greek and Roman full-orbed human life; and partly by a sensitive encouragement of the new scientific spirit that was spreading abroad since Roger Bacon and which served to develop confidence in human thought. The old scholastic faith in man’s discursive reason was transmitted to the modern period to become a basis for philosophic criticism of theological dogmas. This criticism in turn led to the separation of religious experience from theological dogma. Thus it was that Kant, son of pietistic parents, demolished classical theological arguments for God on the one hand, and on the other hand emancipated religion from rationalism and gave it independent status as an experience of moral obligation. ¹

In this setting the Reformation gave new emphasis to the individual experience of religion. In Luther’s thought salvation was by faith and a religious experience was one in which faith showed itself through an “ethical and spiritual

fellowship with the living God."¹ On the subjective side, the individual soul came into actual contact with the Divine Spirit. But this experience came about through the objectivity of the Bible and the sacraments. In the years following Luther, more and more emphasis came to be placed on faith as intellectual assent to certain doctrines. Calvinism illustrates this emphasis.

In reaction to this intellectualization, the Pietists said that will and feeling and not intellect were the essential marks of the religious experience.² Salvation was holiness of life, inspired by the indwelling of the Spirit. This holiness was interpreted not so much in terms of Christian conduct in this world, as in terms of escape from the evils present in this life. And here we approach the mystical concept of religious experience--actual union between God and man--which has been a recurring theme in Christianity through the centuries.

Following the Reformation came the rationalist thinkers and the Deists who laid their stress on morality to which any "religious" experience was subordinated. Reason, not faith, was the essential mark of the experience.

However, Kant had set the stage for new developments and the way was open for Schleiermacher, the romanticist, who made religious experience a non-rational "feeling of absolute

¹A. C. Knudson, Present Tendencies in Religious Thought (New York: Abingdon Press, 1926), p. 151

dependence;"¹ and thereby introduced a new trend in religious thought. By this definition he freed religious experience from any subordination to or dependence upon other types of human experience. It was not to be confused with morality, nor was it to be misinterpreted as intellectual assent to dogma. "Piety in itself is neither a Knowing nor a Doing, but a disposition and modification of Feeling."² In Schleiermacher we have the beginning of the modern theological concern for religious experience.

Albrecht Ritschl with his distinction between judgments of value and judgments of fact, sought to relieve religious experience of the burden of scientific validation. Religion was confined to the field of value judgments. The Christocentric emphasis looms large in his view, while the mystical interpretation is definitely repudiated. Through revelation in the historical Jesus, God is known to man.³ Fellowship with the Eternal is possible not in any mystical union with Him, but through this historical revelation and through ethical conduct, in which one is obeying the laws of God.

These views of Ritschl and his followers have had a widespread effect on American theologians of the liberal school.

At the same time Hegel was developing his distinction between the idea and its changing formulas, thus starting the

²Ibid., p. 6.
³Knudson, op. cit., pp. 169 ff.
search for an essence of religion within the changing theological forms. The close of the nineteenth century saw the struggle between the growing prestige of scientific empiricism and the idealistic tradition in philosophy. Curiously enough, theology, though steeped in the idealist tradition, began to make claims to recognition as an empirical science with its data the alleged facts of the religious consciousness and religious experience. The popularity of science enhanced this approach. Preacher and theologian talked of the "scientific" theology of religious experience, and it became the cornerstone of modernist theology.¹

It was in this atmosphere, that psychologists turned toward religion, either to defend it or deprecate it. Eventually religion also turned to psychology for support. It is interesting to note that the first systematic observation of religious experience had really been done almost 150 years earlier by Jonathan Edwards. In his book, Narrative of Surprising Conversations, he showed amazing introspective powers and ability at analysis.² For more than a century no one developed this beginning in experimental religion.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, however, psychologists were seeking something which could be investigated empirically according to their ideas of what constituted acceptable empirical data. "God" and "soul" were believed

¹Aubrey, op. cit., pp. 435 f.

incapable of examination and tended to be looked upon as terms which belonged to a prescientific statement regarding the nature of man and the universe. What was needed was a specific event or experience which would be open to examination by several investigators and hence a common ground of inquiry would be available. "Religious experience" seemed to suit the prescription. The psychologists seized upon mystical experience and conversion as temporally delimitable.

The so-called "American school of religious psychology" had its beginning in the work of Stanley Hall and his students at Clark University. One of these students, Edwin D. Starbuck concerned himself with religious questions of adolescence and then in 1899 published The Psychology of Religion. Another student, James H. Leuba published a number of articles on conversion, followed later by two books, A Psychological Study of Religion and The Psychology of Mysticism. G. A. Coe's book on conversion and temperament, The Spiritual Life, appeared in 1900. While Leuba's initial work was largely focused upon the immediate aspects of the conversion experience, the work of Starbuck and Coe indicated

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1Ibid., passim. A comparative study of this whole school.


that conversion was related to a significant body of events prior to the actual experience of conversion. They also became interested in the fact that many religious individuals had never experienced a sharp religious conversion but displayed a more steady growth in their religious experience.

Thus the stage was set for the most famous exposition of this early religious psychology, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*,\(^1\) by William James. The title indicates the growing awareness of the complexity of religious experience and the fact that James was willing to step beyond the restriction that only the explicit could be studied empirically, though in actual development he dealt only with the explicit.

In 1907 J. B. Pratt published *The Psychology of Religious Belief*\(^2\) which made out a strong case for mysticism. Later he published *The Religious Consciousness*,\(^3\) a well-balanced contribution to the growing literature. With the publication of *The Psychology of Religious Experience*\(^4\) by E. S. Ames in 1910, the new field of religious psychology had moved from a concern with such specific events as conversion or mysticism to the whole wide range of human experience. There was a growing realization that not the least aspect of

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life was without religious significance. In fact, for some of these men one might say that religious experience was all of life. This early American school used largely descriptive methods based on such devices as questionnaires, biography, history, and comparison.¹

After these early years religious psychology in America languished for awhile until a new interest in pastoral psychology developed in the late thirties. This new school has been particularly interested in the relationship of psychotherapy and Christianity, along with positive suggestions for the work of the pastor with persons. It is very much alive today and is represented by such men as J. S. Bonnell,² Seward Hiltner,³ Fritz Kunkel,⁴ and Carroll Wise,⁵ to mention only a few.

In Britain and Europe one might make a broad generalization and say that there have been three interests in the field of religion and psychology, though there is considerable overlapping and variation. First, there never was such a concerted interest in the empirical data of religious experience as that shown by the early American school. However, there

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¹Uren, op. cit., chap. 11.


⁴Fritz Kunkel, In Search of Maturity (New York: Scribners, 1943).

were some studies represented by such men as A. C. Underwood and Sante De Sanctis and their work on conversion. T. H. Hughes in his work on mysticism carried on the psychological investigation of this phenomenon.

Second, there has been a great deal of work done in attempting to relate religion to the so-called "new psychology," represented by Freud and Jung and their followers. It has often taken the form of a defense of the faith against the depreciation of religion made by the psychoanalytic school. The group is represented by such men as T. H. Hughes, L. W. Grensted, and W. B. Selbie.

This second interest blends into a third which we might call a general concern for the rapprochement of psychology and religion, particularly in theological terms. This has sometimes resulted in practical suggestions for the minister or the layman, but it usually carries more theological consideration than much of the American work. Such men as


This historical survey can only be suggestive because an exhaustive study of this literature over the past half-century would be more than a thesis in itself. Though many psychological schools are represented, to the best of the author's knowledge no writer has ever made more than passing reference to the Gestalt concept in psychology, though as we shall come to see many writers have used its attitude and concepts implicitly.

C. The Problem of Definition and Interpretation

In order to proceed with any analysis it is necessary to define the object of your interpretation. This is extremely difficult if not impossible in respect of religious experience for there seem to be as many definitions as there are men who have sought to define the term. Furthermore, the interpretation which a writer brings distinctly qualifies his


definition. Thus, if "feeling" looms large in his definition of religious experience, then his interpretation will also emphasize "feeling" or vice versa. The interrelationship of definition and interpretation must be kept in mind, as we seek to sort out the meanings of the term "religious experience."

H. Balmforth indicates something of the variety of definition when he says that it ranges from a "consciousness of God as well as of spiritual ideals," to a broad conception that the

... artist's passion for beauty, the scientist's devotion to research, the philosopher's quest of truth, the reformer's zeal for social justice, are all, from the Christian standpoint, facts of religious experience. For each has to do with the spiritual world of truth and beauty and goodness, whether or no in any given instance there is a conscious realization of God as the ultimate ground of spiritual ideal.¹

J. H. Leuba collected forty-eight "definitions" each of them significant as far as it goes.² Such variety led C. C. J. Webb to conclude that definition of religion or religious experience in the strict sense of the word "definition" is impossible.³ With this word of caution about our probable results, let us review some of the definitions and interpretations which have been made of religious experience. Our method will be to raise certain questions which will help us to classify the various statements.

¹Balmforth, op. cit., pp. 11 f.
1. How Much of Human Experience Should Be Included in the Category of Religious Experience?

There are two possible answers to this question: a limited area of experience or all of the experience of man can be religious, if rightly interpreted. The majority of present-day writers would subscribe to the latter view.

W. C. Bower expresses it this way:

Wherever any experience of any sort is seen and judged in its relation to the total meaning and worth of life in terms of its responsible relation to God, be it in the family, in industry, in vocation, in recreation, in intellectual pursuits, in aesthetic enjoyment, or in moral conduct, that experience takes on the religious quality.¹

F. R. Barry expresses a similar view when he says that "religious experience cannot in fact mean anything but the life-experience of a religious man, his total response to his environment as directed and sustained by his religion."² His skepticism of the possibility of setting off certain areas from the rest of human experience and calling them "religious" is shared by Balmforth when he says: "man's religious experience is his experience of life when seen steadily against a spiritual background, viewed, that is, in relation to God and the unseen world."³

John Macmurray agrees with this inclusive use of the term. Science, art and religion deal with the same common field of experience, but only religious activities combine and syn-


³Balmforth, op. cit., p. 8.
thesize the opposing utility-values of science and the intrinsic-values of art. In the field of religion we are both transcendent of the experience and immanent within that experience. "The field of religion is the whole field of common experience organized in relation to the central fact of personal relationship. Hence the religious attitude is best expressed in terms such as fellowship or communion.

F. E. England states a similar viewpoint.

Immeasurable confusion is introduced into religious discussion, also, when it is assumed that the field of reality within which the religious mind is confronted is other than the field with which the mind of the man of science, the mind of the poet or the mind of the "man in the street" is confronted. . . . Reality is one, whatever be the differentiations within it.2

The special sciences view this field from their particular standpoints. What is the place of religious apprehension in this scheme?

God is the datum to the religious mind. It is this "given" element, this sense of direct contact, this consciousness of objectivity, that invests the religious experience with its peculiar intensity.3

William James was inclusive in his use of the term. Religious experience for him was the response of the whole personality to the impress of that quality we call divine.

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, is the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend


3Ibid., p. 27.
themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine.  

Religion is a man's total reaction upon life.  

Martin Buber now stands within this group who use the term "religious experience" in an inclusive fashion. However, he testifies to the fact that there was a time when "religious experience was the experience of an otherness which did not fit into the context of life." Thus there were these mysterious times when Buber experienced the "religious." But the "illegitimacy of such a division of the temporal life," was brought home to him on a day when he experienced the "religious" in the morning and then had a visit from a desperate young man in the afternoon. Buber had failed to ask or guess the real questions on the man's mind. Not long afterwards, Buber learned the truth from a mutual friend. The young man was no longer alive. Buber describes his transformation in almost poetic prose.

Since then I have given up the "religious" which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its here where everything happens as it happens. I know no fullness but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and responsibility. I do not know much more. If that is religion then it is just everything, simply all that is lived in its pos-

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1James, op. cit., p. 31.
2Ibid., p. 35.
sibility of dialogue. Here is space also for religion's highest forms. As when you pray you do not thereby remove yourself from this life of yours but in your praying refer your thought to it, even though it may be in order to yield to it; so too in the unprecedented and surprising, when you are called upon from above, required, chosen, empowered, sent, you with this your mortal bit of life are referred to, this moment is not extracted from it, it rests on what has been and beckons to the remainder which has still to be lived, you are not swallowed up in a fulness without obligation, you are willed for the life of communion.1

Thus, Buber provides an illustration of the two answers to our question, and we turn now to the second, narrower one: religious experience is unique and entirely set apart from the rest of human life. This view is preeminently held by the Barthians. What is commonly spoken of as "religious experience" is not, according to Barth, a genuine experience. He differentiates between what he calls actual and alleged experiences and implies that the ordinary views of religious experience belong to the latter class.2

The so-called "religious experience" is a wholly derived, secondary, fragmentary form of the divine. Even in its highest and purest examples, it is form and not content.3

"Experience" to Barth means only reference to God, a fact which makes it form, and God is "never experienced as form" but as content. Actual experience, on the other hand, "begins where our alleged experiences cease, in the crisis of our experiences, in the fear of God."4 Only when we go beyond our

1Ibid., p. 14.
3Ibid., p. 285.
4Ibid., p. 94.
ordinary experiences of life, and are met by God in an "existential encounter," can we have a really religious experience.\(^1\)

In contrast to the inclusive view, the Barthians hold that ordinary experiences instead of leading one to God are either no help at all, or actually hindrances. Men may find a subterfuge in worship, or in theology, or in ethics but they are not being met by God, or having a genuine religious experience in these forms of activity, for they are merely hiding in them from God's presence.\(^2\) Only after men are driven beyond their common experiences into a desperate crisis does God break through to meet them. Any Christianity which is based on experience or history or metaphysics is false and doomed to failure.

Apart from the Barthians, Rudolph Otto and his followers set religious experience off from ordinary experience. Stress is laid on the quality of the feeling which is present in the experience. Otto judges an experience to be religious when it is diffused with a consciousness of the "numinous" or a sense of the holy.\(^3\) In this experience the person is gripped by "tremendum," a feeling of fear which differs from "natural fear" not in degree, but in kind, so that it really implies an element of awfulness and uncanniness, which is closely related to "daemonic dread."\(^4\) There is a "unique emotional mo-

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\(^2\)Ibid., p. 50


\(^4\)Ibid., pp. 13 ff.
ment in religious experience, a moment whose singularly
daunting and awe-inspiring character"¹ is baffling to those
who think of God only in terms of love and gentleness. Not
only this uncanny fear, but also an overwhelming sense of
the majesty and absolute superiority "of a power other than"
one'self, and a sense of energy or urgency belong to this
state. "Mysterium" is used to signify the "Wholly Other"
element which is present. In addition to this "daunting aw-
fulness and majesty," the element of fascination is present,
combining with the fear in a "strange harmony of contrasts."²
There is no such thing as "varieties of religious experience"
for Otto. Rather he assumed that all normal and developed
religious experience would conform to the pattern he described--
a unique experience set apart from ordinary experience--thus
giving us a foundation for theological construction.

C. G. Jung, though differing in some respects, also
characterizes religious experience by a specific kind of emo-
tional experience: surrender to a higher power, whether this
higher power is called God or the unconscious. He has built
upon some of Otto's work. Jung states that religion

... is a careful and scrupulous observation of what
Rudolph Otto aptly termed the "numinosum," that is, a dy-
namic existence or effect, not caused by an arbitrary act
of will. On the contrary, it seizes and controls the hu-
man subject which is always rather its victim than its
creator.³

These illustrations of the inclusive and exclusive an-

¹Ibid., p. 19. ²Ibid., p. 31.
³C. G. Jung, Psychology and Religion (New Haven: Yale
swers to our first question concerning the area of religious experience could be multiplied, but our primary purpose has been fulfilled, namely, to see that there is no easy agreement. Though interpreted in various ways, one theme runs through these definitions. Somehow, whether implemented from man's side or from God's side, religious experience is trying to establish a relationship between man and the rest of his world, and primarily with God. With this in mind we turn to a second question.

2. What is the Outstanding Aspect of this Relationship between Man and God?

A classification of definitions and interpretations of religious experience can also be made in terms of the aspect of the relationship most emphasized. These are not hard and fast divisions, but they are instructive for our survey of representative thinkers.

a. The moral aspect of religious experience is stressed by E. S. Brightman. "Any consciousness of the presence of God is religious experience,"¹ but there must be real acquaintance with God, actual comradeship between God and man. "Religious experience is always a 'Thou' experience in its meaning if not in its form."² This characteristic is what distinguishes prayer, for example, as a genuine religious experience, from prayer as "mere meditation on high ideals or even on God."³

²Ibid., p. 101.
³Ibid., p. 102.
The more moral we are, the more we are our best selves, and the more adequately we are our best selves the closer we are to God.

The rule is that moral goodness deepens religious experience and that religious experience strengthens moral goodness. Morality leads to God and God commands and supports morality.  

The result of religious experience is a sense of needed reform. From this experience with God we come to see clearly how out of harmony with God's purposes is the world of man.

b. The mystical aspect of the relationship is often singled out for emphasis as the essence of religious experience or as a type thereof. Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as

... the reaching out of the soul to contact with those eternal realities which are the subject matter of religion. And the mystical life is the complete life of love and prayer which transmutes those objects of belief into living realities: love and prayer directed to God for God Himself, and not for any gain for ourselves.

Rufus Jones defines it as "a direct way of vital intercourse and correspondence between man and God." It is a "type of experience in which a person feels an overmastering conviction that actual contact is attained with a divine, life-giving, joy-bringing Presence." There are all degrees of this experience of contact, from a simple awareness of the surge of "updwellling life" to a rapturous sense of complete union with

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1Ibid., p. 83.
God.

Mysticism is an experience of the inner world of man where he responds to spiritual values in contrast to the space-time world described by science. The result is a unifying religious experience.

When the powers of the mind are fused and unified, overbrimming and revitalized by intense mystical concentration and unification, the whole interior self becomes an immensely heightened organ of spiritual apprehension in correspondence with the real world to which it belongs.1

The practical aspect of religious experience is sometimes singled out as the outstanding feature. The Oxford Group Movement symbolizes this attitude. In contrast to mystical or theological interests, religious experience for them is much more concerned with gaining help through communion with God for use in daily life. Guidance and sharing are the typical religious experiences. In guidance the individual seeks "direct and specific instructions from God Himself for every detail of daily life and speech."2 The chief requirement for clear guidance is "complete surrender of everything—will, time, possessions, family, ambitions—all to God."3

Confession and witness enter into sharing. Sins, which are anything that comes between persons or between man and God, are confessed to God and at least one other person, or to a

1Ibid., p. 41.

2H. P. Van Dusen, "The Oxford Group Movement," Atlantic Monthly, CLIV, (No. 2), 244.

group. God is thought of as the one who forgives but sharing helps many to come into this relationship with Him. Restitution, when possible, to the person against whom one has sinned, is required. Conversion is a progressive affair of increasing guidance and sharing until complete surrender to God is possible. Religious experience is a means toward practicing the better life here and now.

d. Jesus Christ as the essential factor in the relationship between man and God is another emphasis. Machen suggests that salvation, and Jesus' significant role in it, are the primary facts in the religious experience of man.

The Divine Savior and Lord, for the love wherewith He loved us, bore all the guilt of our sins, made white and clean the dark page of our account and reconciled us to God. There is the center of our religion.

T. F. Lockyer would agree with this central fact of Christ in religious experience. "Salvation, through all its process, is nothing other than the love of Christ."

... each one's salvation, though mediated historically by such information concerning Christ as has come down through the ages, is yet effected immediately by the power of Christ present with men today.

W. A. Brown suggests a broader approach to the place of Christ in the religious experience of man. Jesus Christ

1Ibid., pp. 16 ff.
4Ibid., p. 66.
through His life and death is the supreme revelation of the nature of God as love, "the outgoing spirit that manifests itself in creation and renewal and that has its most signal manifestations in the Cross of Jesus Christ." It is Christ Who is able to satisfy the moral and spiritual needs of men, to solve the social problems, and to fulfill all their deepest longings, and because He is at the same time the Revelation of God to men, He stands as the central fact in their religious experience.

The value aspect as the essential factor in the relationship between God and man is suggested by many writers today. D. M. Edwards illustrates this view for us when he says, "Religious experience is the apprehension of the Supreme Reality under the form of worth or value." The values which enter into religious experience are the ones customarily regarded as universal and ultimate: the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.

Religious experience as a unique experience possesses a value all its own. Edwards comes to agree with Rudolph Otto that the idea of the holy is the unique element in religious experience, the richest of all man's experiences. Edwards states that the sense of the Holy is its chief characteristic, and thus concludes that the "Holy is the richest and most in-
exclusive of all values." The Holy is "so to say, the common protoplasm from which all the other values of life have been differentiated," and since the Good, and True, and Beautiful are "emanations from the Holy, they may be sources for experiences of God." The faith aspect of religious experience is singled out by John Baillie as the essential factor, when he says, We can have no religious experience prior to and independently of the practical experience of religion—because religion is faith and there is no religious experience of which faith is not a constitutive part. . . . The deepest of all religious experiences is just the experience of believing.

Faith is religious experience; the experience and the act of believing are inseparably bound together.

A. C. Knudson shares much of this attitude when he says "Religious experience is the concrete expression of faith and as such shares in its self-evidencing character." Faith is a "basal and elemental activity of the human mind," and is "something deeper, more universal, more fundamental, than anything that can be assigned to the independent activities of the intellect, will or feelings." Faith is the factor which conditions religious experience just as other factors condition sense experiences. It is the source of both mystical

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1Ibid., p. 504
2Ibid., p. 509.
4Cf. D. M. Baillie, op. cit., chap. iii.
5Knudson, op. cit., p. 184
6Ibid., p. 183
and practical religious experiences.

A "feeling of limitation" aspect as the essential factor in religious experience is suggested by W. E. Hocking. "Primary religious experience is so burdened with this consciousness of limitation that we may almost say 'What man faces, that he worships.'"\(^1\) This feeling originates from two types of experiences: Crises in social experiences, such as war, death, marriage, sickness, and experiences of nature which are awe-inspiring, are most apt to be conducive to a special awareness of God for they make man conscious of his own limitations. Hocking believes that behind these experiences there is something more elemental, and this is a "sense of mystery," which man has acquired. If this element is present in man, then the special aspect of nature and of social experience unite with this sense of mystery, to produce an event which has religious significance. The feeling of limitation is summarized by man's awareness that he does not know, but God does.\(^2\)

The classic expression of this feeling of limitation and finiteness as the basis of religious experience appears in the work of Kierkegaard. The significance of the existential dialectic lies in the final religious stage that alone gives meaning to the whole. The aesthetic is trivial, the ethical merely transitory; only in the religious stage does

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subjectivity come into its own. But what is this religious life which Kierkegaard exalts?

It is the life of what he himself calls "an intensive point." Subjectivity can be truly subjective only in the confrontation of the individual with God, since only the absolute is completely indescribable, completely beyond the inroads of abstraction and objectivity. Only before God is a man really himself, because it is only before God that he is finally and irretrievably alone. But before God the finite individual is as nothing; and it is the bitter realization of that nothingness that marks the religious stage of existence.1

Religious experience for Kierkegaard, in other words, lies wholly in the self's awareness of its infinite distance from the God whom alone it loves. And the quality of that awareness, the way it feels to the self, is pure and unmixed suffering.

In concluding this section, we must note again that we have not by any means exhausted the possible aspects or the advocates of these viewpoints. We can see, however, that if there is this variety of emphasis on various aspects of the relationship between man and God, then no final solution to the problem of definition is to be found here, unless there is some more inclusive arrangement which can include the variety. With this in mind we ask another question.

3. What Faculties Within Man Are Involved in Religious Experience?

What are the roots of religion in the individual?
What are the psychological factors in religious experience?
These and similar questions have been used as another approach

to the problem of definition and interpretation. It is immediately apparent that they are very closely related to the ideas we surveyed in the previous sections. The three elements most often cited are feeling, thinking, and volitional or active factors. Historically, there have been partisan exponents of each one of these theories or derivatives thereof and we will briefly sketch something of the viewpoint under each. However, it is fair to anticipate our conclusion in this section by saying that there has been a steady movement toward an appreciation for all of them, working together.

a. The feeling factor has probably received the most emphasis for it has seemed to get beyond dogma, theology, and ritual to the heart of religion. Schleiermacher certainly fostered this view, and most of its exponents would agree with Hoffding’s statement that "religious experience is essentially religious feeling." ¹ W. E. Hocking describes the movement by saying, "The whole apparatus of reason in religion has retreated in importance, in favor of a more substantial basis— which we have agreed to call feeling."²

John Baillie has criticized this use of feeling, but partly by narrowly defining the term as "the one subjective state that is purely 'affective,' as feeling of pleasure or pain."³

²Hocking, op. cit., p. 37.
But most exponents of the term have not thought of it in any such narrow terms, but rather as undifferentiated conscious response. However, when this is done it becomes increasingly difficult to isolate the feeling factor from the intellectual and volitional activities of the person. Rudolph Otto was an exponent of the unique place of feeling in religious experience though he rejected Schleiermacher's idea that it was a feeling of dependence. Otto prefers the term "creature-consciousness" to help describe this special religious emotion of the individual. Awe, fear, a feeling of mystery and a sense of fascination are the emotions which lead to a feeling of the numinous which characterizes a religious experience. The description of this feeling is even more complicated by the fact that this fear is not like ordinary fear at all.

Other writers have tried to clarify their ideas of feeling as the important factor by talking of intuition or presentiment. However, two questions seem to remain. First, the variety of feelings and interpretations thereof has made agreement impossible and some other understanding is necessary. Second, whereas, feeling may come more readily in religious experience, some kind of reflection or thinking about that feeling is usually not far behind.

b. The thinking factor has often been emphasized though not made the sole element in religious experience. It is only through the functioning of this factor that theology and concepts of interpretation about religious experience

1 Otto, op. cit., pp. 12-41
have come into Christianity. Hocking goes so far as to say, "dissolve out the idea tissue of religion, and no feeling, and so no religion is left."\(^1\) Knudson states that all experience is interpretative and religious experience is no exception to this. Though there are exceptions in persons of a mystical bent, he believes that for the average person God's presence is known, not as objects are known to the senses by direct presentation, but rather through analytical implications drawn from his religious consciousness.\(^2\)

From this emphasis upon reason as essential in religious experience we pass to those who view it as decidedly secondary or even non-essential. The mystics are represented by Rufus Jones when he says, "The intellect possesses no master key which unlocks all the secrets of the Soul."\(^3\) Evelyn Underhill agrees that although reason may be important it is not primary, in fact, "A painful cleansing of the intellectual life is necessary."\(^4\) This does not mean that one should cultivate a holy stupidity, but that one must remember that the concepts supplied to us by our intellects are only symbolic.

The Barthians repudiate any purely human means as being in any way helpful to the religious experience. Thus Barth

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\(^1\)Hocking, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 39.

\(^2\)Knudson, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 144 f.


says, "reason sees the small and the larger but not the very large. . . . It sees what is human but not what is divine."

Brunner, too, is constantly on guard against the idea that reason can be essential in religious experience. Thus he says,

Since thinking is easier for us than practical obedience in faith and love, the danger of willful speculative developments is always with us, and these lead all too readily and in unforeseen ways to transformations in the Gospel.

We have seen two extreme viewpoints towards the power of reason in man as a way to religious experience. With such diversity, thinking must not be the touchstone of interpretation.

The volitional or active factor in human personality as the mainspring of religious experience has been suggested. Religious leaders are generally aware that feelings must be moved if action is to take place. While this view seems to place feeling at the center of experience, since it regards it as the originating factor, it may also be observed that it values feeling simply as a means to activity. Thus action comes to be regarded as the essential factor in religious experience.

A derivative of this view is the idea that religion has its origin in some particular instinct or drive within human personality which compels it to action. W. P. Patterson

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1 Barth, op. cit., p. 9.

represented this view in his Gifford Lectures when he de-
defended the position that there is a religious instinct along
the lines of McDougall's definition of instinct. The defense
is made on the basis of the universality of religion.¹ However, it does not follow that there is a specifically re-
gious instinct, and the immense variety of religious mani-
festations stands in the way of such a concept.

Sex and gregariousness have also been suggested as
the origin of religion, as well as the desire for the good
life. But to assume that such desires or instincts are al-
together innate or fixed or invariable within man, without
consideration for other factors or for environmental and cul-
tural influences is to oversimplify the whole issue.

d. The person as a whole as the unit to be dealt
with in considering man and religious experience, has been
a growing concern in the last few years. The complexity of
religious experience has been more and more recognized, and
it is in some such totality containing emotion, intellect and
volition that the answer lies. One writer goes so far as to
suggest that "the approach to religious experience is motivated
by some special interest,"² whenever a particular psychological
factor is stressed.

Kenneth Edward was probably one of the first to begin

considering the person as a whole, though in a somewhat limited way. He speaks of the religious sentiment, using the word as meaning "an organized system of emotional dispositions centered about the idea of some object."¹ In Edward's view the "emotional and intellectual keep step in their development, each interplaying with the other through the agency of the sentiment in which they unite together in an integral mental function."² E. S. Waterhouse was another early writer saying that religious experience involves the whole of consciousness. He assigns functions to various elements such as feeling, thought and action but they are not independent of each other.³

Other writers could be cited, but they all contribute to this trend of considering the person as a whole. The complexity of experience and of the person seems to doom all attempts to single out certain features in the person as more determinative than others. J. G. McKenzie has voiced this present day viewpoint in this fashion, recognizing

... the most fundamental need of personality. It is the Need to realize the Personality as a Harmonious Whole both in its inner and outer relations. Original human nature has a need to develop so that conscience, behaviour-tendencies, emotions, and thought will be in harmony. Experience must harmonize with feeling.⁴

¹Edward, op. cit., p. 99.
²Ibid., p. 106
In their equally recent books, Leslie Weatherhead\textsuperscript{1} and Gordon Allport\textsuperscript{2} would agree with this concern for the person as a whole.

4. What Effect Does the Idea of God, that is the Objective Reference of Religious Experience, Have on Definition and Interpretation?

This question could take us far afield into metaphysics and theology. We can only briefly indicate its relationship to our concern for religious experience and the problems it raises for any interpretation of that experience.

If an important or primary aspect of the experience of religion is relationship to God, then it becomes obvious that the kind of God which a person conceives will effect and largely determine his experience. We have already raised the prior question as to whether the idea or the experience comes first. But let us note here that if an individual conceives of God in Barthian terms as Wholly Other, completely transcendent, then the kind of religious experience possible is certainly limited. Only when man is driven beyond his ordinary experiences to a place where he is helpless does the Transcendent God "break through" to meet him, and only then is man experiencing something which can rightly be called religious. No sense of comradeship, no consciousness of man's working together with God, no ecstatic enjoyment of beauty, no comfortable

\textsuperscript{1}Leslie Weatherhead, \textit{op. cit.}, passim.

\textsuperscript{2}Gordon Allport, \textit{The Individual and His Religion} (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1950), passim.
morality characterizes this experience of God. It is in the fear of God and in fierce inner conflicts and in total surrender of oneself that there is the beginning of a religious experience.\(^1\)

A sharp contrast to this idea of God would be the easy approachability to God stressed by the Oxford Group. The chief emphasis here would be the immanence of God. The individual can approach God for help in all his problems. The Big Brotherly qualities of Jesus are transferred to God and thus religious experience is this intimate, everyday communion with God.

The mystics' conception of God would tend to be inconclusive of both transcendent and immanent ideas. Underhill speaks of this double aspect of God, by saying that the inner life requires not merely the acceptance but the full first-hand apprehension of the ruling truth of the richly living, spaceless and unchanging God; blazing in the spiritual sky; yet intimately present within the world of events, moulding and conditioning every phase of life.\(^2\)

Thus the mystical idea of God allows them to achieve union with God in their religious experience.

An even more pressing problem concerning the objective reference is the challenge that it might all be illusion. Freud gave impetus to this kind of criticism, by trying to

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\(^1\)EBARTH, op. cit., p. 94 and p. 24.

\(^2\)Evelyn Underhill, Concerning the Inner Life, op. cit., p. 23.
show that the idea of God was just a projection by man of his father image. Any interpretation of religious experience must handle this problem.

Wieman is representative of one answer when he says that all experience is experience of something; and this is as true in the realm of religion as in other areas. "Absolute skepticism concerning existence of the objects of experience is impossible."

Baron Von Hugel felt that inasmuch as we accept expert opinion in other areas of experience there was no reason why we shouldn't accept it in the religious field.

It is impossible to see why Plato, Aristotle, Leibnitz and Kant, and why again Pheidias and Michael Angelo, Raphael and Rembrandt, Bach and Beethoven, Homer and Shakespeare, are to be held in deepest gratitude, as revelers respectively of various kinds of reality and truth, if Amos and Isaiah, Paul, Augustine and Aquinas, Francis of Assissi and Joan of Arc are to be treated as pure illusionists in precisely what constitutes their specific greatness.

Such illustrative material will suffice to indicate the fact that the idea of God influences the definition and kind of religious experience which is possible for any individual.

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2Baron Von Hugel, Quoted by Balmforth, op. cit., p. 106
D. Conclusions

Our outstanding impression from this survey is the variety of interpretation, meaning and definition which has centered around the term "religious experience." Yet mankind's experiences of the things of religion is an ever-present and age-old concern. We turn now to the Gestalt concept in psychology as a possible instrument for the interpretation of religious experience, seeking understanding of the following issues.

1. The variety of definitions and the manifold meanings of religious experience.


3. Religion as relationship and the experiences whereby the individual establishes his religious orientation.

4. The nature of the person involved in religious experience, and his development.

5. The possibility of types of religious experience.

6. The objective reference of religious experience.

In subsequent chapters we shall utilize our instrument as a possible interpretation of these and related issues.
CHAPTER II

THE GESTALT CONCEPT IN PSYCHOLOGY

A. The Historical Setting of the Gestalt Concept

In common with all new schools of thought, Gestalt theory began as a revolt against the established order. It grew out of efforts to understand and to see relationships between various problems in the field of psychology, race psychology, logic and epistemology. Increasingly, the work done in these fields seemed to indicate one problem common to all of them.

"The fundamental and central problem," stated by Max Wertheimer before the Kant-Gesellschaft in Berlin in 1924, was that involved in the assumption (borrowed from the natural sciences) that to understand a psychical complex one should analyze it into its component parts and then discover the laws of their association. When the psychologist had dutifully and laboriously done this, he had

...the distinct feeling that he held in his hand a great deal, and yet actually nothing. Somewhere in the process he had lost what seemed to him the value, the essence, the heart of the matter.\(^1\)

Out of acute dissatisfaction with this state of things arose

\(^1\)Max Wertheimer, Über Gestalttheorie, (Leipzig: Sonderdruck des Symposium, Welt-Kreis Verlag, 1925), p. 39
the Gestalt concept, which proposed a radically different approach.

What is the Gestalt concept? It would be convenient if we could define our terms immediately. However, Gestalt has so many aspects to its meaning that we shall postpone a definitive statement until the end of the chapter and shall try at this point to understand it within context. A note about terminology is in order. Unsuccessful attempts have been made to translate the German term Gestalt into the English language. Form, shape, figure, and configuration have all been used and finally rejected on the grounds that they limit the concept too narrowly and are often misleading. The practice today, which we shall follow, is to use the German word.

Let us try to understand the Gestalt-theorist's dissatisfaction with earlier psychological theories which culminated in their search for something better. As stated by Wertheimer,¹ these earlier theories were two in number: (1) the "mosaic" or "bundle" theory, and (2) the theory of association. The first assumes that all psychical complexes are primarily and fundamentally the sum of their constituent psychical elements, mere "mosaics" or "bundles" chiefly of sensations or their derivatives; the second assumes that contiguity in space or time (simultaneous and successive association)

is the sole bond which holds these elements together. Kohler proposed that there was a third faulty hypothesis, "the constancy hypothesis," which assumes "that the sensation is tied fast to its stimulus, that to every stimulus corresponds a sensation determined once for all."¹

The Gestalt-theorists grant that earlier psychologists were aware of the obvious deficiencies of these hypotheses, and had made various attempts to supplement them by the additional concept of a "unifying soul," or of some unifying process at a higher level of consciousness than that of mere sensation. Thus, for example, Wundt spoke of "creative Synthesis," the Graz school of "production," and G. E. Muller of "attention." All such auxiliary hypotheses had in turn to be supplemented by others, until, so to speak, the original garment was almost hidden by patches, and yet, in spite of all efforts, was still going to pieces. Time to discard it entirely, said the Gestalt-theorists, and get something better able to stand the wear.

Opposition was voiced to the school and its habitual use of a "trained introspectionist" in a special laboratory. This method ignored some of the facts. The Gestalt-theorists insist on working with the naive experience of common sense, and a return to unprejudiced seeing.

To behaviorism, the Gestalt-theorists objected first to the needless discarding of consciousness which, they hold

¹Wolfgang Kohler, Gestalt Psychology (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929), p. 49.
is a fact of experience just as much as the physical world is.
The second objection is that behaviorism builds up larger
wholes from elementary processes. The monotonous formula,
Stimulus—Response, is sterile of positive and useful concepts.
Gestalt psychologists insist that the formula should read:
Stimulus—Organization—Response.

The chief objection of the Gestalt school to all these
theories has been implied: the practice of taking their material
piecemeal, of assuming that their larger units are nothing but
smaller ones put together in specific combinations. The Ges¬
talt psychologists called this a brick and mortar psychology,
with emphasis on the brick, because the trouble was to find
the mortar. What holds the elements together? Various kinds
of "mortar" had been proposed by previous psychologists as we
have seen, and others had not even recognized the problem or
else had been content with the mere word, "associations." The
Gestalt theorists found all of this to be clumsy, artificial,
and just not true to the facts. It is simply and absolutely
not true that conscious experience is made up of elements
which are somehow or other synthesized into wholes. They de¬
clare that the so-called elementary sensations are mere arti-
facts, and that the supposed need for higher processes of syn¬
thesis is therefore artificial, too. A return to "unprejudiced
seeing" will reveal that the primary fact of sensory experience
(and indeed of all mental life) is spontaneous and compulsory
grouping of data.¹

¹Ibid., chap. v and p. 148 ff.
It is not the purpose of this thesis to treat the development of Gestalt psychology exhaustively or to trace its historical roots definitively. To indicate its beginnings, someone has said that Gestalt was in the air of Germany around the turn of the century. There were then important antecedents and suggestions looking towards a solution of the problem we have sketched along Gestalt lines. However, most historians now recognize Max Wertheimer as the father of the movement, both because of his pioneering work on perception and formulation of Gestalt laws, and because of the strong and militant group of disciples which rallied to his side. Wertheimer, Koffka, and Kohler became the ultra-radicals of their day, abandoning practically all the axioms and postulates of established psychology with the exception of the naturalistic standpoint and the appeal to experiment. At the same time, most psychologists, even though they shared many of the views and furnished much of the supporting material for the Gestalt-theorists' most trenchant criticisms, protested against their extremism and clung to the traditional methods and interpretation. The Gestalt psychologists wanted to make a clean break, and criticized others for attempting to patch things up.

Other authors have developed the historical antecedents in far greater detail,¹ and it is not within our purpose to

make such an analysis here, beyond mentioning and recognizing that Gestalt theory grew out of and beyond the work of others. Such men as Mach, Ehrenfels, Dilthey, and other Germans at the turn of the century had an interest in the concept of totality but they approached it by way of associationism. Rubin’s experimental phenomenology, growing out of the suggestions of Edmund Husserl, culminated in his figure-ground experiments which supported the Gestalt-theorist’s contentions. Throughout the methodological spirit of Gestalt one senses a tacit agreement with Bergson’s claim that “the relation between the ‘phenomenon’ and the ‘thing’ is not that of appearance to reality, but merely that of the part to the whole.”

Ward and Stout in the English speaking world along with William James skirted the edges of the totality concept but never stated it in as revolutionary a manner as the Gestalt-theorists. James, particularly, seemed to state the problem in such a way as to lead to Gestalt conclusions, but he always returned to atomism and associationism. General Smuts’ work bears a close resemblance to that of the Gestalt-theorists, although the author was presumably unacquainted with their work. At least he makes no mention of them or it anywhere in his book. The similarity is shown in this sentence: “The

2Focht, op. cit., pp. 52 ff.
3J. C. Smuts, Holism and Evolution (New York: Macmillan co., 1923).
whole is not a mere mechanical system. It consists indeed of parts, but it is more than the sum of its parts."\(^1\) However, his use of creative synthesis would not be accepted by the Gestalt psychologists.

Christian von Ehrenfels established the clearest signpost pointing the direction for the later Gestalt-theorists. In his essay Über Gestaltqualitäten, published in 1890,\(^2\) Ehrenfels defines "Gestalt-quality" thus:

By Gestalt-quality we mean that positive phenomenal something which is occasioned by the presence in consciousness of complexes of ideas (Vorstellungen); which complexes are, for their part, made up of elements separable from one another (that is, capable of appearing in consciousness without one another). The complex of ideas necessary for the presence of Gestalt-quality we will call the base of the Gestalt-quality.\(^3\)

The often-cited two criteria of Gestalt-quality which Ehrenfels mentions are: first, the requirement that all elements of the base must be present together in one consciousness; second, the requirement that the elements of the base may be transposed without essentially altering the Gestalt-quality.

The best known illustration which Ehrenfels used concerns itself with melody. He first pointed out that a tune cannot be comprehended as a mere sum of its constituent notes, but must possess a particular form quality. To transpose a

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 103

\(^2\)In Vierteljahresschrift fur Wissenschaftliche Philosophie XIV, 3, (1890). This article was reprinted in Ehrenfeld’s book, Das Primzahlgasets, published in 1922.

\(^3\)Ehrenfels, Das Primzahlgasets, p. 19.
tune means to shift it higher or lower. The result may be that the original tune has not one single note in common with the transposed tune. Yet the tune itself is retained. It is the form-quality that remains the same when such shifting takes place.

The Gestalt-theorists differed from Ehrenfels and go beyond him in several respects. First, they said that he had merely added a new element to the complex, (i.e. the Gestalt-quality) which does not solve the problem. Second, they denied that sensational elements are primary and fundamental whether perceived or not. Rather, Wertheimer stresses priority of the whole with various gradations of data and degrees of organization. Kohler emphasizes the dynamic interaction of the so-called sensational elements. Both of these concepts are alien to Ehrenfels.

Thus we have sketched something of the setting into which the Gestalt-theorists came with a radical answer to the problems confronting psychology.

B. The Gestalt Concept

Briefly, the Gestalt concept says that the primary fact of sensory experience (and indeed of all mental life) is spontaneous and compulsory grouping of data. What the baby sees when he opens his eyes upon the world is not the "gray chaotic indiscriminateness" or the "one unanalyzed bloom of confusion" to which William James in varying moods condemned him, and which he has to put in order by acts of selective
attention, creative synthesis, production, association or what not. Even the infant's world is a world figured, laid out in patterns, a world not of isolated elementary sensations, but a world of segregated wholes, of Gestalten. These Gestalten acquire "meaning" it is true, through experience: I learn what I can do with a book or a pencil and how they react to what I do by using them. But they do not come into existence through experience; they are there as a segregated whole when first perceived.

Wertheimer summarizes the Gestalt concept in this manner.

The fundamental "formula" of Gestalt theory might be expressed in this way: There are wholes, the behaviour of which is not determined by that of their individual elements, but where the part-processes are themselves determined by the intrinsic nature of the whole. It is the hope of Gestalt theory to determine the nature of such wholes. With a formula such as this, one might close, for Gestalt theory is neither more nor less than this.\(^1\)

The proper unit for study in psychology is the organized whole; not elements or compounds or isolated stimuli. The whole is something other than and different from the sum of its parts, and it is functionally prior to them. The illustrations of this whole principle are legion. Kohler suggests a very common one.

Take all units consisting of separate parts! If we look up at the sky on a clear night, some constellations of stars are seen immediately as belonging together and as detached from their environment. Cassiopeia is an example, the Dipper is another. In past ages people saw the same groups as belonging together and at the present time children...

\(^1\) W. D. Ellis, A Sourcebook of Gestalt Psychology (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), p. 2
do not need instruction in order to perceive them as units.\(^1\)

This stress on organized wholes is characteristic. A soap bubble is a good example of a Gestalt, that is, a whole in which the parts are dynamically interrelated and determined by the whole. If you break one little part, the whole structure collapses. Another example is the human face. There is a sense in which the parts of the face—eyes, mouth, chin, forehead, etc.—must be considered; but they must be seen in relation to the total. The whole face determines the parts, for if you first see only the eyes and then suddenly the whole face is revealed, the eyes will seem to have changed their expression. Yet analysis will show that they have not, but their relationship within the whole makes them seem to change.\(^2\) In like manner we get no true picture of a person's character by adding up all the traits in his personality. Such addition fails to show which trait is central and dominating in the individual's personality. It does not show the role or function of each single trait in the total personality. The personality is not a mere sum of traits, but an organized whole, a Gestalt.

The Gestalt-theorists' original work was done in the area of perception through experiments conducted in Berlin.

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\(^1\) Kohler, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

between 1911 and 1914. Wertheimer stated his findings in classic form in essays in the *Psychological Forschung*.

Hartmann has summarized this work as follows:

The burden of Wertheimer's study is that we do not react in uniform or constant ways to specific stimuli as though they were always insulated, but that the nature of the setting in which they are found determines the mode of organic response. In psychology, the right formula is, Constellation of stimuli—Organization—Reaction to results of organization, rather than the usual S—R type. The organism is not barren functionally, it is not a box containing conductors each with a separate function; it responds to a situation, first, by dynamical events peculiar to it as a system and, then, by behavior which depends upon the results of that dynamical organization and order. This is the cardinal principle of all Gestalt psychology: The whole is something other than the sum of its parts—it is genetically and functionally prior to them. This is the *Leitmotiv*.2

Having established the fact that the raw data of the world are perceived as Gestalten, the determination of the conditions which favor the perception of Gestalten became the next problem. Many ingenious experiments have been devised in the attempt to distinguish these principles of organization. Wertheimer outlined nine laws of organization in perceptual forms in 1923,3 denying the reality of haphazard perceptual combinations which psychic atomism advocates.

When we are presented with a number of stimuli we do not as a rule experience "a number" of individual

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1 For a simplified description of these experiments see R. S. Woodworth, *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1931), pp. 107 ff.

2 Hartmann, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

things, this one and that and that. Instead larger wholes separated from and related to one another are given in experience; their arrangement and division are concrete and definite.\(^1\)

This essay sets out to answer the problem why we perceive one arrangement rather than another. Here is a summary of the nine factors.

1) The factor of proximity or nearness. The nearness of elements to each other makes for their perception as parts of a pattern. That form of grouping is most natural which involves the smallest interval.

2) The factor of similarity or likeness. This is the tendency of like parts to band together. Elements which are alike tend to be perceived as belonging together.

3) The factor of uniform destiny or common fate. Elements which have been shifted against the originally dominant factor of proximity share a common fate and therefore tend to form a separate pattern.

4) The factor of Pragnanz. Elements tend to be perceived together in a pattern which gives figural stability and equilibrium to the situation. There are regions where the stability is greater and we tend to group elements around these regions. Precision is established. All experienced fields tend to become as articulated and differentiated as possible.

5) The factor of objective set (Einstellung). Anticipation or expectancy may determine the structure of our percepts. We see what we want to see. Any compelling interest to a pattern will cause it to gain over other perceptual factors.

6) The factor of direction. One has a feeling how the arrangement should go, the direction it should take in order to achieve a "good Gestalt."

7) The factor of closure. Segregated but imperfect wholes (such as perceptions) tend toward complete or closed forms. Incomplete systems demand equilibrium.

\(^1\)Ellis, op. cit., p. 72
8) The factor of past experience or habit. We tend to see objects which are familiar and wholes which we have previously experienced. (Wertheimer denies the behaviorists' claim that this factor underlies the others.)

9) The factor of figure-ground. The perceived figure is dependent upon the character of the surrounding field. Segregation is dependent upon strong differentiation between the field and the figure.

The summary law of Gestalt, in which all of these are comprehended, is the law of Pragnanz. (The German word is inadequately translated as "pregnancy.") It has the meaning of "knapp, und doch vielsagend" (compact but significant). Psychological organization tends to move in one direction rather than another, always toward the state of Pragnanz, toward the "good" or "precise" Gestalt. Every Gestalt is as good as possible: that is, under the given conditions it possesses the greatest possible simplicity, stability, equilibrium, regularity, closure, etc.\(^1\) "We might say that in psychological organization either as much or as little will happen as the prevailing conditions permit."\(^2\) The soap bubble is an example of a "good" Gestalt. This tendency toward Pragnanz is also illustrated by the fact that under ordinary conditions we do not and cannot see a black figure on a white field as anything but a whole segregated from a background; it is quite impossible for us to perceive any such arrangement.

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\(^2\)Ibid., p. 108
as a figure part black and part white on a ground also part black and part white. This would only happen under extraordinary conditions where we forced ourselves by means of the factor of objective set to "see" a part black and part white figure. Even then it would probably be a very unstable, "weak" Gestalt.

We have developed our concept enough now to indicate some of the generalized definitions of Gestalt. Gestalt refers to the theory that all experience comes organized in the form of structures, which when relatively incomplete, possess an immanent tendency toward their own completion as functional wholes. Gestalt rejects the assumption that isolated local determination of psychic processes ever occurs and maintains that all organic and inorganic stresses tend toward an end—the state of equilibrium of the whole. Organization is the process that leads to a Gestalt, that is, the process dynamically distributes and arranges itself in accordance with the constellation of determining circumstances in its entire field. This organization is in accordance with the law of Pragnanz, along with the other factors of organization. The following definition is a good summary statement.

The Gestalt, as opposed to a mere sum of elements, is the typical and basic datum with which psychology as a science has to deal, whose counterpart is also to be found in the physical world; it is a spontaneously and coercively appearing, self-regulating whole, the so-called parts of which are determined dynamically through interaction from a center out, in accordance with structural laws of the whole.¹

¹Focht, op. cit., p. 28
Though the original experimental work was done in the limited area of perception, the leaders of the movement—Wertheimer, Kohler, Koffka—were quick to generalize the Gestalt concept into a universal method of interpretation. Kohler says:

The concept of Gestalt may be applied far beyond the limits of sensory fields. According to the most general definition of gestalt, the processes of learning of reproduction, of striving, of emotional attitude, of thinking, acting, and so forth, may be included as subject-matter of gestalt-theory insofar as they do not consist of independent elements, but are determined in a situation as a whole.

Koffka puts the claim for the school in even stronger words, indicating that the Gestalt psychologists believe that they have uncovered a universal principle, a philosophic way of looking at the world that will interpret all experience. The external universe, life and mind are composed of Gestalten.

The term Gestalt is a short name for a category of thought comparable to other general categories like substance, causality, function. But Gestalt may be considered more than simply an addition to preexisting conceptual principles; its generality is so great that one may ask whether causality itself or substance does not fall legitimately under it.

Such optimistic claims for the Gestalt concept grew out of the concrete work of these psychologists as they worked out the ramifications of the idea. We can see this enlarging field of application developing when we consider one of the problems which they early had to face. Our mental life

1Kohler, op. cit., p. 193
and experience is organized into Gestalten. The problem now arises, how do these Gestalten come about, or, more correctly, how are new Gestalten formed when the organism is confronted with a problem or when new factors are introduced into the field of the organism which do not fit into the existing Gestalt? Wertheimer attacked this issue by wondering what happens, for instance, when we solve a problem, when we understand (in the sense of passing from the uncomprehended to the comprehended), when we "see through" a problem—what happens which does not happen when ideas merely drift through our minds?¹

Wertheimer used the concept of "centering" in his interpretation of this issue. He characterizes this as the grasping of some one factor which opens the way to an ordered whole, so that Gestalt appears where previously organization was lacking or a new Gestalt is formed after the old one had been upset. When we understand, we understand "from a center out," to which center all other parts of the "togetherness" are related in hierarchical order. To this concept of "centering" he later added that of "recentering," which indicates the dynamic nature of Gestalten. The world is in process and there is a constant need for "recentering" in order to maintain the "good" Gestalt.

A simple illustration of this process occurs in the jigsaw puzzle. The task of putting the puzzle together becomes

relatively simple once you have an idea of what the whole picture is going to be, that is, a "center" to which all parts are related. Knowing this, the parts and their relations can be determined. Without this idea of the whole, the pieces can only be shuffled in a random manner. Or if the idea of what the picture is intended to represent happens to be a mistaken one, there will be no satisfactory progress until "recentering" has taken place.

Wertheimer applied this concept to such things as logic and the syllogism. In later years he spent much of his effort on the problem of thinking as interpreted by the Gestalt concept. His book, Productive Thinking1 summarized this work.

What happens when one is thinking? Wertheimer defined the process as a movement from situation 1 to situation 2. The problem is to determine what happens in order to get the person's thought from 1 to 2. His thesis is that S1 contains certain stresses and strains and tensions for the thinker, which are making the Gestalt of S1 unstable and weak. These very structural features of S1 yield vectors in the direction of improvement of the situation. The law of Pragnanz, the tendency to the good Gestalt, and the other Gestalt laws operate to determine this development. Thus S1 changes to S2

which is a good Gestalt, and one in which the tensions have been resolved. \( S_2 \) is a harmonious organization in which the parts are determined by the structure of the whole, and in which the parts are dynamically interrelated.\(^1\)

A simple illustration is found in the individual thinking about his car. The tensions of \( S_1 \) include the fact that the car has broken down; new cars are expensive but so are repairs; new cars are not easily available; the amount of money he has is limited, etc. These structural features of the first Gestalt establish a direction and set a process in motion until \( S_2 \) is reached where he has decided to repair the old car once more. This is the best possible Gestalt in the light of all features.

Thus, all relations within a whole are not equally important, but there is always a determinative "center" which however, varies with varying conditions. Hence, in the attempt to solve a problem, it is often necessary to "recenter;" to look at the situation from a different point of view, to take hold of it in a different way, to achieve what Gestalt-theorists have come to call insight, in order to find the pattern which establishes the "good" Gestalt.

Hartmann defines insight as "appropriate or meaningful behavior and experience in the presence of any life situation."\(^2\)

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\(^1\)Ibid., pp. 194 f.

\(^2\)Hartmann, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 312.
The process may be characterized by sudden perceptual reconstruction of the field, but this is not essential. Insight is the how and why of a situation, an understanding of the innermost nature of the field, the stresses not merely apprehended but comprehended. It is the operation of the factor of closure. The gap is closed and the pattern of the Gestalt falls into shape.

Kohler used the idea of insight in describing the learning of apes when faced with problem situations. This work grew out of his extensive experiments with apes during the first World War. For example, when the ape could not reach the banana outside his cage with his arms, he went around in a kind of random activity until suddenly he seemed to literally "see" that the stick at the back of the cage would close the gap between the banana and himself, and ran to that side of the cage and proceeded to nudge the banana within reach with the stick.  

Growing out of further work with apes, Yerkes made a list of the criteria whereby the process of insight could be identified. When we perform an act with insight, we are familiar with certain characteristics.

These features are: (1) Survey, inspection, or persistent examination of problematic situations. (2) Hesitation, pause, attitude of concentrated attention. (3) Trial of more or less adequate mode of response. (4) In case initial mode of response proves inadequate,

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trial of some other mode of response, the transition from one method to the other being sharp and often sudden. (5) Persistent or frequent recurrent attention to the object or goal and motivation thereby. (6) Appearance of critical point at which the organism suddenly, directly, and definitely performs required adaptive act. (7) Ready repetition of adaptive response after once performed. (8) Notable ability to discover and attend to the essential aspect or relation in the problematic situation and to neglect relatively, variations in non-essentials.1

The Gestalt-theorists have used the idea of insight extensively in their discussions of learning.2

Another important conceptual tool within the Gestalt concept is the field theory. We can understand this best if we come now to a consideration of the person who is also a Gestalt. The behavior of this person is determined by the whole and its intrinsic nature and not by individual elements operating in an insulated fashion. Thus, to understand the behavior and experiences of any individual, it is necessary to understand the nature of the whole wherein that individual finds himself. This "whole" within which the individual operates has been termed the "field." Koffka has used the field theory extensively as a means of more adequately describing the operational aspects of the Gestalt concept. He asks:

Can we introduce the field concept into psychology, meaning by it a system of stresses and strains which will determine real behaviour? If we can, we have at once a general and scientific category for all our explanations and we should have the same two kinds of problems which the physicist encounters: viz., (1)


what is the field at a given time, (2) what behaviour must result from a given field?¹

Koffka differentiates between the physical field of an individual (the geographical environment) and psycho-physical or psychological field (the behavioral environment). This latter field is the individual's perception of the "whole in which he lives." The individual behaves in terms of this psycho-physical field (an internalized world) regardless of other factors which an external observer might see in the field.

An interesting example of the distinction between these two fields is given by Koffka. A driver in the desert suddenly stops his car when he perceives a huge rock rolling onto the road in front of his car. After some seconds he realizes that the object is not a rock after all, but a huge bramble bush which could not possibly hurt his car. Thus the actual geographical environment was harmless, but individuals always operate in terms of their perception of the field, the psycho-physical field. It is this latter "whole" which we shall mean by the term "field" in later sections of the thesis.

It is out of these considerations that Koffka formulates the task of Gestalt psychology: "the study of behavior in its causal connection with the psycho-physical field."²

To achieve this task the following steps are necessary:

1) We must study the organization of the environmental field, meaning, (a) we must find out the forces which organize it into separate objects and events,

¹Koffka, Principles of Gestalt Psychology, op. cit., p. 42.

²Ibid., p. 67.
(b) the forces which exist between these different objects and events; and (c) how these forces produce the environmental field as we know it in our behavioral environment.

2) We must investigate how such forces can influence movements of the body.

3) We must study the Ego as one of the main field parts.

4) We must show that the forces which connect the Ego with the other field parts are of the same nature as those between different parts of the environmental field, and how they produce behavior in all its forms.

5) We must not forget that our psychophysical field exists within a real organism which in its turn exists in a geographical environment. In this way the questions of true cognition and adequate or adapted behaviour will also enter our program.¹

It is extremely important to notice here that the stresses and strains of the ego are just as much a part of this field as are features of the external environment. Thus the dualism of heredity and environment become irrelevant in this "whole" as do the old divisions of mind and body. To the extent that features in all of these areas are perceived by the individual as parts of his field, they are gathered up into as stable a Gestalt as possible.

Though Koffka spends a great deal of time analyzing perception in terms of his stated task, he also enlarges the application of Gestalt theory to include such items as behavior, the ego, memory, learning, recognition, thinking, and finally social psychology. Through all of these areas of investigation, Koffka uses the concepts of the psychophysical

¹Ibid., pp. 56 ff.
field, consisting of ego and environment; the laws of field organization and the establishment of Gestalt; and field reorganization; to deal with each new problem.¹

Kurt Lewin utilized the field theory to a great extent in his experimental theory and work.² He used the term "individual's life space" to describe this field. He applied diagramatic schemes in which he sketched the individual's field and the stresses and strains within it, and the forces pointing toward possible solutions, and reestablishment of a "good" Gestalt. For example, a need for food within the individual sets up tensions within the present Gestalt which can only be resolved by action and reorganization of the Gestalt to include the acquisition of food. Lewin also founded a school for the study of group dynamics, which in recent years has explored the "field" and the interaction therein, of a group of persons. The Gestalt concept has offered a theoretical background for this growing understanding of group life. Here the same laws of organization seem to be operating and Gestaltes are established and reestablished.

The client-centered counseling movement in the United States acknowledges its indebtedness to Gestalt theory, and has made extensive use of some of its concepts, such as the field, reorganization, insight, and the individual's unique

¹Ibid., passim.

perception of his field.\(^1\) A recent book, *Individual Behavior*,\(^2\) uses the term "phenomenal field," meaning the entire universe, including the individual, as it is experienced by the individual at the instant of action. This way of looking at the individual represents a personal frame of reference as opposed to the objective frame of reference which has been utilized by physics, chemistry and the other physical sciences. The phenomenal field represents an internal consideration of the individual as compared to external observation. Another approach to therapy with the Gestalt concept is reported in a volume entitled, *Gestalt Therapy*,\(^3\) making particular use of the individual's perception of his situation, his unique Gestalt, and the figure-ground distinction. Therapy can be viewed as a shift whereby new factors come into the individual's perception as figure, and the old maladjusting factors recede into ground.

The Gestalt concept has also been utilized in social psychology,\(^4\) attempting to understand various problems in this discipline by looking at the psychophysical field of an individual from the point of view of that individual and not

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from an outside objective and quantitative viewpoint. Krech and Crutchfield define this whole as the immediate psychological field of the individual. This field is produced through influences arising from three sources: 1) the external physical environment of the person; 2) his internal physiological state; and 3) neural "traces" of past experiences. The field at any given moment is a dynamic unity of these various effects, for interaction among these effects is the rule.

These examples of the application of Gestalt theory in a variety of fields will suffice to indicate that it is a promising instrument of interpretation. In concluding this chapter we return to our primary interest in the person. The person is a Gestalt. Perception, thought, behavior, feeling all belong to one great whole, and any separation of them is artificial. On the basis of the individual's perception of his field comes the organization leading to a Gestalt. In the light of this Gestalt the individual thinks and acts. Out of action comes new perceptions and thus all through the process and the product Gestalten are being formed and reformed, and the individual is seeking new organizing centers for his Gestalten.

What is behavior in Gestalt terms, then? In the beginning there is tension, a lack of equilibrium, disturbance, or a gap in the organization perceived by the individual. Perception, thought and behavior operate to achieve closure and a new Gestalt which brings equilibrium, the "good" Gestalt. The laws of Gestalt formation operate, particularly the law
of Pragnanz, in bringing about new Gestalten. Total-behavior thus resolves itself into a series of dynamic Gestalten, which in turn constitute, in the whole of personality, one great Gestalt. Very simply, the formula might be put as follows:

1) The organization of a Gestalt is upset.
2) The laws of organization operate as the organism seeks a restoration of equilibrium.
3) Insight into the situation occurs.
4) A new Gestalt has been established.

A very simple illustration occurs when a man is given a letter by his wife with instructions to mail it. His Gestalt is upset. As he moves along the street, the sight of a mailbox causes the laws of organization to operate in such a way that insight occurs, and he drops the letter into the box. Equilibrium has been restored and his new Gestalt is no longer disturbed by this letter tension.

At a far more profound level, Gestalt theory suggests that meaning in life is possible when there is the grasping of an inner coherence, and a center of organization in the life of the individual. Life as a whole becomes meaningful when it is determined by a true belonging together of all parts. The parts of the personality as of any Gestalt do not stand in haphazard relationship, but each is in its own place, that place being determined by a non-summative structural principle of the whole. It is in the "good" Gestalt in which all parts of the total field of the individual are interrelated to the greatest degree of equilibrium, that meaning
occurs. Thus, the Gestalt concept has become a worthy instrument of interpretation for all experience.

C. Summary of the Gestalt Instrument

The following summary will be utilized in the balance of the thesis as a possible instrument for interpreting religious experience.

1) The proper unit for the analysis of behavior or experience is the whole—the psychophysical field of the organizing center of that experience.

2) Behavior is determined by the stresses and strains of all properties within this field in its totality, including those within the ego or self. Each individual perceives its field uniquely, that is, those things in its field which are functionally significant for it.

3) This psychophysical field is organized and meaningful to the individual. That is, a Gestalt is established and maintained by the individual or organizing center. The following principles operated to organize this field.

   a) The factor of proximity or nearness.
   b) The factor of similarity or likeness.
   c) The factor of uniform destiny or common fate.
   d) The factor of Pragnanz.
   e) The factor of objective set.
   f) The factor of direction.
   g) The factor of closure.
   h) The factor of past experience or habit.
   i) The factor of figure-ground.

4) Reorganization of the field takes place whenever tensions or instabilities enter into the field and destroy the equilibrium or balance of the Gestalt. This change or
reorganization is in the direction of establishing the best possible Gestalt—the most stable structure or form which will include all of the properties within the psychophysical field. The term insight has been used to describe this resolution of tension within the field.
CHAPTER III

THE GENERAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE GESTALT CONCEPT
FOR RELIGION

Our task for the remainder of our thesis is to relate the Gestalt concept to religious experience. To this end we will explore the general interpretation of religious experience and some of the key ideas suggested by the Gestalt concept in this chapter. The inference that Gestalt psychology could contribute anything to an understanding of religion may seem presumptuous to many, and yet, curiously enough, Gestalt psychologists as well as religious writers have made the suggestion.

Kurt Koffka suggests that science has forgotten its original base and feels that the Gestalt concept has a role to play in integrating our entire life again.

Is it the tragedy of the human race that for every gain it makes it has to pay a price which often seems greater than the gain? Must we pay for science by a disintegration of our life? Must we deny on week-days what we profess on Sundays? As a personal article of faith I believe that there is no such inexorable must. Science, in building rational systems of knowledge, had to select such facts as would most readily submit to such systematization. This process of selection, in itself of the greatest significance, involves the neglecting or rejecting of a number of facts or aspects. As long as scientists know what they are doing, such procedure is fraught with little danger. But in the triumph over its success science is apt to forget that it has not absorbed all aspects of reality, and to
deny the existence of those which it has neglected. Thus, instead of keeping in mind the question which gave rise to all science, "what God is, what we are..." it holds up such questions to ridicule, and considers the men and women who persist in asking them as atavistic survivals.¹

Plainly, Dr. Koffka hopes that his science of Gestalt will encompass all the aspects of life, including religion. He rejects the attitude of neglect and ridicule on the part of some scientists.

Allport documents this neglect of religion by science by recalling that during the past fifty years religion and sex have reversed their positions. In the Victorian age it was religion that was written about while sex was hidden away. "Today, by contrast, psychologists write with the frankness of Freud or Kinsey on the sexual passions of mankind, but blush and grow silent when the religious passions come into view."² Surely such neglect is patently unfair when religion is a vital part of the lives of the majority of people. Psychology cannot hope to fulfill its task if it persists in omitting part of the experience of people. As we saw earlier³ Kohler believe that the Gestalt concept is a universal method of interpretation applicable to all subject matters that "are determined in a situation as a whole."⁴

²Allport, op. cit., p. 1.
³See above, chap. ii, p. 47.
⁴Kohler, Gestalt Psychology, p. 193.
In his William James Lectures at Harvard in 1934, he discussed a subject with very definite kinship to religion, "The Place of Value in a World of Facts." Max Wertheimer has also been interested in the question of values for many years.

George Hartmann gives us an indication of the kind of interpretation possible in his comments on ethics, an area bordering on the religious.

The domain of morality has so long been associated with religious instruction that any effort to deal objectively with it is still greeted with suspicion. Even highly scientific minds view ethical conduct as an expression of human irrationality and consider it a hopelessly subjective matter; yet strangely enough, from the Gestalt point of view, it may represent the culmination of man's rational nature.

The latter position is made tenable by a simple extension of the notion of insight to an appreciation of the social consequences of one's action. A "good" act is one which takes into consideration all the immediate and long-distance effects which it may draw after it, and is performed only if it leads to a better group organization (in the sense of Wertheimer's "good" Gestalt). A "bad" act, on the other hand, is one executed out of relation to the setting in which it occurs and thereby inevitably creates tension or conflict between the offender and the society of which he is a "member." Society, however, is not absolved of at least partial responsibility, for there must be something "wrong" with it that one of its parts should react in a way which defeats its own integration.

Certain advantages which inhere in this interpretation are:

1. It is optimistic, for by identifying goodness with the operation of Pragnanz it suggests a steady evolution toward improved and more harmonious behavior. Symmetry as an end-state in memory and perception is matched by an equivalent drive toward "balance" in action. The

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1Wolfgang Kohler, *The Place of Value in a World of Facts* (New York: Liveright, 1938)
possibilities which this conception holds for a scientific basis for happiness are obvious.

2. It is rational and supports the Socratic view that the wise man is also the virtuous one. A young child or a mentally deficient adult are incapable of ethical conduct because the structures which must be apprehended exceed the limitations of their insight. It is for the opposite reason that Arnold's praise of Sophocles may be considered the height of esteem—"He saw life steadily and he saw it whole." The ethical significance of the mental hygienist's emphasis upon an "integrated personality" is likewise revealed in a new light.

3. It is just and humane. "Society and the individual share in the ethical responsibility for the deeds of man; society because it is the whole from which man derives his moral standards, and the individual, because he is the immediate agent of the deed, executed in terms of his judgment. The individual is simply the figure, subject to all the field-forces which the ground exerts upon him."

Though we cannot share the optimism and all of the conclusions of Dr. Hartmann, the potential interpretative power of the Gestalt concept is suggested by this passage, as well as the interest of some of the Gestalt psychologists.

Religious writers for the most part have not developed the Gestalt concept but have utilized many of the ideas found in Gestalt psychology in many cases without realizing where they have come from. For example, the whole tone of Gordon Allport's The Individual and His Religion is congenial to the Gestalt concept without using the specific terminology. His earlier definition of personality suggests the connection: "Personality is the dynamic organization within the individual of those psycho-physical systems that determine the unique

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1Hartmann, op. cit., pp. 274 f.

2Allport, op. cit., passim.
adjustments to his environment.1

J. G. McKenzie is another writer in the field of religion and psychology whose work is congenial to the outlook of Gestalt psychology without using the terminology. In his book Nervous Disorders and Religion he speaks in holistic terms.

The emphasis today is upon the self or subject. That self or subject has a telos like every other organism, a nissa towards a person as a self-conscious harmonious whole. I believe that this telos is to be identified with what is called the "image of God"; and when the telos is thwarted or repressed, a disturbance of the personality follows, although not necessarily a mental breakdown. Human nature is Holistic, and when the holistic tendency is thwarted personality in the true sense of the term may never develop at all.2

G. Van Der Leeuw utilized the idea of Gestaltung throughout his work and particularly in the volume, Religion in Essence and Manifestation.

The term "Form," Gestalt, is one of the more important in the present work. It is best understood by referring to recent "Gestalt Psychology," which maintains that every object of consciousness is a whole or a unit, and is not merely constituted by the elements that analysis may discover; the English name of this system is usually "Configuration Psychology." "Endowment with Form," and again "Form Creation" in this sense, will appear in what follows as equivalents for the allied term Gestaltung. But it is vitally important to observe that, throughout this volume, all forms are visible, or tangible, or otherwise perceptible; and thus Endowment with Form, or Form Creation, indicates the gradual crystallization of the originally formless


feelings and emotions into some kind of perceptible and unified forms. 1

With this Gestalt concept as one of his major instruments of interpretation, Van Der Leeuw makes a large-scale study of religious practices in many different ages and cultures.

From the theological side of interpretation come similar instances of congeniality with the Gestalt approach. H. H. Farmer reveals a concern with the whole and the self within its environment.

In religion the personality of man synthetically grasps its environment as a totality; it grasps the "ultimate" of its world, that which holds together its apparent discord and confusion in a final and unalterable unity of meaning.2

In analyzing Protestantism's current situation, Paul Tillich calls attention to the need for a "Protestant Gestalt."3 He feels that we have been one-sided in our development, and must now recall the fact that a "protest cannot exist without a 'Gestalt' to which it belongs."4 Protestantism can only be creative as it seeks to live in a "Gestalt of grace, in a sacred structure of reality."5

These examples will suffice to show that both Gestalt

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4Ibid., p. 206.

5Ibid., p. 209.
psychologists and religious writers have not been unaware of the potentialities of the Gestalt concept as an instrument for interpreting religion and religious experience. We turn now to the general requirements Gestalt psychology would place upon religion and the subsequent interpretation of religious experience.

1. Religion Must Consider the Person as a Whole

The Gestalt concept does not allow us to dissect the personality into parts, such as feeling, will and volition, or any of the other schemes for isolating factors which seem particularly relevant to religious experience. In so doing, we violate their basic Gestalt postulate that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. The person is a system of energy. The parts constituting the person as a whole react reciprocally upon each other because nature exists in structured fields in which the activity of each part is determined by its pattern or arrangement.

We noted in chapter I the variety of methods which had been suggested as approaches to religious experience. Religious writers had picked one or another of the factors within the person and attempted to make it the significant factor for religious experience. The Gestalt concept suggests that we must begin with the person as a whole and not introduce any dichotomies into the analysis.

This is the way the person functions, not only in religious experience but in all behavior, as a whole. There
is agreement here with psycho-somatic findings, for they insist that the mind-body division does violence to the manner in which the person really functions. Personality is a Gestalt. It functions as a whole. These are the conclusions of a long study on expressive movements\(^1\) as well as being general Gestalt theory.

The evidence indicates clearly that the expressive movements of personality are not specific and unrelated; on the contrary they form coherent, if perplexing patterns... From our results it appears that a man's gestures and handwriting both reflect an essentially stable and constant individual style. His expressive activities seem not to be dissociated and unrelated to one another, but rather to be organized and well-patterned. Furthermore, the evidence indicates that there is congruence between expressive movement and the attitudes, traits, values, and other dispositions of the "inner" personality.\(^2\)

According to McKenzie this represents a general trend today, to get away from the idea of personality as "no more than a sum of its parts, or a bundle of instincts, or an array of conditioned reflexes, or a conglomeration of complexes created by a ruthless 'superego.'\(^3\)

It would seem that Jesus dealt with the person as a whole. It was not enough to have agreed intellectually to his teaching, one would be known by the fruits of his actions as well. And sin was not only the overt action; it was also the inner thought of misdeed. In later chapters we shall

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\(^2\)Ibid., pp. 247 f.

\(^3\)McKenzie, Nervous Disorders and Religion, p. 118.
consider the self which is the organizing center of the person as a whole.

2. Religion Must Recognize the Individual Person as Authoritative for Himself

Each person exists within a unique field of his own. In a very real sense that individual person is the only one who can ever fully know his field and the organization he has made of it. Perception, that is the person's total awareness of his field including thought, will, feeling, and seeing, is functionally selective. The outsider may see things in this individual's field which the person seemingly has ignored. From the Gestalt point of view the factors of organization are operating and the particular perceptions of any individual will be unique. He may choose to ignore certain factors, consciously or unconsciously, for good reason—at least to his own Gestalt.

Some recent writers in psychology are recognizing this unique aspect of each person and emphasizing it. Religion must also accept this uniqueness of the person. This gives us an interpretation of the great variety of definitions of religious experience which we found in our first chapter. There is variety of definition because each person is finally authoritative for himself. A definition evolves from the in—

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individual's own unique experience and is thus tinged with autobiographical reference. Because of the uniqueness of each person, the locus of definition of religious experience resides with each individual. Even the acceptance of a definition suggested by an authoritarian institution will not give uniformity. Each individual will perceive and interpret that suggested definition in his own way. In the words of Allport,

"An experience is what you have. While it may conceivably distort reality, it can scarcely distort itself. The error of Schoen, and of the majority of writers on religion in its subjective aspects, is that they do not refer the task of characterizing the religious consciousness to the only authorities capable of knowing what it is—namely the individuals who experience it."

This uniqueness—though not necessarily all of its consequences—is also recognized by some theologians, for example, H. H. Farmer.

"But, on the other hand, when I get into my home, the one thing I am interested in, that I clamour for, that I delight in discovering and "hold on to" in the persons with whom I have the distinctively personal relationship of love and trust, is their individuality—all that makes each one of them his own unique, unrepeatable, distinctive, irreplaceable self."

The Gestalt concept gives us an interpretation of why and how each person is "individual."

"But, say our critics, isn't this a hopeless relativism? Yes, it is a relativism but it is not hopeless. Rather, it is

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psychological understanding of the finiteness of all men. Though we may argue in the heat of debate as if our position regarding the nature of God was absolute and authoritative, in moments of silence when we are alone with God we recognize our own finiteness and limited grasp on eternal verities. Either other persons have an equal claim to truth, or we have fallen victim to the sin of pride.

This individuality and its dependence upon the unique field in which each person finds himself, is discussed theologically by Richard Niebuhr.\(^1\) For him "the problem of Christ and culture can and must come to an end only in a realm beyond all study in the free decisions of individual believers and responsible communities . . . ."\(^2\) And these free decisions are relative.

The conclusions at which we arrive individually in seeking to be Christians in our culture are relative in at least four ways. They depend on the partial, incomplete, fragmentary knowledge of the individual; they are relative to the measure of his faith and his unbelief; they are related to the historical position he occupies and to the duties of his station in society; they are concerned with the relative value of things.\(^3\)

Those within the Christian faith may accept this finiteness of man; but those who are critical may see it as proof of their claim that religion is only a projection on the part of man. Paul Tillich answers this criticism in a review of Erich Fromm's book, *Psychoanalysis and Religion.*

\(^1\)Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), passim.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 233.

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 234.
Freud's theory of projection, like every theory of projection since Feuerbach, confuses two things; that which is projected and that at which it is projected—"the picture" and "the screen." There can be no doubt that the concrete material out of which the images of the gods are made is rooted in healthy as well as in distorted experiences, in childhood and later. But this does not mean that the screen, namely, the ultimate of being and meaning, the ground and aim of existence, is itself a projection. The question, therefore, for theology and psychotherapy is not the removal of the screen, but the interpretation and the purification of the symbolic expressions of our relation to it.¹

Thus, the Gestalt concept does not suggest that the screen, that is, God, is illusory or unreal or a projection. It does affirm the uniqueness of the individual's insight and perception of God, leaving the question of religious objectivity and authority open, a question to be settled on other than purely psychological grounds. However, any theological position must reckon with this understanding of the unique individual, for it will be created by the unique perceptions of one or more individuals and if it is dogmatized without leaving room for future individuals, it has violated this principle. Gestalt sustains the dignity, worth and sacredness of each person. D. M. Baillie quotes V. Solovyof in this connection,

> The reality of the Deity is not a deduction from religious experience, but the content of it—what which is experienced. If this immediate reality of the higher principle be taken away, there would be nothing left of religious experience.²

It is this immediate experience which Whitehead believes to

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be infallible. Gestalt reminds us that the infinity of God will be perceived uniquely by each finite person.

3. Religion Must Be Equally Aware of the Process as well as the Content of Religious Experience

It follows from the previous description of the uniqueness of each person that the content and essence of a religious experience might well be different for each person. The effort at uniformity of experience and content that is dogmatism either violates the individual or causes revolt. Dogmatism may set up a dichotomy in a person's life wherein religion is not integrated into his total organization but is set apart in a separate compartment. This would frustrate the development of the person as a whole.

Our first chapter described many different attempts to be definitive about the content and essence of religious experience. But for every position taken there are those who will debate the issue and claim a different essence. The Gestalt concept suggests an analysis of any experience, that is the process, and allows the content to be filled in by the experiencer, the self. The content or nature of the objective reference is not suggested. The Gestalt concept is neutral in this respect.

A further ramification of this emphasis on process brings us to a dynamic concept of religious experience rather than a static one. As we shall see later in more detail the person is constantly reorganizing his field in order to establish equilibrium in the midst of new stresses and strains.
Thus the experience of religion cannot be completed once and for all at any one point in time. Though some experiences may color all subsequent ones, there is a constant reorganization going on if the person is to continue to develop as a whole. The "paradigmatic experiences" suggested by Karl Mannheim would be such an instance.\(^1\) David Roberts develops a "dynamic view of salvation"\(^2\) as opposed to a static view, in a recent volume, and this would be in agreement with the Gestalt suggestion. He feels that if religion is to make men whole then theology must pay "more attention than it has in the past to the widely divergent needs and capacities of different individuals."\(^3\) Roberts goes on to emphasize the importance of process as well as content.

The movement of thought should be from the operation of healing power in life—love replacing egotism and inward harmony replacing conflict—to a resulting formulation of belief in doctrine. An attempt to reverse the process, to force experience into the confirmation of doctrine, shows a lack of confidence in the power of the Gospel to illuminate, persuade and convert men.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) Karl Mannheim, *Diagnosis of Our Time*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), passim.


\(^3\) Ibid., p. 137.

\(^4\) Ibid., P. 142. See below, chap. vi.
4. Religion Must Determine and Understand the Nature of the Field of the Individual Which Includes the Self as the Organizing Center

What is the nature of the field of that man in the pew? It isn't what the minister or his neighbor imagines it to be, but rather it is the entire universe, including himself, as it is experienced by him at the instant of action. It is simply the universe of naive experience in which each individual lives, the everyday situation of self and surroundings which he takes to be reality. The minister may be convinced that the field of "that man in the pew" is filled with error and illusion and is an interpretation of reality rather than reality itself. But to the individual his field is reality, the only reality he can know. This field, as perceived by each individual, is the one with which the minister and religion must reckon.¹

No matter what the man in the pew is told, his own field will always seem real, substantial and solid to him. It is the only field and the only reality he can directly experience. It includes all the universe of which he is aware—physical objects and environment, psychological entities, ideas, opinions, past experience, etc. There are no dichotomies in this field; it is one field, not only in terms of mind and body, but also in terms of consciousness and unconsciousness. It is a unified field of figure-ground phenomena of which the individual is more or less conscious. Furthermore,¹

¹Snygg and Combs, op. cit., pp. 15 ff.
this unique field of the individual is constantly in process. His Gestalt is not permanent but fluctuates. This increases the minister's difficulty for he cannot ever be finally sure he knows where the other person stands. But this is also the minister's hope, for the individual can change.

This unique field of the individual sounds reasonable enough, but does this bring us to an impasse as far as communication and fellowship is concerned? Not at all, say the Gestalt psychologists, but it does make us face the reality of the situation. The idea of the relationship of this self in his unique field to other selves, the world, and God will concern us in the next chapter.

Has Christianity and the church been sufficiently aware of this field concept? Hasn't the preacher naively assumed that the field he handled and organized so adroitly in his sermon was shared by the man in the pew? Now to be sure there may be similarities and considerable overlapping of fields, but finally that man in the pew is going to perceive his field in a unique way. Awareness of this fact might save the minister from being so concerned with the content of religious experience which the man in the pew cannot perceive in a similar way, that he does not foster the process whereby every individual is able to arrive at his own Gestalt of the world and God. The preacher must declare the content of his own Gestalt, but he must also help the individual to begin where he is to establish a relationship with God.
5. Religion Must Understand Behavior as Determined by the Forces of the Field

The behavior involved in experiencing religion is not the result of any instinct or innate disposition toward religion. "The total field, and more particularly its relevant parts, set up the stresses in the Ego which determine behavior according to the properties of the whole field."¹

The church long ago recognized the importance of the times of stress and strain in the behavior of the individual. It provided sacramental celebration and interpretation of the common crises in the life of persons. Thus, birth, adolescence, marriage, death—the times when life seems most real, and in need of a new orientation—became part of the church's ritual.

These are obvious times of stress and strain, and common sense suggests how our behavior is "determined by the forces of the field." But this is a general principle applicable at all times, and thus the religious experience of an individual is also determined by the forces of the field. The evangelist is probably intuitively aware of this Gestalt principle when he introduces the stress of an eternal hell into the field of each member of his congregation. The resultant behavior of the congregation is determined by this new force interacting with the properties of the whole field of each person.

These forces in the field might also be designated as

¹Koffka, Principles of Gestalt Psychology, p. 663
needs perceived by the person as necessary to his development. Behavior would then result in the same fashion that we have described. J. G. McKenzie\footnote{McKenzie, Nervous Disorders and Religion, pp. 60 f.} describes behavior in this fashion:

\begin{quote}
(Human nature) \ldots begins with certain specific needs in the interests of which we acquire behaviour-tendencies by which we satisfy these needs. These needs are not separate instincts independent of the organism and the personality as a whole. They find their meaning in the organism and personality which they subserve. In man these become personal ends and not simply something that belongs to the "flesh." In virtue of man's capacity to perceive relations, he can subordinate both the needs and behaviour-tendencies to his own selfish pleasure or ends. Immediately he does so there is set up either a conflict which may result in neurosis or a condition in which the possibility of realizing a personality at all is undermined.\footnote{Ibid., p. 60.}
\end{quote}

Has Christianity been sufficiently aware of the multitude of forces playing upon the individuals to whom it ministers? Is this awareness one of the factors which has gone in to preaching at its best? This ability to understand the stresses and strains of persons and to provide interpretation for them through the Christian message, has surely marked the minister who was truly a "shepherd to his flock."

The concept of field forces offers an interesting analysis of the current theological differences between the European continent and the American churches. Continental theologians share the forces in Europe today, including pessimism and a hopelessness as far as any man-made schemes are concerned for extricating themselves from political, economic and cultural problems. With such forces in their field, is it...
strange that theology has come to dwell on eschatology and a hope which comes from the wholly other God and from nothing that man can do?

On the other hand, America and the so-called "younger churches," have an optimistic field. New horizons are still opening up. Economics, politics and cultural forces are predominantly enthusiastic about the possibilities of progress and a future of hope. It is easy to see that theologians with such forces in their field would be optimistic and dwell on social action and religious development. God is at work in human history and man can cooperate with Him or not, as they choose. The World Council of Churches is faced with these two viewpoints,1 and the Gestalt concept suggests at least one means of understanding them and their proponents.

6. Religion Must Understand the Principles Which Organize a Field into a Meaningful Whole—a Gestalt

His field is organized and meaningful to the person, even though it may seem a bizarre or abnormal organization to the outsider. The theologian spends considerable time making his theology a Gestalt, that is an organized and logically interrelated system. The layman is far less explicit about his organization, but his field is not "a blooming, buzzing confusion;" it is somehow organized into a pattern which makes sense to him.

As we have seen,\(^1\) Wertheimer in his original work in visual perception, discovered that the groupings "seen" by a person were not just random or chance organizations, but seemed to indicate that some definite principles were operating to produce the resulting configuration. In transferring these principles to the totality of perception by a person as we are doing, we find that they are not all equally useful. Subsequent Gestalt psychologists have emphasized one or the other, as for example Koffka in his central emphasis on the Law of Pragnanz.\(^2\) However, the principles are all suggestive for our task of interpreting religious experience, so we shall elaborate them in this chapter on general implications.

a. The factor of proximity. The person perceives those elements which are nearest to each other as parts of a pattern. Thus, the growing child is likely to understand God as somehow like his earthly father. The child will also perceive the church and religion as an integral part of his configuration, if his parents have taken him to church regularly. Church and self are near to each other. Parents, church and self are also grouped together. In adolescence the self may reject the parents in its struggle to attain independence, and because of the close proximity of parents and church, he may also reject the church. Religious writers confirm this analysis of

\(^1\)See above, chap. 11, p. 47 ff.

the rebellion of the adolescent.\textsuperscript{1} An excellent illustration of just this development is found in the book, \textit{Father and Son}.\textsuperscript{2} Edmund Gosse describes how proximity operated and he was completely identified with the church of his father, but eventually he found it necessary to affirm his own individualism and religious independence. He rejected his father’s authority and then the church too.

b. The factor of similarity. The person perceives those elements which are alike as parts of a pattern. Again the growing child gives us an illustration in the pre-adolescent age, when he becomes aware of the fact that the world is divided into boys and girls. Boys are part of one configuration; girls are part of another configuration.

In the religious experience of the early Christian church, the members perceived themselves as belonging together because of their similarity and likeness. They had had an experience of the Risen Christ which set them apart from the rest of the world. Thus their Gestalt of the total world included two groupings: Christians and non-Christians.

c. The factor of uniform fate or common destiny. The person perceives elements which have been shifted from a pattern of similarity, as sharing a common destiny or uniform fate. Whereas the early church member, originally saw himself

\textsuperscript{1}Allport, \textit{The Individual and His Religion}, pp. 32 ff.

\textsuperscript{2}Edmund Gosse, \textit{Father and Son}, (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1907).
as part of all people in the world, when he became a Christian he saw himself in a new configuration, sharing a different destiny. Though he was in the world, yet he was not part of the world because he shared a new destiny.

**d. The factor of Pragnanz.** The person tends to perceive elements in the field together if they give stability, equilibrium and precision to the configuration. In the process of conversion, the person is in an upset condition, seeking stability for himself in relationship to God. He will perceive those elements together which give him stability. For example the cross of Christ or the example of the Jesus of history may become the focal point of his conversion experience, around which all other factors will tend to group.

The factor of Pragnanz or the tendency toward the "good" Gestalt means that the field of the person will tend to become as articulated and differentiated as possible. From the initial conversion experience (with its change to a new center of organization) the person will discover implications for many areas of his life. Every Gestalt is as good as possible; that is, under the given forces in the field, it will possess the greatest possible simplicity, stability, equilibrium, regularity, closure, etc.

**e. The factor of objective set.** The person may perceive elements of his field in a particular configuration because of anticipation, expectancy or interest. How often in our experiences of religion, do we "see what we want to see." In the reading of the Bible, one can elicit very different interpre-
tations from a fundamentalist and from a liberal Protestant. Does this not suggest an interpretation of the difficulty of religious debate? The parties in the debate arrive with pre-conceived expectations, interested in seeing things in their own way, rather than entering freely into discussion from which their convictions and decisions will spring.

Let us return to our mythical "man in the pew" for a moment. Could this factor of objective set be an interpretation of why worship and prayer and preaching are so often ineffective? We approach these potentially life-changing experiences with a rigid Gestalt. Our minds are made up; they are not in a fluid state casting about for a Gestalt with more stability or greater precision. The author's own experience with an actual man in one of the pews of his church is illustrative. This man was of a particularly conservative nature, and he had a strong "objective set." Whenever the minister tried to point out the implications of the Gospel for our day-to-day relations with our fellow men, this particular man "closed his ears." This was his statement to the minister in a moment of candor.

The masters of prayer have told us to approach prayer expecting great things. Jesus seems to have been aware of this factor when he rebuked his disciples, "Oh, ye of little faith." Expect nothing and you will receive nothing.

f. The factor of direction. The person may have a feeling about the arrangement of the elements, the direction that events should take in order to achieve a "good" Gestalt.
For example, in Biblical criticism once a principle is established for interpreting some part of scripture, a direction has been established. One has the feeling that the rest of the Bible should be looked at in the same manner, in order to establish a "good" Gestalt, "that is, a harmonious, symmetrical interpretation in which all the parts are determined by this whole.

Conversion carries something of this factor, when the person feels that a direction for his life has been established and subsequent experiences as well as all relationship ought to go in this direction in order to establish the "good" Gestalt.

g. The factor of closure. The person perceives the elements in his field as separated and incomplete, demanding completion and the establishment of equilibrium. Prior to conversion, a person may perceive the elements of his field as isolated and unrelated, but tending in a direction of unity. He is restless and unhappy over this disequilibrium. The self cries for unity and completion of the Gestalt which will bring wholeness to the person. In the ultimate religious sense, Augustine's phrase, "Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou has formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee," expresses the religious demand for closure. In the experience of conversion, closure is achieved and the person feels a sense of completion, of wholeness.

\[1\] Augustine, Confessions, Book I, chap. 1, p. 1.
J. G. McKenzie describes this need for closure and therefore wholeness as

... the most fundamental need of personality. It is the Need to Realise the Personality as a Harmonious Whole both in its inner and outer relations. Original human nature has a need to develop so that conscience, behaviour-tendencies, emotions and thought will be in harmony.¹

That moment when closure is achieved has been designated the moment of "insight." We shall discuss this experience of insight in section seven.

h. The factor of past experience or habit. The person perceives objects which are familiar and configurations which have been experienced before. The difficulties of the Christian missionary are illustrative of the power of this factor in the formation of a Gestalt. The missionary is preaching a new orientation to life, but his congregation will tend to perceive in what he says, ideas which are familiar to them.

Christianity is often handicapped by this factor. Too often those who enter the church integrate old familiar patterns with a part of the Gospel, thus establishing only a partially new configuration. Literally, they cannot see the totally new pattern, because previous habit and thought patterns have come crowding in, and the person believes them to be part of the new configuration.

i. The factor of figure-ground. The person perceives his field as structured in terms of figure and ground (short-
ened from background). "Figure" is the focus of interest—an object, pattern, etc.—with "ground" as the setting or context. Depending upon other factors of organization previously mentioned, the figure may shift, as different elements become differentiated in the totality.

The sin of pride might be described as a situation where the self is figure and all the rest of the world including God is ground. In religious experience the figure shifts until finally God is the figure and the self is part of the ground.

We have now explored the principles of organization. Any one or all of them may be operating as the person achieves a Gestalt of his field.

7. Religion Must Recognize and Facilitate the Reorganization of the Individual's Field into a New Gestalt When Tensions Introduce Disequilibrium.

In a very real sense this reorganization is constantly taking place in the person as a whole. Religion must reckon with a dynamic situation; one that is always in process. From the Gestalt viewpoint, revelation is a progressive matter with God being perceived in ever new manifestations by finite men. New glimpses of God's truth are yet to break forth. This attitude is equivalent to Allport's statement that mature religion is essentially heuristic in character, always held tentatively pending confirmation or a more valid belief.¹

¹Allport, The Individual and His Religion, pp. 72 ff.
This constant process of reorganization can be simply illustrated in the area of humor. When a friend tells us a joke and we cannot get the "point" of the story, our field undergoes considerable tension and is in a state of disequilibrium. Our own estimation of our ability is questioned and we tend to worry about what our friend will think of us. Then suddenly through the operation of one or more of the principles of organization, we "get the point" of the story. Our face lights up and we share the laugh with our friend. Our field has been reorganized and a good Gestalt established. This is the moment of insight.

Certainly the profound experiences of religion are not on a level with a joke. Yet Gestalt psychology would insist that the process--disequilibrium, insight, reorganization--is the same. The difference is one of degree and not of kind. As we shall see in chapter V this process is often a part of religious experiences (both the immediate, e.g. prayer, and the life-determining experiences). The conversion experience is that moment of insight when the individual suddenly feels confident that a new configuration of his life has been achieved, or he perceives a new center of organization for his life in God, or the church, or the Bible, or in Jesus Christ. This is the best possible Gestalt for him.
8. Religion Must Seek the Good Gestalt
For All Individuals and for the Total Field.

These Gestalt demands upon religion have been aimed
at the individual person and his religious experience. The
demands, however, apply also to groupings of individuals in
the church fellowship and finally to the world as a whole.
Jesus was insistent that love of God and love of neighbor
were parts of the same whole and could not be separated with¬
out jeopardizing the entire religious experience. In the
next chapter we will explore this central theme of relation¬
ship in religious experience; relationship to self, others,
world, and God.

These requirements of the Gestalt concept upon religion
form the basis of our general interpretation of religion. In
subsequent chapters we will use them as an instrument for in¬
terpreting specific experiences of religion.
CHAPTER IV

RELIGION AS RELATIONSHIP

A. Introduction

Our survey of definitions of religious experience and methods of approach to that experience in chapter I produced a variety of opinion. Yet we were left with one ever-recurring thread in each definition: each author was trying to describe the relationship of the self to God primarily, and secondarily, to other selves and to the world. How can the individual relate himself to God, other selves and to the world? What is the nature of this relationship, and how does it come about? Relationship is one of the concerns of religious experience.

This emphasis is noted also in current theological writing. The very title of Emil Brunner's book, "The Divine-Human Encounter," suggests his concern with relationship, which he most often speaks of as "the relation of personal correspondence between the Word of God and human obedience-in-faith." He finds the truth of which the Bible speaks "is always a happening and indeed the happening..."

1 Emil Brunner, op. cit.
2 Ibid., p. 146
of the meeting between God and man, an act of God which must be received by an act of man.\(^1\) And this "happening" between God and man will result in a "new relation with fellowmen."\(^2\)

Another recent theological title, God and Men, also suggests relationship. Indeed, Dr. Farmer places it "right at the center of the picture. This is what may be called 'the world of persons'--the world of persons in relationship with one another."\(^3\) He goes on to say:

Christianity says that whatever else may be true of God, and much else no doubt is true, it certainly is true that He is personal. And whatever else may be true of us as men, and much else no doubt is true, it certainly is true that God has created us persons and has set us in a world of personal relationship both to Himself and to one another.\(^4\)

Martin Buber's I and Thou has given fresh understanding and almost poetic expression to this central religious concern of relationship. He sees the world divided into two primary dimensions, the personal dimension of I and Thou, and the impersonal dimension of I and It. Impersonal relations are governed by calculations of use. I use things and relate myself to impersonal things. The danger is in considering a person to be a thing, an "it," to be brought into my service.

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\(^1\)Ibid., p. 147.  
\(^2\)Ibid., pp. 74 f.  
\(^4\)Ibid., p. 35.  
In the personal relationship all this disappears and two subjects are face to face, not to use each other nor to seek domination, but in the freedom and community of love.

Daniel Williams emphasizes the importance of relationship and its basic nature in the following paragraph:

God the Creator we know as the power which binds the surging variety of life into richer and wider societies of mutual enjoyment and support. To be anything is to enter into social relations. Perhaps this is even true of electrons; it certainly is true of all living things, and supremely of men. But the good life is woven into these social relations. A purely individual and absolutely isolated enjoyment of appreciation is nothing at all. Emil Brunner defined hell in a recent lecture as being "the state of absolute loneliness."

Such examples of theological concern with relationship might be multiplied many times. These will suffice for now, giving us a basis for referral later in the chapter.

Not only theologians, but all people concerned with the state of man and the world, are emphasizing the relationships of the person as the source and the solution of man's difficulties.

Dr. Ian Suttie in his book, Origins of Love and Hate, traces all emotional breakdowns in men to a disturbance of relationship in which the need for love has been rejected or spurned. The early relationship of the child to the mother and father often set the pattern for a stunted development.

Karen Horney agrees with this analysis that all breakdown is due to a disturbance in personal relationships. If the


child does not receive love, his whole life will be dominated by a compulsive seeking for love. Insecurity in our personal relationships gives rise to what Dr. Horney describes as basic anxiety, the breeding ground of all neurosis.  

In a memorable passage Dr. Horney describes the abasement of personal relationships with consequent lack of true fulfillment because of the competitiveness in our culture.

It must be emphasized that competitiveness, and the potential hostility that accompanies it, pervades all human relationships. Competitiveness is one of the predominant factors in social relationships. It pervades the relationships between men and men, between women and women, and whether the point of competition be popularity, competence, attractiveness, or any other social value, it greatly impairs the possibilities of reliable friendship. It also as already indicated disturbs the relations of men and women, not only in the choice of the partner but in the entire struggle with him for superiority. It pervades school life. And perhaps most important of all, it pervades the family situation, so that as a rule the child is inoculated with this germ from the very beginning.  

Rollo May in an exhaustive study of anxiety discovers its roots in the various kinds of relationships which the individual must develop and elaborate through his life. For example, in discussing the conflicts which underlie anxiety he finds a common denominator in

The dialectical relationship of the individual and his community. On the one hand the human being develops as an individual; the fact of individuality is a given datum in the respect that each person is unique and to

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1 McKenzie, Nervous Disorders and Religion. p. 41

an extent discrete from other individuals. Actions, no matter how much conditioned by social factors, are still actions by an individual. At the point in development at which self-awareness emerges, there also emerges a measure of freedom and responsibility in each individual action. But on the other hand this individual develops at every moment as a member of a social nexus, upon which he is dependent not only for the early meeting of his biological needs but also for his emotional security. It is only in interaction with other individuals in a social nexus that the development of a "self" and the development of personality are understandable.¹

His explorations of the mutual interests of theology and psychotherapy have led David Roberts to a position emphasizing the crucial importance of relationships. He feels that we have tended to build "phony" relationships and chameleon-like personalities, selling ourselves to the highest bidder. Thus

Inward conflict is so directly related to estrangement from others that whatever intensifies one will intensify both. Because most of us do not have an adequate opportunity in family life, in school, in business and in community relationships to "be ourselves" we develop false fronts which conceal the truth concerning our own behavior and motives from ourselves as well as from others.²

Erich Fromm's "market-place personality"³ and Arthur Miller's brilliant description in "Death of a Salesman"⁴ are further examples of this abasement of relationship.

William James emphasized personal religion and rela-


²Roberts, op. cit., pp. 28 f.


tionship to God almost to the exclusion of other relationships, yet in his summing up of the characteristics of the religious life, the final item indicated the direction which religion and psychology were to explore more and more in the next fifty years: "An assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections." 1

The interrelatedness of all man's relationships has become a significant clue for theology and psychology. John Baillie has stated this fact in connection with his analysis of man's search for knowledge of God:

I believe the view to the capable of defence that no one of the four subjects of our knowledge--ourselves, our fellows, the corporeal world, and God--is ever presented to us except in conjunction with all three of the others. 2

We have seen that the problem of relationship is a central concern of religion. Our problem for the remainder of this chapter is to consider what light of interpretation the Gestalt idea can throw on this central concern. To do this we shall discuss the nature and development of the self, and its relationships to other selves, to the world and to God as suggested by our instrument. Though it is necessary for us now to proceed in analysis we must never lose sight of the fact that all of these aspects make up a Gestalt, and in

1William James, op. cit., p. 475 ff.
this respect have a dynamic interrelatedness.

B. The Nature and Origin of the Self

The self is a Gestalt. This is the conclusion of Koffka, and subsequent writers in the Gestalt tradition have supported this view and have gone on to analyze what it means in greater detail. The self is the person as a whole, differentiated and articulated from the total field. By the self we mean those aspects of the field which we refer to when we say "I" or "me." Physical aspects of the body are included and also an infinite number of other aspects such as strength, honesty, good-humor, sophistication, intelligence, capability, etc. Indeed, the self may even include other persons at times, when for example we feel that an attack on our children is really an attack on us. The old saying, "Love me; love my dog," may well contain more truth than fiction under this definition. In fidelity to our Gestalt instrument, the self includes all those parts of the field which the individual experiences or perceives as part of or characteristic of himself.

From the very beginning at birth the basic human need

We will use the term "self" in preference to "ego" or "personality." Though Koffka preferred ego (Principles of Gestalt Psychology, chap. viii), the term is likely to be confused with Freudian terminology. Furthermore, since Koffka's writing, the term self has more and more been used. The term "personality" is also not as sharply defined in present day literature.

Snygg and Combs, op. cit., pp. 56 ff.
is the preservation and enhancement of this self, that is the maintenance of a Gestalt. This organism is an energy system—organizing and creating itself. Its fundamental striving is for organization, integrity and wholeness. The Gestalt concept of growth is an increasing differentiation of the field. Even in the new born infant, after only a few hours the amount of stimulation necessary to bring forth a response may be observed to decrease rapidly.\footnote{Ibid., p. 81.} At first this maintenance of organization is primarily in relation to physical needs, but very quickly all other aspects of the person as a whole, such as emotional needs, become a conscious part of the organization. This is born out by such studies as Margaret Ribble's, The Rights of Infants,\footnote{Margaret Ribble, The Rights of Infants, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943.)} showing the tremendous importance of love in the relationship of mother and infant.

Thus we see from the very beginning the fundamental importance of relationship; the child in relation to its parents and particularly its mother. Harry Stack Sullivan summarizes this importance.

I have spoken of the functional interaction, in infancy and childhood, of the significant other person, the mother, as a source of satisfaction, as an agency of acculturation, and finally as a source of anxiety and insecurity in the development of social habits which is the basis of development of the self system.\footnote{Harry Stack Sullivan, Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry, (Washington D. C.; The W. A. White Psychiatric Foundation, 1947), p. 16.}

Here in the matrix of family relationships, the child increases...
ingly differentiates himself from his parents. And his own unique organization of self proceeds utilizing the Gestalt principles of organization. Always the self is in search of the best possible Gestalt, the "good" Gestalt.

All through life this refinement and maintenance of the self goes on. Dr. Rogers has summarized his findings about the self in these two statements:

As a result of interaction with the environment, and particularly as a result of evaluational interaction with others, the structure of the self is formed—an organized, fluid, but consistent conceptual pattern of perceptions of characteristics and relationships of the "I" or the "me," together with values attached to these concepts.

The values attached to experiences, and the values which are part of the self structure, in some instances are values experienced directly by the organism, and in some instances are values introjected or taken over from others, but perceived in distorted fashion, as if they had been experienced directly.

In Gestalt psychology we find an interpretation of the vital importance of the family relationships for the developing child. Intuitively and in some cases experimentally, religion has understood the importance of the family in forming the self. In the child the process of organizing his world goes on constantly, and though this world may be very egocentrically organized, yet it is forever expanding and integrating new forces from the enlarging field.

In this process our particular concern is religion which is also finding its way into the child's field, and primarily through the family. As Allport says, "The standardized

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1Carl Rogers, op. cit., p. 498.
theology and morality of his culture slowly seep through and gradually replace some of the self-centered thinking."¹ Allport also gives an excellent illustration of a six-year old boy struggling to maintain the organization of his Gestalt. One day the boy suddenly refused to say "Our Father" in beginning the Lord's Prayer. Under pressure he finally gave his reason that God, who was presumably good, could not be like his earthly father, a drunkard and renegade.² The self of the child had found it necessary to reorganize its field in order to find a meaningful Gestalt which included all of the factors of its field.

Thus the self of the child takes over from its environment many of the values and ideas found there, though always remaining the final authority as to just what kind of Gestalt will result. As we saw earlier³ Gestalt psychology says that each person's field is organized in a unique way. However, this organization can incorporate too much of the parent's Gestalt if the child finds it necessary to bargain for love by accepting uncritically religious or other ideas. It is also true that the expanding field of the child may well incorporate new factors which the parents have not had to cope with. Gestalt would say that each person must be his own true self, and not frustrate this full development of self by

¹Allport, The Individual and His Religion, p. 31.
²Ibid., p. 31
³See above, chap. iii.
over-dependence upon parents or authority, failure to face up to the self's true nature, hiding in conventionality, or any number of other dodges.

The self in a meaningful relationship to the widest possible Gestalt including the world, other selves and God is certainly a goal, if not the goal of religion. Kierkegaard was concerned with this problem of the self. To will to be oneself is man's true vocation. He felt that one cannot define specifically this self one is going to be, for the self is freedom; but at considerable length he points out how people try to avoid willing to be themselves: by avoiding consciousness of the self, by willing to be some one else or simply a conventional self, or by willing to be oneself defiantly, which is a form of tragic, stoic despair and therefore doomed to fall short of full selfhood. This willing is a creative decisiveness, based centrally on expanding self-awareness. "Generally speaking, consciousness, i.e. consciousness of self, is the decisive criterion of the self. The more consciousness, the more self." ¹

Perhaps we have indicated enough about the self in general to allow us to state more concisely certain principles growing out of Gestalt psychology which describe the nature and development of the self. Because of our concern with religious experience we would like to be able to speak about the

development of the religious personality. It must be evident by now, however, that Gestalt will not allow any such arbitrary division of the self. We must indicate principles applicable to the self as a whole. The implications and illustration of these principles we will take from the area of religion in so far as that is possible.

1. The Self is a Gestalt, Dynamically Organized, Ever Striving to Enhance and Maintain Itself

No list of character traits or sum of instincts would ever adequately describe the self. The whole is more than the sum of its parts, and the whole influences the parts. The individual does not expand through a summation of the products of knowing, feeling, and willing. Growth is a unitary evolution with all parts dynamically interrelated. The desire to preserve the organization of the self is the genesis of such things as defense mechanisms, aggression, submission, sublimation, etc. Thus, the self responds as a whole to the forces in its field.

Religiously, the self must respond as a whole, allowing the orientation provided by religion to permeate the self. In its insistence on a change in the inner man, religion has recognized the necessity of this whole response on the part of the self. Gestalt would confirm our suspicions that the man who only gives lip service on a Sunday morning, has not reorganized his self as a whole in terms of a religious commitment, but has reorganized his religion in terms of some other commitment of his self.
2. The Self Grows Through Increasing Differentiation and Articulation of Itself in Its Total Field.

In the infant responses are very general, but increasingly the child is able to distinguish refinements in its field, until finally it sees itself distinct from the rest of the field. Through adolescence and maturity this process of differentiation goes on, as the self makes adjustment to the largest possible field. This is a way of describing the uniqueness which finally distinguishes each self from every other self.

Theological refinement is possibly the highest differentiation in the religious field. The religious sentiment in childhood is surrounded by egocentricism, magical thought, and anthropomorphism. Through this process of differentiation it passes through many stages until finally the individual can say such things as "God is love," and "Not my will, but Thy will be done." Dr. Allport illustrates this long process of differentiation for us.

Tommy, at the age of five, entered a church with his mother and noticed the cross upon the altar. "What's that?" he asked. "A cross," whispered his mother. "Red Cross?" he asked. "No, just a cross." "Oh, I know," said the boy, "T for Tommy." It will be many years before Tommy will be capable of understanding the reverse interpretation of the symbol—that it represents "the I, crossed out."¹

¹Allport, The Individual and His Religion, p. 29
3. The Self Is a Theatre of Stresses and Strains Which Demand Resolution Within Its Gestalt

In the child these tensions are often of a physical nature, such as the disequilibrium created when the child sees a new toy just beyond its reach. The tension is resolved by crawling over to the toy. The adolescent may experience tremendous tension over his changed outlook toward the opposite sex, and the successful resolution of these stresses and strains may take many years. Always the self is in search of the "good" Gestalt.

The tensions of adolescence and maturity in the form of suffering, death, war and a multitude of other strains brings the self face to face with the religious orientation. The Gestalt which will give meaningful organization to all of these tensions must be something powerful and enduring enough that within it one can meet whatever comes without disintegrating into chaos and anxiety.

4. The Self Is a Part of Larger Wholes--Family, Community, Culture, and Universe

The self cannot ultimately refuse membership in these larger wholes. In fact, these totalities determine the part, that is the self, to a great extent. Always remembering that the self will make a unique response, we must take into account the properties of these larger wholes, properties which determine the parts and the whole: such things as customs, public opinion, morality, language and a host of other common forces. Ultimately everything in the universe can become a force in
the field of the self. However, we must always remember that individuals vary widely in the ways in which they form their own Gestalt. We have already indicated the influences of the family upon the child, and in the following pages we shall indicate these other relationships.

It is in the largest of wholes that the self has discovered the religious need of achieving a relationship with some greater-than-self power. The self has sought for another organizing center around which to build a picture and point of view about the world impinging upon it. The self must needs acquire time perspective on this life-space which binds past, present, future into one organized whole. Erich Fromm has said it in these words: "Because the need for a system of orientation and devotion is an intrinsic part of human existence, we can understand the intensity of this need. Indeed there is no more powerful source of energy in man."

Having established these four principles of the nature and development of the self, with special reference to the implications for religion, we are now in a position to look at the stages in the life of a self. Again we cannot be exhaustive but merely suggestive of the interpretation that Gestalt would give to the religious development of the self in child-

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1Fromm, Man for Himself, p. 150.
hood, adolescence and maturity. These stages are not sudden transitions but rather areas on a continuum stretching from birth to death, with a genuine interrelatedness between all parts.

a. Childhood. Here we must note again the importance of the properties of the child's field, originally within the family and later in the school and gang. The Gestalt which the child achieves will of necessity include all of these forces in some manner. Meaningful organization is there and the struggle of the self through childhood is to maintain and enhance the organization at all costs. We saw this in the case of the little boy and the Lord's Prayer. S. H. Mellon has recognized the importance of the field in these words.

The incomparable importance of socialization becomes as it were concentrated when socialization takes the group form, as it always tends to do—the family group, the play group, the school group, the "set" or "gang," the civic group, the national group, the church group, the world society, the Kingdom of God. The social principle which has its culminating definition in the conception of an ideal society or family inclusive of God and men, applies throughout.¹

It is instructive to note here that this field is composed of persons and things. We have indicated something of the great importance of the emotional atmosphere into which the child comes. The child's behavior pattern established to maintain its Gestalt in relationship to his parents will be

carried over into other relationships all the rest of his life. Thus, the adequacy of the parents in all areas, including religious orientation, will color the self of the child.¹

b. Adolescence. Religion has always looked upon adolescence as a time when the self was undergoing change and seeking a more inclusive orientation to its world. Confirmation and often the conversion experience have occurred at this time. Gestalt would indicate at least three interpretations of the adolescent experiences of religion.

First, the field of the adolescent is rapidly changing and expanding. Physically and emotionally the adolescent is now able to go far beyond the family field, encountering many new stresses and strains which must be integrated into his Gestalt. If this enlarged field is dominated by secular forces to the exclusion or serious curtailment of religious forces, it becomes understandable why the new Gestalt is quite likely to exclude a religious orientation. It seems clear, then, that the church should foster group life for adolescents.

Second, the old Gestalt, including the comfortable factors of the family, is no longer adequate. New relationships with persons, things and God must be established, although the pattern may be similar to the one already es-

established with the parents. Lewin suggests that "one can view adolescence as a change in group-belongingness."¹ For example, the adolescent leaves the school group and joins an occupational group. This change in group-belongingness brings many new problems and a great deal depends on how society provides for the transition. Adequate preparation can help avoid much adolescent tension. The situation is fluid and the adolescent is groping for an orientation which will gather up all of the new relationships impinging upon him into an organized whole.

Third, adolescence is preeminently the time of stress and strain in the field. Allport sums it up in this manner:

"Usually it is not until the stress of puberty that serious reverses occur in the evolution of the religious sentiment. At this period of development the youth is compelled to transform his religious attitudes—indeed all his attitudes—from second-hand fittings to first-hand fittings of his personality. He can no longer let his parents do his thinking for him. Although in some cases the transition is fluent and imperceptible, more often there is a period of rebellion."

Various studies show that for approximately two-thirds of all children there is a reaction against parental and cultural teaching . . . the average age for conversion, like that for the rejection of parental systems of belief, is sixteen, although there is evidence that in recent years the trend is toward an earlier age.²

The Gestalt interpretation of these adolescent tensions gives us an understanding of the situation; and for religion

¹Lewin, Field Theory in Social Science, p. 137.
²Allport, The Individual and His Religion, pp. 32 f.
it ought to give some suggestions for coping with the problems. Primarily, the church ought to develop the kind of youth groups where there is acceptance of a great variety of ideas, and an over-all feeling of belonging. In such a group the adolescent can stay within the church while going through necessary exploration in his quest for a new Gestalt.

c. Maturity. The Gestalt interpretation of religious experience seems to make two suggestions here. If the self is dynamically organized in the way we have suggested, then reorganization of the individual's Gestalt must be a continuing process throughout life. Too often religion has allowed the opposite to be the case. Having achieved closure in terms of a conversion experience in adolescence, adults often tend to look back longingly at this experience ever afterwards. It is possible that the conversion experience itself may well have given them an ultimate outlook on life, but considering all of the new stresses of adult life, new insights ought to occur until death. Particularly in America, adults tend to glorify adolescence and try to maintain it and return to it even when they are far beyond its physical and chronological age limits. William Sheldon has called this "the progressive dying back of the brain."\(^1\) Religion should encourage constant growth on the part of adults.

The second suggestion builds on the first; not only

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should adults be continually reorganizing their field, they should also be constantly expanding it. Maturity will come only as the adult moves beyond his adolescent Gestalt, incorporating such new experiences as vocation, marriage, community responsibilities, parenthood, and a search for the meaning of his life within his Gestalt. For the religious person, the Gestalt here must include God as the organizing center and the self as servant. Allport summarizes these avenues of growth open to a human being as

the avenue of widening interests (the expanding self),
the avenue of detachment and insight (self-objectification),
and the avenue of integration (self-unification). I doubt that any scientifically supported criteria of maturity would differ substantially from these three.¹

His last avenue includes our concern for an ultimate relationship to the totality we can know: God and His universe.

Such, then, is the nature of the self as a Gestalt; constantly reorganizing and differentiating itself from the field. This is a life-long process fulfilling the need of the self to maintain and enhance itself. We now turn to an examination of the relationship of this self to the other major entities in its field.

¹Allport, The Individual and His Religion, p. 53.
C. The Self in Relationship to Other Selves

We turn now to the consideration of two or more selves in relationship, that is to say a group. Though there may be differences in the relationship of just two persons as compared to several persons, we must treat both situations as a group experience. Following Koffka our basic premise is that "a group is a Gestalt," and as such, subject to the Gestalt principles we have been considering. Koffka feels this is true of both sociological and psychological groups.

In recent work which follows in the Gestalt tradition many people have concerned themselves with the relationship of persons. Dr. Carl Rogers has emphasized the counseling relationship existing between two persons; through this emphasis he has come to feel that the dynamics operating between two persons has application in the relationships of many persons. His latest book takes up "group therapy" and "group-centered leadership and administration."2

Dr. Kurt Lewin is more responsible than any other person for the development of the Gestalt implications in group relations. As the late director of the Institute of Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, he inaugurated a movement that has continued to this day. Two

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1Koffka, Principles of Gestalt Psychology, pp. 649 ff. Also chap. xiv, "Society and Personality."
2Rogers, op. cit., chaps. vii and viii.
posthumously published books\(^1\) have gathered together a wide variety of papers by Lewin and indicate his prolific imagination and concern with a wide variety of relationships between selves. It is beyond the scope of the present thesis to analyze or utilize all of the suggestions which he made, though we shall refer to them from time to time. We must content ourselves here with an application of the Gestalt principles which we have already established.

Here in this matter of relationship between persons or selves we are discussing a problem which is often a main question if not the main question in the issues of life. Glance at any newspaper and almost every report displays a concern with personal relationship: marriage and divorce; education; law, crime and police; government and constituents; capital and labor; war or peace in international affairs.

And as we approach our concern with "religion as relationship," we find Christianity primarily occupied with this main question of the human predicament rather than with esoteric or side issues. Throughout his writings John Macmurray emphasizes relationship as the central concern of psychology and religion.

The basic fact about human beings, in virtue of which they are human, is that they know one another and live in that knowledge... If we wish to discover the

\(^1\)Lewin, Resolving Social Conflicts and Field Theory in Social Science.
new elements which have to be represented in the description of personality, and so in the unity-pattern of psychological thought, we have to reflect upon the nature of personal relationships in their completely personal character. The main characteristic which reflection reveals is the mutuality of the conscious relationship.

We must necessarily anticipate here our later section of the relationship of the self to God, because in the teachings of Christ we cannot separate our relationships with our neighbor and with God. Dr. Farmer has expressed this very well when he says:

In other words, every finite person—by the very nature and constitution of the personal world as God has made it—stands in a dual personal relationship of claim; he is related at the same time and all the time to the claim of the infinite Person and to the claim of other finite persons. It is important to grasp that it is a dual relationship in which he stands, and not two relationships. It is one relationship with, as it were, two poles—the claim of God and claim of the neighbor. The two claims are distinguishable in thought, but in actuality wholly inseparable from one another. The claim of my neighbor is always part of God's claim on me; God's claim on me meets me always in and through the claim of my neighbor. These truths find concrete expression and illustration in our Lord's teaching that it is no use worshipping God when we are in a state of enmity with one another; or asking the forgiveness of God when we refuse to forgive one another; or expecting acquittal at the judgment seat of God when we ignore the claim of a thirsty man for a cup of cold water. And most impressively of all they find expression in the words He puts into the mouth of God—words which might well make us tremble if we really believed them or were not so familiar with them: "Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me." In such words there comes to expression, not a piece of romantic sentimentalism, but a very profound philosophy of personal relationships.

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Christianity has insisted that man must find a new relationship, best described perhaps in Buber's terms. There must be the radical change from an "I-it" relationship to an "I-Thou" relationship. Emil Brunner would say that this new relationship with other persons only comes about after a radical meeting with God.

Man stays concealed in his secure hiding place, secreted behind the walls of his I-castle; and nothing can really entice him out until one meets him who overcomes all the mistrust and anxiety about his very existence which drives him into self-security and thereby imprisons him. Man remains imprisoned within himself until one meets him who can free him, who can break down his system of defences, so that he can surrender himself, and in this surrender of self receive what he needs to enable him to abandon his securities; that is to say, until that one comes who gives man the life for which he was created. Only unconditional love, which brings man to self-fulfillment and therewith gives him true selfhood and eternal life, can call out in him complete unconditional trust.  

One of the distinctions between Farmer and Brunner appears here. Farmer feels that persons can share this experience with one another and thus come to understand better the relationship to God. Brunner feels that the only Person that can mediate this love is our Lord, and then the new relationship with our fellowmen occurs.

As we said in our preface, Gestalt psychology, being an empirical science, would have to side with Farmer in this discussion because it presupposes the validity of natural theology. However, we will not embroil ourselves in this debate which has been going on for centuries, but rather say

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1Brunner, op. cit., p. 51.
to these two men and Christianity in general, that our Gestalt principles may well suggest ways of implementing the Christian desire for new relationship. Too often the minister as well as the theologian calls forth in his listener a commitment to establish new relationships with God and other selves, but fails to help that listener decide just how he shall respond and think and act as a new self.

This is not to overlook the fact that both Gestalt and Christianity agree that the most important fact is a change of attitude.¹ Let us proceed therefore to explore the interpretation of relationship between persons which our Gestalt principles give us. It may be that such interpretation can give Christianity specific suggestions for implementing "love of God and love of neighbor." We will proceed with our analysis by following the implications of the Gestalt suggestions for religion discussed in Chapter III.²

1. Religion Must Consider the Group as a Whole

When a self relates to one or more other selves, a new and unique Gestalt has been created, in which "the whole is more than the sum of its parts." You cannot assess this group by merely adding up the number of selves present or even by possessing an exhaustive understanding of each member. This new Gestalt is dynamically interrelated and func-

¹Cf. Lewin, Resolving Social Conflicts and Rogers, op. cit.

²See above, chap. iii, pp. 73 ff.
tioning and thus creates new form far beyond the mere sum of its member parts. In fact the parts tend to become different because the whole determines the parts to some extent. Here then we have an interpretation of community and fellowship. Membership in the fellowship can alter the member, as religion has always insisted.

In relationship to another person, the self must see himself as part of a new whole, not aloof from it, but an integral part of it. Perhaps this is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the marriage relationship when two independent selves create a new whole, unique in all the world. Over the years this marriage relationship intertwines itself until we very commonly speak more often about a family as a whole, than about the individual members thereof.

Membership in the church fellowship ought to catch a person up into a new whole, greater than the sum of the people present. Too often this does not happen in the Christian Church. The church has failed to provide the experiences of interrelationship between its members which would get the group beyond being a mere geographical Gestalt. A high degree of dynamic interrelatedness and differentiation would be necessary before a group had become a spiritual Gestalt, in the world yet apart from the world.
2. The Group Must Recognize Each Member 
As Authoritative for Himself.

If we accept the Gestalt interpretation of each person as being unique, what is the relationship which must exist when two or more of these unique persons come together to form a new whole? Each self in the group is unique and independent, worthy of respect and tolerance. Each self has dignity and worth in his own right. Here is psychological undergirding for the equal treatment of democracy, but more important for the Christian conviction of the brotherhood of all men and their love for each other.

When the self relates to things he manipulates them for his own benefit and in any way he chooses. But, when the self enters into relationship with another self, he is in a different world. Dr. Farmer has described the difference thus:

... my will now undergoes a new and altogether different check or limitation, the limitation of meeting other intelligent, self-directing, self-conscious, personal, wills besides my own. The will of another person confronts me with an independent and inaccessible source of activity which I know I am not able, and ought not to try, to manipulate and control into an instrument of my own will; and the other person himself knows that I cannot and ought not to do so... in proportion as the highly personal relationship of love and trust is present, it is not felt as a limitation at all. I do not desire to manipulate a person when I really apprehend him as a person; I rejoice in his independence, and most of all I rejoice when a harmony of trust and co-operation is achieved in and through his independence and mine.1

1 Farmer, God and Men, pp. 43 f.
The recognition that each self is authoritative for himself suggests the inner attitude with which each self should enter into relationship with other selves. Respect for and trust in the other selves grows out of the Gestalt understanding of the unique field in which each self lives. As we shall see later, manipulation rather than co-operation, domination rather than genuine sharing set up tensions in a group which frustrate the "good" Gestalt.

3. The Group Must Concern Itself with the Process of Its Relationships as well as the Content of Its Discussion

A relationship between persons is by its very nature a dynamic thing and not static. If religion emphasizes relationship, then it, too, must be dynamic and not static. In so doing it must be concerned with the process of the relationship occurring when the self meets other selves, as well as with the content of the meeting.

The words we use to describe the religious relationship of persons—love, trust, understanding, faith—are not static terms but ideas which must be lived out in action. These are also the terms we commit ourselves to in Christianity. Yet in the actual experience of a religious group we often forget the persons present as well as the process of our relationship in our concentration on the objective content of the business. Gestalt suggests that when the religious self meets another self, it is the inner attitude of respect and trust in this other self which will build the religious fel-
lowship and not mere concentration on the business at hand.

Church groups presumably exist to foster this new relation among men, and yet how many of the boards, committees, meetings and discussion groups are so concerned with the business at hand that the process of relationship and the effect on persons is almost never mentioned. Are the decisions of a committee the result of honest sharing of the real feelings of the members or the passive acceptance of ideas expressed by the leader or dominant members of the group? Do the members leave the meeting feeling more adequate in themselves or have old patterns of relationship merely been reinforced? Will all the members take responsibility in carrying out the decisions because they shared in making them, or will some of them "drag their feet" outside the committee because they really didn't agree and didn't feel free to express themselves in the existing relationship? If religion is a "new relation with fellow men,"\(^1\) then such questions can be ignored only at the expense of the very crux of Christianity.

4. The Group Must Determine and Understand the Nature of Its Field, Including the Private Field of Each Member

Each member of a group perceives this new whole—the group—in a unique fashion, and rarely with perceptions identical to those of the other members. In fact it may be that depth of community and fellowship only come to the extent

\(^1\)Brunner, op. cit., pp. 74 f.
that the individual members share a common perception and understanding. If a group could be self-conscious about these unique perceptions and expectations of each member it would have taken a long step toward common ground and understanding.

Each self sees and organizes every situation by the dynamic of its need and by its way of seeing things. For example when a family approaches their common meal in the evening, there may be three perceptions of the field. Father considers it a time when he can completely relax and ignore others after a hard day at the office. Mother may see it as a time when she can talk with an adult (father) for the first time that day. The children consider this group as a time to eat and have fun. Unless they come to some common ground and understand each other's private field, difficulties will ensue.

Or consider the church committee in which the minister is perceived as the leader. He comes with a private world completely organized about the church, and sees this group as a means toward furthering the work of the church. He may also come well prepared and organized. Other members of the committee have spent the day in their own secular work; their private world organizes this new group differently. They may "see" the minister as too aggressive or ignorant in money matters. Or they may see the work of the church as completely concerned with "spiritual" matters, having no voice in secular matters or judgment upon them.
Only as the group becomes self-conscious about its field including all of these private fields of the members can the honest sharing which leads to true community take place.

5. The Group's Behavior is Determined by the Forces of the Total Field

It would be well to comment here on the word "determined" as used by Gestalt psychology. In general usage it would imply the mechanical determination of an individual by forces beyond his control. However, Gestalt speaks of "forces of the total field" including all aspects of the self (the internal field), as well as the external field. Each individual creatively organizes his total field into a unique Gestalt. Man, as Christianity has said, is free to decide for himself.

When the self enters into relationship with other selves, the new whole which is formed will act in terms of all the forces in the field of individual members as well as the field forces of the group. We have already seen something of these forces at work in our discussion of the family and certain church groups. In discussing anxiety, Rollo May describes the effects of forces present in the relationships of a family (a group).

Anxiety arises out of the infant's apprehension of the disapproval of the significant persons in his interpersonal world. Anxiety is felt empathetically, in a sensing of the mother's disapproval, long before conscious awareness is possible for the infant. It is self-evident that the mother's disapproval will be very por-
tentous for the infant. Disapproval in the present sense refers to a threatening of the relationship between the infant and its human world—a relationship which is all-important to the infant in the respect that he depends upon it not only for the satisfaction of his physical needs but for the more inclusive sense of security as well. Hence anxiety is felt as an all-over, a "cosmic" experience. 1

Though the self becomes toughened during its life, it nevertheless remains dependent upon its relationships with other selves. In adult life it is possible for persons to articulate these feelings and communicate about the way they see the field. But often this is precisely the thing which does not happen and the group is no more than a sociological phenomenon. The good Gestalt will only be established when the ideas and feelings of each member have been awakened and clarified; communicated by him; understood by every other member of the group; and finally interwoven into a group climate and a group goal.

This is to say that only when all of the forces of the field have been shared and understood and accepted will the behavior of a group begin to be wholehearted and approach the religious goal of a new relationship among men. Prior to this experience, all of the unexpressed forces in the field will sway the group's behavior this way and that. Such things as fears, aggressiveness, threats, hidden agendas and agreements, anxiety, autocratic leadership, hates, personal desires, etc., will determine the group's behavior. With such forces rampant

\[1\text{May, op. cit., p. 148.}\]
the Christian commitment to love and trust, even if expressed verbally, will not permeate the actual relationships.

6. The Group as a Gestalt is Organized According to Certain Principles

The Gestalt factors of organization which we have previously discussed are also operating in the group's field to bring about organization, though now in a group there are several organizing centers. At any rate these factors are operating in group formation just as they were with individual perception.

Koffka suggests a very simple illustration.

When we enter a room, we see the people in it as a group, separate from all the other objects, and more or less independent of their spatial distribution. This organization is, at least in part, reducible to the law of equality or similarity. . . At first, on entering the room, we do not belong to the group. A little later, however, we may. What has produced this new group, containing not only the other people but also ourselves? Does it seem far-fetched to apply the same law to the formation of this new group which was found operative in the formation of the first? I believe not. Though surely not the only factor, the similarity between ourselves and the others seems definitely to contribute to this new organization. Thus one feels distinctly out of place when one is in evening dress while none of the others are, even when no social mistake is involved on either side.

The formation of groups in Christianity has often been influenced by the factor of a common fate or uniform destiny. In joining the church a self sets himself apart, sees himself as a member of a new group, because his destiny lies with

1 See above, chaps. 11 and 111.
Christ and not with his own ego-centered efforts in the world.

The Christian Church has tended toward the "good" Gestalt as a group. However, the forces in the field have often produced a Gestalt "good" in the judgment of man and evil in the judgment of God. Thus the tendency to differentiate and articulate the church group, has led spontaneous formations of people guided by the spirit of Jesus Christ, into highly rigid and structured church hierarchies. Out of the religious experiences of the early church came increasing differentiation until the Roman Catholic hierarchy was established. Since this formative period the Roman Catholic Gestalt has tended to be rigid, not admitting the need for the constant reorganization which Gestalt psychology finds inevitable. Such forces in the field as ecclesiastical corruption and new scientific ideas have resulted in the Reformation and new churches, all tending toward the "good" Gestalt.

The above paragraph also indicates the operation of the factor of objective set. The majority of the members of the Roman Catholic Hierarchy approached any reorganization with their minds already made up. The Gestalt of the Roman Church was maintained by this factor. Martin Luther's perception of how the Gestalt should be reorganized was not accepted.

Group formation is also often determined by the past experience or habits which individual selves bring into the new
whole. What minister has not cried his heart out at some
time or other, because his church group would not take cog-
nizance of new forces in the field (as the minister saw them)
and reorganize their Gestalt? Religious groups have been
particularly susceptible to formation on the basis of past
experience. "What was good enough for our grandparents is
good enough for us."

Koffka\(^1\) feels that the self (ego in his terminology)
is incomplete apart from relationship with other selves.
This illustrates the factor of closure for us and is parti-
cularly apparent in family groups.

The helpless baby is not "complete," it depends for
the satisfaction of its needs on the actions of others,
and the first intimate relationship in a person's life
is to those who administer to his needs. Conversely,
having to administer, having to help the pitifully help-
less, is another and not less strong force to produce
group connection, to which is added the paternal rela-
tionship: flesh of my flesh. Parents are also no longer
"complete" without their children.

But is any human being "complete" in isolation or
would he be if he had grown to adulthood without ever
coming into contact with his fellow creatures? We feel
convinced that he would not.\(^2\)

Koffka denies that this in any way suggests McDougall's
instinct or innate disposition idea.

The total field, and more particularly its relevant
parts, set up stresses in the Ego which determine be-
havior according to the properties of the whole field.
If we claimed that the Ego was "incomplete" without a
number of social relationships we meant that the Ego,
which itself is a product of organization, is an in-

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\(^1\)Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, p. 662.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 662.
complete organization, a structure under stress, unless the total field fulfills certain conditions, viz., that it contains objects with definite dynamic characters.¹

The Christian emphasis on the church, the community of believers, has borne out this factor of incompleteness. Through the ages the church and groups within it have not only developed because of Christian emphasis, but out of the feelings of individual selves, seeking completeness in fellowship one with another. And for the Christian, completeness is not found merely in relation with his fellows but also with God.² As Sherrill suggests there is a "call to go on toward completeness"³ at every stage in life.

Group formation often develops from the factor of figure-ground. Thus selves in relationship for the first time bring many different perceptions of what is figure and what is background for this group. However, if agreement is reached on what shall be the figure, that is, the focal point of their concerns, then all else becomes background. The group as a Gestalt has developed because of this focus. A very simple illustration occurs every time two persons meet and start talking. A common topic of conversation becomes the figure and all of their other concerns fade into ground. If they do not agree on what is to be figure in their conversation,

¹Ibid., p. 663.
²See below, "The Self in Relationship to God."
³Sherrill, op. cit., p. 22.
then the Gestalt is very poor indeed, and community soon ceases to exist.

7. Groups Must Handle Tensions in the Total Field by a Reorganization into a New Gestalt

The Gestalt achieved by any two or more selves is a dynamic relationship, and as such will need constant reorganization. The family provides a simple illustration. The mere physical growth of children, not to mention their emotional growth, introduces new tensions into the family field almost every day. The relationship of these selves within the family has to be a dynamic one undergoing constant reorganization, or else the pressures built up within some members will become unbearable. Failure to recognize this need for new form to the relationships is probably one way of describing the adolescent revolt.

Unless this process of reorganization is accepted, we condemn other persons to a stereotyped role. If the self always expects a certain kind of Gestalt when in relationship to another self, then we have frustrated any development, even the new life Christianity believes is possible for every person. Furthermore, the first meeting of the self with other selves is usually superficial, as is recognized by our frequent use of the weather as a first topic of conversation. No one would suggest that the Gestalt of this group ought to stay at the level of this kind of superficiality. If depth is to come in the relationships of persons, then reorganization must go on apace, until finally self speaks with utter security
and honesty and trust to another self. Here is where spirit meets spirit in a new relationship through Jesus Christ.

This reorganization must also occur in the total impact of Protestantism upon the world. Paul Tillich calls us to a creative use of Protestant "Formative Power," through consciousness of the "Gestalt of grace." He asks Protestantism to create new forms for this time of crisis, in other words to reorganize its Gestalt. In his words Protestantism is faced with a choice.

Either Protestantism will become a sect, isolated from the main trend of history, or it will become the starting-point of a new embodiment of the spirit of Christianity in which a demonic sacramentalism and an empty secularism are overcome.

8. The Self Must Seek the "Good" Gestalt for All Selves

Our Gestalt principles emphasize the interrelatedness of all persons in the largest field conceivable—the world. All parts are to some extent determined by this whole. Here is psychological interpretation of the religious intuition and revelation concerning the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of all men.

There is a Gestalt of the world but in recent years it has been a very "weak" one. Factors which would build the "good" Gestalt as we have noted them in this section—love, understanding, trust, respect for every self—are notoriously

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1Tillich, op. cit., chap. xiv.

2Ibid., p. 221.
lacking in the world. We noted that both Lewin and Rogers were convinced about the necessity of the inner attitude of man being right before he could enter into relationship that would be meaningful. And here we meet the teachings of Jesus. He insisted on a change of heart and reminded us that if we could not love our fellowmen whom we have seen, we could not love God whom we have not seen.

D. The Self in Relationship to the World

The question of the relationship of the self to the world, that is to things, has been dealt with far less frequently and less passionately than the relationship of self and other selves. And yet it may be an equally fateful problem for twentieth century man.

Originally, primitive man felt that things had power to destroy or save his life. For him things took on a sacred quality. He felt himself to be a part of things, with a limited power of his own but no superiority in principle.

This has all changed with the coming of the ideal of personality. "Man becomes an epistemological, legal, and moral center, and things become objects of his knowledge, his work and his use."\(^1\) "They become 'things' in the proper sense of the word—mere objects, without subjectivity, without power of their own."\(^2\) They have become means for the person-

\(^1\) Tillich, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

\(^2\) Ibid., p. 120.
ality and have ceased to be ends in themselves.

Paul Tillich traces several historical strands of this development: the prophets of the Old Testament, Greek philosophy, Lutheran Protestantism, and Calvinism. In different ways they all deprive things of their power in the name of the ideal of personality, determining the spiritual outlook in an industrial society. Tillich finds the "new realism" to be a movement which is "trying to create a new relationship that is based not on violation, willfulness, and arrogance on the part of man but on his desire for community with the power of things."2

No thing, not even iron and concrete, is completely determined by its ability to serve utilitarian purposes. Everything has the power to become a symbol for the "ground of being," which it expresses in its special way. It is not merely a "thing" but a part of the universal life which at no point is completely deprived of freedom, of that freedom which in the personal life comes to its own.3

Not only is there a danger of the subjection of things to the self, but also of the self to things. Finally, man gets caught in the machine he has created. If all things are designed to serve his purposes in a kind of universal machine, then man has to adapt himself to this machine.

"The mechanized world of things draws man into itself and makes him a cog, driven by the mechanical necessities of the whole."4

1Ibid., pp. 121 ff.  2Ibid., p. 123.
3Ibid., p. 123.  4Ibid., p. 123.
Tillich's understanding brings us to the Gestalt interpretation of a whole.

The sacrifice laid upon things in every human dealing with them corresponds to the sacrifice laid upon the personality in every creative work. Both have to give up some of their potential power in order to reach a higher, actual power by entering a new creation... what must be said generally about the relationship between personality and thing—that it is, in principle a mutual service. The true work is a mutual fulfillment, the false work, a mutual violation of personality and thing. The "ideal of personality" in the sense in which we have to conquer it, leads to the exploitation of things and the mechanization of personality; the "idea of personality," as we have to claim it, leads to mutual fulfillment of thing and personality.1

The ultimate totality which we can know—man, the world, and God—is a Gestalt, dynamically interrelated. As Farmer suggests2 God was under necessity to set man in a world which in a sense was as yet uncreated, a world in which the full working out of God's will would depend on the responses and decisions of man. Farmer goes on to make a statement similar to Tillich's: "Minimise the independence of the world and nothing can save the independence of man."3

It is instructive to note that sub-wholes in the ultimate totality are also Gestalten. This was our finding in respect to the self and groups. The world is also a Gestalt. We may dimly perceive the extent to which this is true at the present time if we examine the evidence of nuclear physics.

1Ibid., p. 124.
3Ibid., p. 69.
The atom is a dynamically interrelated whole, a Gestalt, apparently, and exceedingly difficult to divide. But when fission does take place, that is, disequilibrium is introduced, then the electrons hurriedly seek reorganization into a new Gestalt.

Hocking suggested this Gestalt nature in these words, "unity and integration in the self are concomitant with unity and integration in the world known by that self."¹ Farmer also suggests the importance of perceiving the Gestalt nature of the world and self.

Only by discerning the unity of its world can the inner conflicts of the personality be resolved, and only as the inner conflicts of the personality are being resolved can the unity of the world be discerned. It is a single unitary response in which the objective unity meets the need for inward wholeness in an emancipating awareness of God.²

The self, therefore, cannot escape its involvement in the world of the things. The organization of the world and the self into a Gestalt will be dependent upon the principles we have already discussed. We will not go into each of them in detail in this section, but rather suggest their general implications.

First, we notice that the establishment of a "weak" Gestalt or the inability to achieve any organization is symptomatic of the disintegrating personality, the anxious self.

¹W. E. Hocking, op. cit., p. 533.
²Farmer, The World and God, p. 43.
³See above, chap. ii.
Rollo May has described this condition in these words:

Everyone has noticed in his own experience how anxiety tends to confuse not only his awareness of himself but at the same time to confuse his perception of the objective situation. It is understandable that these two phenomena should go together, for, in Goldstein's words, "to be conscious of one's self is only a correlate of being conscious of objects." The awareness of the relationship between the self and objects is precisely what breaks down in anxiety.¹

Second, such factors of organization as "objective set" and "past experience" may help us establish a Gestalt of the self and things which is finally self-frustrating. That is to say, if the self approaches all things with a mind set on the fact that the things must serve him, then the resulting Gestalt will be organized around the self instead of in a mutuality. Here Tillich's analysis of dangers would become operative and the things might soon be dominating the self.

A third suggestion from Gestalt would find the self using things as the "organizing center" of his Gestalt. Things rather than self, other selves, or God have become the center of the Gestalt, and all else takes a secondary or even subconscious part in the Gestalt. Sherrill characterizes this as an "external security to take the place of the deeper inner security which he (the self) has missed."² Love of things and the compulsive necessity to have things completely at one's own command would be illustrations of this

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¹May, op. cit., pp. 52 ff.
²Sherrill, op. cit., p. 33.
kind of Gestalt.

In conclusion, we note that in the relationship of self and the world, the same factors of organization are operating to form a Gestalt. Man seeks a meaningful organization of his world. The danger is that the self will organize his Gestalt around a limiting and ultimately self-defeating center. This is a possibility in all of the three relationships we have thus far examined. "Weak" Gestalts organized around self-centeredness, group-centeredness, or thing-centeredness would ultimately be unsatisfactory in relationship to the largest possible Gestalt which would include all of these things and a relationship to God. This brings us to our next section.

**E. The Self in Relationship to God**

What interpretation can the Gestalt concept lend to this most important of all relationships? We must recognize immediately that we are reasoning from the finite to the infinite. But man has always found this to be necessary. Farmer suggests this in developing his own theory.

If there is continuity between the personal world in which we live with our fellows and that in which we live with God—and Christianity, alike in its doctrine and in its ethics, emphatically affirms that there is—then we should expect that what is central in the one sphere would be central in the other. Man could hardly react in one way in apprehending his fellows as personal, and in an entirely different way in apprehending God as personal, however great the difference in the total content of the two experiences, corresponding to the profound difference in the realities which evoke them, must necessarily be.¹

This continuity is to be seen also in man’s use of terms to describe the self’s relationship to God. Terms such as love, trust, forgiveness, estrangement, reconciliation are all used in connection with relationships between persons. And though their use in describing the relationship of the self to God may be infinitely different in degree, man has believed that the relationship is of a similar kind.

In fact as we saw previously in discussing the self in relationship to other selves, love of God and love of neighbor cannot be analyzed into parts, but are rather parts of a whole. In other words the totality is a Gestalt. God is first mediated to us through persons in the world. As Sherrill describes it: "When the infant encounters love he encounters God."\(^1\) In making our interpretation with Gestalt principles we must also reason from the finite to the infinite.

The field of the self with which we are now dealing is that totality of comprehension of which the self is capable. It includes other selves, the world, and God. Within this total field man senses an incompleteness in his life. Creation, birth, death, immortality, right and wrong, the purpose of life, are just a few of the factors within his field which create disequilibrium. Wertheimer faced this problem of passing from the uncomprehended to the comprehended, and saw the importance of grasping some one factor which opens the way to an ordered whole, so that Gestalt appears where

\(^1\)Sherrill, op. cit., p. 41.
previously organization was lacking. When we understand, we understand "from a center out," to which center all other parts of the "togetherness" are related in hierarchical order.¹

For the Christian self, in Gestalt terms, God is this one factor who opens the way to an ordered whole, so that Gestalt appears in this total field where organization has been lacking. "The religious intuition essentially concerns itself with the world as a whole;" and in and through this whole it finds God and becomes aware of Him as the center from which all other parts derive their nature.

As we have seen, all through his life man seeks Gestalten both in subfields and in the most inclusive field. At various stages of its development, the self utilizes different factors as the "center" of its Gestalt. Thus, at an early stage, the self centers around itself; later, things or groups may be the organizing center. The self may remain all its life at some such stage, shutting out from its perception or its recognition, the stresses and strains of the total field.

We might also use the figure-ground factor in the formation of a Gestalt. In the total field of the self (the ground) various factors come into figure, dominating and organizing the field. For example, at one stage the mother becomes figure, around which the infant self organizes its field. Or the self may be figure in its own field, organiz-

¹See above, chap. 11, p. 48.
ing everything in terms of itself. Or as James Luther Adams has suggested in a colorful word, "thingification" ¹ occurs, and the self sees things as the figure, and organizes its Gestalt around and in terms of things. Other people have interpreted these experiences as the Oedipus complex, egocentricity, and materialism. It is instructive for us to see that Gestalt does in fact become a general method of interpretation.

In the Christian orientation, the self comes to see God as figure, and the total field is organized from this center. Thus does the self come to feel complete, as it finds rest in the Gestalt where God is the figure and organizing center. "Thou hast formed us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee."²

The self's knowledge of God comes through increasing differentiation of the total field. The self continually refines and interprets its experiences seeking to discover the "good" Gestalt, that is, the true nature of realities impinging upon it. As we previously noted, John Baillie agrees that all four factors of ourselves, our fellows, the world and God are always presented to the self in conjunction with each other.³ Thus knowledge of God is increased differentiation and refinement of our perception of our experi-

¹James Luther Adams in Tillich, op. cit., p. 284.
²Augustine, Confessions, Book I, chap. i.
³See above, chap. iv, p. 100.
ences until we begin to trace, however inadequately, the outlines of that which stands "beyond, behind, and within, the passing flux of immediate things." ¹

Here Gestalt would agree with John Baillie when he says:

Perhaps, indeed, the main principle to be grasped in this whole matter is that religion lives not by sight but by insight. A man is religious not in so far as he stumbles on certain new facts but in so far as he discovers a new meaning in facts that are already known to us all. And it is in this discovery, in this insight, that he comes into touch and commerce with the unseen God. "No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, "God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us." (I John 4:12)²

This is the Gestalt factor of closure, of the tendency toward completeness, and of that moment of insight, when suddenly the field falls into shape. The "good" Gestalt is established.

But what of the question of the objective reality of God? Does Gestalt lend any interpretation to this problem of the objective reference? We have already discussed this to some extent³ and our conclusion must be that Gestalt is neutral in respect to this question. It does suggest the process whereby man has come to establish Gestalten with God as the organizing center, but it does not establish the nature of the object perceived or the reality of the object. The in-

³See above, chap. i, p. 35 and chap. iii, p. 88.
dividual self is the authority about the nature of his field and the organization he has made of it.

A simple illustration of this phenomenon often occurs in counseling. A person comes for help because he has organized his field to include an object which he fears. Now the counselor knows full well that this object does not exist, at least not in his perception of the situation. But the needy person perceives this object to be there and is acting in relation to it. It does no good for the counselor to argue about it. The most helpful thing seems to be to try to see this person's field from his standpoint and help him come to a new insight about it.

Now on the infinite level of God and His reality we have the testimony of millions of Christians that they have perceived Him to be the center of their field, yea, the factor which gives meaning to the whole field. Gestalt accepts this testimony even as it does perceptual experience at all lesser levels. Gestalt lends interpretation to the process but it does not suggest the content. It might well say with John Baillie, "the truth being rather that the deepest of all religious experiences is just the experiencing of believing."¹

F. Can the Self Change Its Relationships?

Gestalt would emphatically answer, "yes." Here is the fundamental concern of Christianity: conversion, the new relationship to fellowmen, the Kingdom of God. The Gestalt answer has been implicit throughout this chapter. The self will change its perception of itself and its relationships to other selves, the world and God whenever it sees its field differently and thus reorganizes its Gestalt. We have suggested that this is constantly happening to the self in a great welter of minor matters; it can also happen in the fundamental matters of ultimate religious orientation.

Christianity says that every man must be born again and every man can be born again. Gestalt would agree that this is necessary and possible, though of course it would not be thinking of the Christian interpretation. Habit is not all-powerful. Given a new field, or new perceptions or insight into the same old field, the self can and will reorganize its Gestalt. A very simple illustration is an army man demobilized after the last war. For six years his Gestalt included rising precisely at 6 a.m., presumably a well-entrenched habit. Yet the radical shift in his field which demobilization produced caused him to reorganize his Gestalt overnight and to drop the habit of arising at 6 a.m.

For the self to change its Gestalt in relationship to God and all other factors may be more difficult, but not impossible. All things are possible with God. The difference
is one of degree and not of kind.

To be permanent, the change must come spontaneously from within the self, a wholehearted reorganization undertaken because it fundamentally wants to change. That is to say, fear and threat and imposed changes from external authorities may bring about change, but once these forces are removed the self is likely to revert to its former state. It would seem then, that the self can best change in an atmosphere of love, trust, forgiveness, understanding and security. In such surroundings of spirit the self can honestly explore its field and achieve the new insight and consequent new Gestalt. And hasn't this atmosphere always been the mark of the truly Christian fellowship where selves achieved that new relationship which is at the very heart of Christianity?

Gestalt suggests an interpretation of "religion as relationship," and implications for achieving the "good" Gestalt in the most inclusive field of the self. It brings suggestions of a practical nature to help us achieve that new relation among men and in the fellowship. Gestalt suggests steps which can be taken to achieve that depth of fellowship and relationship in which alone is salvation. Such procedure has been needed in every generation, for John Wesley's criticism is as true today as when it was written.
"Is this Christian fellowship? Are not the bulk of the parishioners a mere rope of sand? What Christian connection is there between them? What intercourse in spiritual things?"¹

¹John Wesley, Critique of Established Churches.
CHAPTER V

BASIC EXPERIENCES OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

A. Introduction

In Chapter IV we discussed religion as relationship in the light of our Gestalt instrument. We noted that the self in its development moved through many stages of relationship, beginning with a self-centered Gestalt and then constantly expanding its field to include other selves, the world and finally God. Now we must turn to those "religious experiences" which mark the life of the self in its pilgrimage. This was the phrase made popular by William James and as we shall see, many of his interpretations were forerunners of our own Gestalt interpretation. Thus we find him saying:

Now in all of us, however constituted, but to a degree the greater in proportion as we are intense and sensitive and subject to diversified temptations, and to the greatest possible degree if we are decidedly psychopathic, does the normal evolution of character chiefly consist in the straightening out and unifying of the inner self. The higher and the lower feelings, the useful and the erring impulses, begin by being a comparative chaos within us—they must end by forming a stable system of functions in right subordination.¹

The formation of Gestalten as the fundamental process in the life of the self, has also been anticipated by S. H. Mellone when he says, "the process of reality, and the process

¹James, op. cit., p. 167.
of human experience, consists in the formation of wholes.\(^1\) He goes on to suggest that the religious conception of value or worth enters our considerations when we remember that the value of the whole is not the same as the sum of the values of its parts. In fact the value of the whole is often greatly superior to the sum of the values of its parts.

The idea of greater value in the whole is in line with Kurt Lewin's correction of the early dictum of Gestalt Psychology that the "whole is more than the sum of its parts." Lewin suggests that this should read not "more" but "different from." "The whole is different from the sum of its parts."\(^2\) He finds this to be a simple fact of science which holds for physical parts and wholes, as well as psychological parts and wholes. These wholes have all degrees of unity.

Our attempt to interpret religious experience with a particular instrument is in line with some of the greatest theological efforts of our day. For example, the editors of The Library of Constructive Theology believe "that religious experience is to be taken as the starting-point of theological reconstruction." Furthermore, no experience can be taken at its face value; it must be criticized and interpreted.

Just as natural science could not exist without experience and the thought concerning experience, so theology cannot exist without the religious consciousness and reflection upon it. Nor do we mean by "experience"

\(^1\)Mellone, op. cit., p. 173.
\(^2\)Lewin, op. cit., p. 146.
anything less than the whole experience of the human race, so far as it has shared in the Christian consciousness.  

Here then is something of our justification for proceeding with a scientific interpretation of phenomena which religion has often held to be sacred and not open to inspection. Yet, in a universe which is ultimately overwhelming, these experiences are universal and recurrent. The fact that the psychology which we use to interpret these experiences is the same as that which is used to interpret other natural phenomena should not put us off. Rather, this fact should cause us to rejoice at the real unity of God's world.

If we accept the description of the self as a whole, it is obviously difficult, then, to determine an order of procedure for analyzing these experiences. There are possibly many ways of proceeding, for whatever experience of the self we begin with leads us to all the other experiences. However, we shall consider eight basic experiences in the following order:

The experience of estrangement or sin (1) will be our starting point. From here the self proceeds by nurture (2) or conversion (3) to the experience of reconciliation or salvation (4). This becomes an abiding faith or belief (5) which is shared in the experience of fellowship (6). The fellowship celebrates together in worship (7) and in prayer (8).

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though these latter two experiences may also be private experiences. What interpretation can Gestalt give us of these experiences?

Any or all of these experiences might go to make up the total religious life of the self under several major types of religious experience. We will consider three of these types in the succeeding chapter: Mystical, Evangelical, and Church-Type.

B. The Experience of Estrangement or Sin

What interpretation can Gestalt give to this age-old description of the predicament in which man finds himself: that is, that the self is in bondage to sin? Our answer comes from our description of man's nature in Chapter IV. We found that the self struggles all through life to enhance and maintain itself in ever-expanding fields and relationships. But the self, either because of choice or inability, fails to establish the best possible Gestalt. The "weak" Gestalt is established. The self uses an "organizing center" which is poor or selfish in the face of all the forces in the field. The self continues to live in disequilibrium and incompleteness rather than go through reorganization. Sin is the self's situation by choice or default or acceptance of a "weak" Gestalt, leaving the self estranged and alienated from the relationships to world, other selves, and God, which alone can bring salvation.
Theologians have not invented the doctrine of sin. It has grown up because it has accurately described the situation in which spiritually sensitive men have found themselves; and the more insight they possessed, the more inescapable have such descriptions of their plight become. The descriptions of sin have been infinitely varied, the variations probably being the result of the forces in the field of each author. Some have described it as disobedience and rebellion; others, as pride; others, as unbelief, worldliness, concupiscence or inordinate desire; others, as sensuality or carnal-mindedness; most common of all is the description of it as selfishness—self-will, self-seeking, anxiety for the self. "The sin of man is that he seeks to make himself God."¹ In Gestalt terms, the self chooses itself as "organizing center," and all things are organized from this center outwards. As Paul so eloquently testified time after time, even when he wanted to do the good he somehow chose the evil.

David Roberts has described this intense disequilibrium in the Gestalt of the self, in a passage which illustrates the remarkable parallelism between the Pauline-Augustinian conception of original sin and the psycho-analytic conception of neurosis. Freud mentioned the parallel more than once.

In both instances man finds himself in a condition of inner conflict, and filled with hatred, envy and mistrust.

toward his neighbors. In both instances it is the basic condition that is enslaving; particular "sins" or "symptoms" are peripheral effects deriving from this central cause, and particular "good deeds" make little dent upon the basic condition. In both instances the injurious influences of others are seen to be so interwoven with personal reactions that it is almost impossible to differentiate between them. Similarly, it is almost impossible to disentangle the respects in which a man has fallen into sin (or neurosis) by necessity or through his own "fault." In both instances the central problem cannot be solved merely by an effort of will; insofar as it ever gets solved at all, the solution comes about through a change in the "will itself."

Man's predicament therefore has been characterized as sin: alienation from God, and thus from his fellows too. Man makes a great refusal of the claim of God and the claim of his fellows, and puts himself on the throne.\(^2\) The self chooses itself as its "organizing center," or finds itself in this situation with no way out.

"Original sin" in the Gestalt interpretation would be the realization that the self is born into a field which is in disequilibrium. It is under necessity of seeking the "good" Gestalt. The physical organism constantly reorganizes its Gestalt to take account of new tensions in the field such as hunger, heat and cold. But in such areas of the self as emotions and relationships to other selves, the reorganization is much more difficult for it requires response and commitment on the part of the self. Original sin, therefore, is the very nature of the field and the necessity of

\(^1\)Roberts, op. cit., p. 104.

\(^2\)Cf. Farmer, God and Man, pp. 70 f.
reorganizing the ever-expanding field. Man cannot escape. He is born into this kind of predicament.

As we saw in the previous chapter this necessity is particularly evident in the relationships of the self, which are a close-knit continuum involving other selves, the world and God. Thus, the mere fact of birth inextricably involves the self in a field which has the potentiality for chaos or for order. Unless the self finally seeks the "good" Gestalt for the total field, it lives in sin. And the consequences of the self's not seeking this highest Gestalt will permeate the whole fabric of the universe with suffering, perversity and disorder.

H. H. Farmer describes this conclusion in his own terms.

The truth of the doctrine of "original sin" is precisely what we have just been saying, namely, that the whole close-knit, human, personal order into which we are born, into which we must be born if we are to come into existence as persons at all, is in fact, and in another sense, no longer an order; it is a disorder, and its disorder instantly becomes part and parcel of our personal existence, even before we become conscious of ourselves as persons and can be deemed in any way responsible for it; though, as I have said, in due course we also put our own personal responsibility into it. Sin thus meets and conditions us at the very point of our origin: it is original sin. A newborn child, for all its lovely freshness and innocence, thus constitutes a problem for God, even though there is no call to describe it in Calvin's words as "odious and abominable" to Him.

The doctrine of total depravity... is not that everything in man's being is utterly foul; it is rather that even the good things can become utterly foul, and even when they are far from warranting so strong a term as that, nevertheless they are always infected with sin and fall short--far short--of the best, and of what God
intended them to be when He created man.¹

The self's formation of Gestalten which are not the "good" Gestalt for the total field or which center around the self, gives us an understanding of sin which is similar to that developed by Reinhold Niebuhr. The self is a finite creature living in a world of perplexity and insecurity. The self becomes anxious and seeks security and here is the temptation to sin. The sin does not always appear evil; it often appears "good," that is, respectable or the thing to do. And thus the self is led to sin. The self uses its ideas, its reason and even its religion to baptize its special privilege, to rationalize its own interests, and to make itself secure and comfortable at the expense of other selves.²

Rationalization is another term for saying that the self has perceived those things in the field which will fit its Gestalt, or it has maintained itself by forming a Gestalt which is not threatening to itself.

What are the marks of the conviction of sin in the self? First there is the feeling of being out of step, of being in disequilibrium, of lacking unity, or in James' terms, we have a "sick soul" and a "divided self."³ James quotes Tolstoy at some length as an example of such a man.

¹Farmer, God and Men, pp. 79 ff.
²Niebuhr, op. cit., chaps. vii-ix.
³James, op. cit., chaps. vii and viii.
"I felt," says Tolstoy, "that something had broken within me on which my life had always rested, that I had nothing left to hold on to, and that morally my life had stopped. An invincible force impelled me to get rid of my existence, in one way or another. . . It was an aspiration of my whole being to get out of life. . . Is there in life any purpose which the inevitable death which awaits me does not undo and destroy?"

James summarizes Tolstoy's attitude as "absolute disenchantment with ordinary life, and the fact that the whole range of habitual values may...come to appear so ghastly a mockery."2

A second mark of sin in the self may be a profound feeling of incompleteness. We have already noted how Koffka3 found this to be one of the marks of the self. The self feels isolated from other selves and God, and caught in a situation where it cannot extricate itself. There is a yearning for completeness and wholeness, for closure into a "good" Gestalt. Augustine's Confessions give us an illustration of a man in search of this wholeness.

A third mark of sin in the self is a feeling of tension. The self seems to be forever suspended between ideal perfection and the actualities of its existence: imperfection and insecurity. The field has conflicting forces within it which the self cannot organize into a "good" Gestalt. The prick of conscience is of this nature. The self forms a

1Ibid., pp. 150 ff.
2Ibid., p. 155.
3See above, chap. iv, p. 129.
Gestalt but deep within itself there are still unresolved tensions and forces which cannot be a part of this Gestalt. And so the self ignores them by seeing only what it wishes to see or by conveniently "forgetting" these forces. Conscience is an activity of the self as a whole, and in Hocking's phrase is "an awareness of the success or failure of that life in maintaining its status and its growth."

Here then is the predicament of the self. Its Gestalt is "weak," and it has consequent feelings of being in disequilibrium, incomplete, and under tension. This sin and estrangement stems primarily from the self's attempt to organize its field with itself as the "organizing center." It is at this point that we see the depth of the problem. If the self is its own organizing center, it is extremely unlikely that it would give up this favored position. The self finds it relatively easy to change or try to change all other things. But can it change itself? Why should it change itself? How can it be changed?

As Christianity has always insisted, new life will come only from a change of the inner center of the self, not from a tinkering with the outer manifestations of the organizing center. We turn now to nurture and conversion as two experiences leading out of this predicament.

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C. The Experience of Nurture

In Gestalt terms, the task of Christianity is to change the self's organizing center from itself to God. Historically and contemporarily there are two general methods suggested for affecting this change: nurture and conversion. These two experiences are not mutually exclusive; they often overlap and supplement each other. They are both re-educative processes, nurture being a long-term effort and conversion being a more sudden experience. It is probably true to say that all selves within the Christian church experience nurture, but not all of them experience conversion. For purposes of our analysis we have separated the two experiences, turning first to nurture.

What is Christian nurture? It is recognition of the fact that the growing self is set within a field which nourishes it. A seed is carefully nurtured through cultivation by the gardener until it grows and blooms. The self likewise grows under the influence of its environment, and the church, therefore, makes an effort to nurture the growing self in such a way that it will flower to mature Christian selfhood. Though there are important differences, it is important to note here that the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church relies on the influence of nurture. If a child is brought up under the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, the influence will likely make him a good Catholic all of his life. We will return to this subject of the church-type of
religious experience in the next chapter.

Horace Bushnell was the first man to develop explicitly the thesis of Christian nurture, though the idea had certainly been implicit within the church for a long time. Something of his view is to be seen in the following excerpts:

All society is organic—the church, the state, the school, the family—and there is a spirit in each of these organisms, peculiar to itself; and more or less hostile, more or less favorable to religious character; and to some extent, at least, sovereign over the individual man. . . The child is only more within the power of organic laws than we all are. . . This organic connection of character subsisting between parent and child, lays a basis for notions of Christian education, far different from those which now prevail, under the cover of a merely fictitious and mischievous individualism.¹

Another exponent of Christian nurture adds some further factors in these words.

Perhaps the most potent factor in the experience in which a person grows up is the religion of those with whom he comes in contact. It is not what his parents and those in the community say they believe, but what their attitude and conduct say they believe which makes the difference.

The sort of God in whom they really believe or disbelieve: their conviction as to the way religion is a resource in life; their attitude toward human life and destiny; their beliefs on human worth and possibility—are definite and formative factors because they are influential in determining the atmosphere in which one lives.²

These ideas of Christian nurture are really trying to


implement the development of "once-born souls,"¹ to use James' terminology. Once-born selves gradually acquire an orientation to life which is satisfactory and never has to be repudiated when crises are met in later life. James quotes Dr. Edward Everett Hale as an example of such a "nurtured" soul.

... any man has an advantage, not to be estimated, who is born, as I was, into a family where the religion is simple and rational; who is trained in the theory of such a religion, so that he never knows, for an hour, what these religious or irreligious struggles are. I always knew God loved me, and I was always grateful to him for the world he placed me in. I always liked to tell him so, and was always glad to receive his suggestions to me...²

Thus, Christian nurture attempts the task of bringing the self to recognize God as the organizing center of its developing life. Nurture means influencing all of the forces in the field of the self so that they will mould the child toward a relationship with God. In Protestant churches the emphasis on religious education both for children and adults is most often built on the idea of nurture. Beyond this the church has recognized that the family is the nurture ground of the self. The Presbyterian Church, U. S. A. has made this a fundamental cornerstone of its new curriculum, providing a great deal of help for the parents and considerable work for the child to do at home.

Gestalt interprets the experience of nurture as frank

¹James, op. cit., Lectures IV and V.
²Ibid., p. 81.
recognition of its principle that behavior is influenced by all the forces of the field. The properties of the self's field will determine the Gestalt. We have already elaborated something of the importance of the field for the development of the self,¹ and need not repeat ourselves here.

However, the Gestalt understanding of the development of the self suggests that there is constant reorganization of this field by the self. Indeed, a kind of "conversion" goes on all the time. This is very evident in the physical growth of the organism, where we see spurts of growth and then plateaus of accomplishment, and then further spurts of growth. In other words, growth is not a long smooth upward movement, but rather a step-like line. For example, the baby learns to crawl and does this for some time. Then almost suddenly, one day, the baby takes his first steps and no longer crawls. Gestalt suggests that this kind of reorganization goes on in all the aspects of the self as a whole—mentally, emotionally, spiritually, as well as physically.²

But the self often becomes fixated on some plateau of development. Seward Hiltner in his book, Self-Understanding,³ talks of "dated emotions." These are emotions which sufficed for our Gestalt in childhood, but in adulthood are no longer adequate. Yet often the self clings to these "dated emotions."

¹See above, chap. iv.
³Seward Hiltner, Self-Understanding. (New York: Scribners, 1951), passim.
Freud's concept of fixation and the Oedipus Complex in which the mother is the organizing center, are further examples of the self using a Gestalt which was meaningful in childhood, but is no longer appropriate. Gestalt emphasis on reorganization suggests that the experience of nurture may not be enough and that conversion may also be necessary to achieve reconciliation. Either that, or our understanding of nurture must be enlarged to include the process of reorganization which goes on in conversion.

Much of Kurt Lewin's work was concerned with what he called the "re-educative process." In essence this was a very careful analysis of the field and its properties as it impinged upon the self, and of the way a new orientation comes to the self. This is not a surface change, but a change from the center outwards. A chapter entitled, "Conduct, Knowledge, and Acceptance of New Values," puts the gist of his findings which represent a Gestalt approach to the experience of nurture.

... re-education must be a process that is functionally similar to a change in culture. It is a process in which changes of knowledge and beliefs, changes of values and standards, changes of emotional attachments and needs, and changes of everyday conduct occur not piecemeal and independently of each other, but within the framework of the individual's total life in the group.

This is the kind of process which nurture must be if it is to achieve the central goal of Christianity. If the change occurs suddenly it has been designated as conversion, and we

1Lewin, Resolving Social Conflicts, op. cit., chap. iv.
2Ibid., p. 53.
shall look at this phenomenon in our next section. If the change occurs more slowly then it would logically be classed as nurture.

Lewin sees the task as two-fold. The self must perceive his field in a new way or perceive new facts and values which have been introduced. The self must accept belongingness in a new group which shares new perceptions and values which are radically different from other previous groups. Which comes first—the new perception or the new belongingness—is a conundrum, varying with each situation. In many cases if the individual accepts belongingness in a new group, he also changes and accepts their values. But the reverse is also possible: the acceptance of new values allows the self to adopt a new group. We have already explored something of the importance of group life,¹ and it is enough to note here that the group is the ground on which the self stands. When we are confused as to our group belongingness, our typical behavior is restlessness, timidity, aggressiveness, a tendency to go to extremes, hypercriticism of self and others. The adolescent is often an example of this confusion. Lewin defines belongingness to a group not in terms of similarity but of interdependence or common fate.

The crucial factor for Lewin in achieving this two-fold process that is necessary to nurture is the leadership of a group. Changing the leadership technique is the easiest

¹See above, chap. iv.
method of determining the group atmosphere, and therefore the possibility of accepting new values and new belongingness. In order to be changed from the inside out, the self must freely choose its new values and must discover new facts for itself.

Gestalt psychology and Lewin raise several questions for us in our efforts to make nurture effective in producing mature Christians. First, there is the danger that the self will accept much of its Christianity on a second-hand basis and fail to make it truly its own. The self may passively accept a point of view which is not adapted to its own unique field.

Second, there is no clean cut delineation of fields; that is to say, there is considerable overlapping. For example, the adolescent belongs to a family, school, church, gang and community. Belongingness is very confused. The church does not have control of all of these groups and thus its nurture may not be effective. Which field will be determinative?

Third, all selves, but particularly the adolescent, are under pressure to establish their own unique Gestalt. Do theories of nurture allow for this unique establishment? Can it meet the adolescent needs for rebellion and new loyalties?

Fourth, there is a danger that nurture will bring the self into acceptance of the status quo both culturally and religiously. Within its process nurture must provide for the uniqueness of future selves who speak with the authenticity
of a Luther or a St. Francis. Religious education must face the fact that even a child-centered church does not guarantee spiritual vitality. It merely assures the perpetuation of the church as an institution. In the following passage Shelton Smith reminds the church that the great periods of religious rebirth have not emerged as the result of child-nurture.

Religion has always come alive in the adult consciousness, and has usually involved a break with the religion inherited in childhood. The Christian Church, for example, had its birth in a new type of religious experience among those who revolted against conventional religion. So it has seemed to be ever since. Revolutionary waves of religious awakening come to a focus in a Saint Paul, a Saint Francis, a Luther, a Wesley, or an Edwards. Their experiences are then communicated to the young. But the insights and experiences of the awokeners tend to fade out in the experience of the second and third generations.

Fifth, Gestalt psychology gives a clearer understanding of the difficulties and complexities of nurture. We have too easily supposed that Christian nurture consisted of a teacher telling a story to a class for forty minutes on a Sunday morning, with a little time for polite questions. Such "nurture" will not cause a self to change its organizing center, for it will not achieve a new belongingness or new perception. To be effective nurture must be of the dimensions described by Edward Everett Hale. The Christian nurture of his self came from the family, not just from the conventional one hour Sunday school class. A contemporary re-

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igious educator suggests the implications of Gestalt for the church school in these words.

The first task of a teacher is to build a group out of herself and the class. For new group membership is the gateway toward learning anything significantly different; and a person's morals are a function of the group he most wants to belong to (the accepting group looking over his shoulder as he acts.) The church group must finally become for each boy and girl the most powerful and significant group membership available to him—and therefore this "over the shoulder group" that helps him choose, sustains his moral impulses.1

What can we conclude about Christian nurture? The Gestalt interpretation provides a basis for making nurture effective in its primary Christian task. Yet we are left with the fact that the primary experiences of religious prophets tend to become secondary experiences in their children, and especially in their children's children.2 In the course of time an innovation of a radical sort has to take place if the fires of religious vitality are to be rekindled.

The inference to be drawn from this fact is not that the church should renounce the function of Christian nurture. On the contrary, to the fullest possible extent the church should share its life and faith with the young. This is a basic and continuing task of the church. Nevertheless, the church must not surrender to the illusion that child-nurture, in itself, will rekindle the fire of life and faith in the Christian community. For the religion of the child will usually be a relatively pale edition of the faith of the older generation. This means that unless the faith comes alive in the soul of


2Cf. Henry P. Van Dusen, The Plain Man Seeks for God (New York: Scribners, 1933), pp. 20-24, for a vivid description of this tendency in American Protestantism during the past four generations.
some mature individual or group religious vitality may be expected to continue to decline in modern culture. This quotation supports our Gestalt conclusions that both nurture and conversion are necessary. Somehow, within the setting provided by Christian nurture, each self must establish its unique Gestalt. We turn now to conversion.

D. The Experience of Conversion

William James contributes to our understanding of the relationship between "nurture" and "conversion" in his definition of the latter experience.

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.

Christianity has been more inclined to designate the gradual process as nurture, reserving the term conversion for the sudden change often accompanied by crisis. However, this is just a further indication of the difficulty of trying to divide and analyze these religious experiences of the self. They are all interrelated; they are a Gestalt. James almost uses Gestalt terms in describing the experience of conversion. Compare the following quotation with our interpretation of Christianity's task: changing the self's organizing center from the self to God.

\[\text{Smith, Faith and Nurture, p. 103.}\]
\[\text{James, op. cit., p. 186.}\]
Let us hereafter, in speaking of the hot place in a man's consciousness, the group of ideas to which he devotes himself, and from which he works, call it the habitual centre of his personal energy. It makes a great difference to a man whether one set of his ideas, or another, be the centre of his energy; and it makes a great difference, as regards any set of ideas which he may possess, whether they become central or remain peripheral in him. To say that a man is "converted" means, in these terms, that religious ideas, previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.

This definition is similar to the one suggested by A. D. Nock.

By conversion we mean the reorientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from indifference or from an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.

A. C. Underwood accepts James' definition of conversion though he says it more simply. Returning to a definition at the end of his long survey he says, "conversion in its comparative aspects is a reaction taking the form of a psychological surrender to an ideal, and issuing in moral development." True conversion is an integral overturning of consciousness, which gives way to a fresh psychic systemization.

1Ibid., p. 193
4Ibid., p. 258.
5De Sanctis, op. cit., p. 92.
Though he does not mention Gestalt psychology, De Sanctis comes close to some of its concepts in his chapter on "the process of conversion," and in such phrases as "new adjustments of the psychic systems." 1

Lest we get ahead of our interpretation, let us make several distinctions for purposes of analysis. The experience of conversion is the process whereby the self changes. The experience of reconciliation or salvation is the content of the change. The experience of faith is the abiding organization which the self maintains.

What interpretation of the process of conversion do our Gestalt principles suggest? In Gestalt terms conversion is the moment of insight; that moment when the diverse properties of the field fall into shape. Organization is achieved. The factor of closure is operating, and the gap in organization is overcome. Synonyms for the term insight might be found in understanding, comprehension, intuition, or "hunch." But the term insight itself is very descriptive and acceptable. 2

Four stages in the process of insight have been denoted: involvement in the field, meditation, insight, and verification. Let us examine them.

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1 Ibid., chap. iv, pp. 87-126.

2 See above, chap. ii, pp. 56 f. and chap. iii, p. 92 f.
1. Involvement in the Field

The self recognizes that all is not well with its Gestalt. Crisis may confront the self. New forces have entered the field or old forces have been perceived in a new fashion, and the old organization no longer is adequate. The self feels a yearning for a more adequate Gestalt, a new unity and harmony.

Such involvement in the field often occurs at many levels in our experience, for example, the student at school who is confronted with a mathematical problem or the inventor who has assumed responsibility for developing a new kind of engine. In the religious field such involvement may come as a sense of need and a conviction of sin or it may be lifelong and thus be similar to the experience of sin which we discussed earlier. Of course the child is not aware of any such involvement. It is only later, in adolescence or when the self is confronted with a crisis or tragedy that it sees itself suddenly involved in a search for meaning heretofore not considered necessary. The Apostle Paul illustrates this. Within orthodox Judaism he felt he had a satisfactory pattern for his life, though difficult to achieve. Christianity, however, called his pattern into question, and he found himself very much involved.

2. Meditation

This stage is characterized by a brooding over the forces in the field. The self searches for an answer, for
some organization which will encompass all of the factors in a meaningful whole. Characteristically, there is a struggle going on. Should the self choose this path or that path? Often the self becomes frustrated and may even give up the struggle for a while. Curiously enough, when the self relaxes, the insight may come. James designated this as the self-surrender type. Whereas, those cases in which the self keeps struggling he termed volitional. In some cases the long years of nurture might include this kind of struggle and meditation, prior to a final commitment.

Our student with the mathematical problem struggles with possible solutions, searching his mind for clues. How much more did Paul struggle! He found himself unable to keep the law or at least when he did so, he still felt that he had failed. He was in terrible conflict. In desperation he lashed out at the Christians because they had further challenged the way in which he was trying to find salvation. Such struggle as Paul was engaged in may be brief or it may go on for years.

3. Insight

This is the moment or, possibly, the period of illumination. The self has insight into its situation and a reorganization takes place. The solution is seen and all of

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the problems and tensions with which the self has been struggling achieve a unity in a new Gestalt. The long periods of doubt are over and there is release and unburdening as the self literally finds itself.

The student's mathematical problem is solved for he suddenly "sees" the solution. The moment of conversion (insight) is quite often filled with ecstasy and peace. The self can resume its action because the direction has again become clear. The experience of Paul on the road to Damascus and the subsequent events brought peace of soul and new sense of direction to Paul. His conversion was truly a moment of insight. The Christ took possession of him, and from that moment his life was organized in a new way. Adolph Deissmann has indicated these stages in Paul's process of conversion in these words.

The conversion of the persecutor into a follower and of the Pharisee Apostle into the Apostle of Christ was a sudden one. Yet it was no magic transformation, but had its psychological preparation both negative and positive . . . Negative in the experiences through which the soul of the young Pharisee had gone in its passionate hunger for righteousness under the yoke of the law. . . and even for the most earnest conscience, it was really impossible to keep the whole law.

The positive preparation for the conversion came, on the one hand, through the prophetic inwardness of the Old Testament revelation which had influenced Paul even as a Jew; on the other hand, through a relatively close touch with the genuine tradition of Jesus and with the effects wrought by Him in the characters of the confessors whom Paul persecuted.

So the lightning of Damascus strikes no empty space but finds deep in the soul of the persecutor plenty of inflammable material. We see the flame blaze upwards
and after a generation we can still feel that the glow then kindled has not lost none of its power in the man grown old: Christ is in Paul, Paul in Christ.\(^1\)

4. Verification

This is a time of elaboration and evaluation of the new Gestalt. Action based on the new insight may be tried out. The self consolidates its new orientation and acts in terms of it. Such a process is closely akin to the experience of faith, which we shall discuss in a later section.

The mathematical student uses his insight in subsequent problems, verifying its correctness. In a life-changing way Paul used his insight of the Damascus road to re-center his entire self as a whole around the Christ. His trust and faith in the Christ was verified during the rest of his life, and he often pointed back to that moment of conversion or insight as the time when he first saw things clearly. In a sense the rest of Paul's life was an effort to verify his moment of insight, and thus clearly tell others of the Good News.

This interpretation of conversion as the Gestalt process of insight can be recognized in the biographies of Augustine, Francis of Assisi, Wesley, Whitefield, Edwards, Moody, and a host of lesser men who have come to an abiding faith in Christ. The conversion of Frank Buchman, leader of

the Oxford Group Movement, gives us a further illustration. Buchman, long in doubt over his own spiritual health (involvement in the field), had come to a small service in Cumberland. A woman, apparently the leader of the group, spoke feelingly about the Cross and its significance. While Buchman brooded (meditation and struggle) on this idea in a reverie of mind, there came to him very palpably and with a most poignant realism, albeit with no great suddenness, no dramatic intensity, a vision of the Crucified (insight). He was conscious at once of two shuddering realizations: the great abyss between him and the suffering Christ and an infinite sorrow in the face of the Master. "A vibrant feeling up and down the spine" seems to have ushered in a new store of life and energy. He had entertained previously a thoroughgoing hatred of certain religious people. His heart had been loaded with the sins of selfishness, pride, and ill-will. It is to the credit of his power of objectification that he took steps immediately after his conversion by writing those ministers in America toward whom he felt ill at ease. (Verification.)

These four stages in the process of insight give us an interpretation of conversion. Inherent within the instrument we are using are several other considerations. One of these is the importance and necessity of each person's having

\[\text{Sources: Elliot D. Hutchinson, How to Think Creatively (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1949), pp. 216-228.}\]
his own conversion experience. Organizational factors such as similarity, proximity, objective set, past experience, and seeing what we want to see, show us the danger of a stereotyped experience. At the worst the churches have too often acted as if conversion were merely a process of getting people to say "yes" to dogmas. Even at best the churches often attempt to evoke religious experiences and conversions which fit into accepted conceptions of God and Christ, instead of providing the conditions which would allow the self to have its own unique insight into its situation and its relationships. Such uniqueness might not always measure up to the minister's expectations, but it would have the virtue of being based on reality. Only on a reality basis can we ever finally achieve true reorganization of the self.

Our interpretation of conversion has also made clear the indissoluble relationship between nurture and conversion. They are really two ways of looking at the process whereby the self comes to a reconciliation and salvation. In conversion the self suddenly makes use of much of the material with which it has been nurtured: properties of its field. In nurture the self must also come to times when it has to reorganize its Gestalt or else it has stopped growing. These are moments of insight, even though they do not possess the breath-taking finality of Paul's experience. At any rate, Gestalt lends an interpretation to the process whereby the self can move from sin to salvation, and we turn now to this latter subject. In the meantime we can summarize the goal of
nurture and conversion in these words of Paul writing to the Colossians. "May their hearts be encouraged! May they learn the meaning of love! May they have all the wealth of conviction that comes from insight."¹

E. The Experience of Reconciliation or Salvation

If, then, the self, through nurture or conversion or a combination of the two, finds a way beyond its estrangement, what is the content or nature of the reconciliation? Can we describe in Gestalt terms, the salvation which has come to the soul? It is instructive to notice here that our description of insight as the means of arriving at knowledge about our situation and reconciliation is shared by some religious thinkers. It is an experience similar to religious intuition which Hocking describes as "a feeling of certainty based on a personal experience of insight. [Italics mine]."²

Though John Baillie's suggestion that there are different kinds of thinking would not be supported by Gestalt principles, the following quotation does show his use of the idea of insight.

Our conclusion can only be that religion, though indeed it is grounded in our nature as thinking beings, is yet grounded in some other kind of thinking than that which the scientist and metaphysician have in greater proportion than the rest of us. What can this other kind of thinking be? We seem to be left with the sole alternative of believing that the kind of intelligent or

¹Col. 2:2 (Moffett trans.).

rational insight in which religion takes its rise is none other than moral insight, and that faith in God is thus some sort of an outgrowth of the consciousness of value. [Italics mine.]

Perhaps Josiah Royce came closest to anticipating the Gestalt interpretation of reconciliation, when he wrote,

Insight is knowledge that makes us aware of the unity of many facts in one whole, and that at the same time brings us into intimate personal contact with these facts and with the whole wherein they are related.

Reconciliation interpreted by Gestalt, is achieved through the grasping of some one factor which opens the way to an ordered whole, so that organization appears where previously it was lacking. When the self is reconciled, it understands "from a center out," to which center all other parts of the "togetherness" are related in hierarchical order. All relations within a whole are not equally important, but there is always a determinative "center," which, however, varies with varying conditions. In the experience of Christian reconciliation, it is necessary to "re-center," to look at the sin and situation of the self from a different view, to take hold in a different way, to gain "insight," in order to find the pattern which will give the "good" Gestalt to the self.

In our previous section we saw that this grasping of some one factor which opens the way to an ordered whole occurs

1John Baillie, The Interpretation of Religion, p. 257.

in the solving of a mathematical problem, in the work of an inventor—in other words, in all aspects of life. In the experience of Christian reconciliation the same grasping of some one factor must occur. The gap is closed and wholeness is present. For Christianity, this one factor, though perceived uniquely by each person, is the love of God manifested in Jesus Christ. This has been the testimony of Christians in all generations. They grasped this central factor of Christ, and everything became an ordered whole. All other parts of the "togetherness" of the self as a whole are related in hierarchical order to God, the organizing center. Wholeness appears where previously there was sin and estrangement. Such was Paul's testimony: "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I that live, but Christ that lives in me."1

William James says much the same thing.

To say that a man is "converted" means, in these terms, that religious ideas previously peripheral in his consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of his energy.2

One of James' case histories illustrates the newness of everything in a life now organized in Christ.

Oh, the precious feeling of safety, of freedom, of resting on Jesus! I felt that Christ with all his brightness and power had come into my life; that, indeed, old things had passed away and all things had become new.3

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1Gal., 2:20.
2James, op. cit., p. 193.
3Ibid., p. 199.
James goes on to characterize the state of assurance which comes to the self in reconciliation. There is a loss of worry and a sense that one is at peace. New truths about relationships are perceived. Even the objective world seems to undergo a change.¹

At this point the skeptic may point to the long history of Christianity and remind us that there have been untold variations in the descriptions man has given of God and the effects of reconciliation in the lives of men. That is granted. We have noted these variations in many places.

Our Gestalt principles give us an understanding of the unique field in which each self dwells, and the consequent uniqueness of perception. The specific content of the self's perception of God as organizing center will remain unique, yet the nature of the process and its effects are as we have indicated. This is but another way of describing man's finiteness. The Godward side is hidden from our view, except as revealed in Jesus Christ and through history. Even in the revelation of Jesus Christ, man must be profoundly humbled, for it is perceived differently by different men. Yet the different perceptions are understandable with our Gestalt principles.

Again we see that Gestalt in no wise tells us what the one factor that helps us find the ordered whole should be. Rather it reminds us that the process whereby a self is recon-

¹Ibid., pp. 242 ff.
ciled to the ultimate things of the world, to other selves, and to God is the same as in lesser spheres of activity. God's world is one world and not two-storied.

A contemporary theologian describes the new life of reconciliation with God as one in which

... the awareness of the infinite demands and infinite succour of His love are daily renewed in penitence and forgiveness, as the soul keeps company with Christ in the fellowship of His People. A profound cleansing, illumination, re-orientation of the inner life, a clearing away of the fogs of insincerity, a growth towards the true norm of personal being, begins.¹

The self with God as its organizing center overcomes the feelings of sin mentioned earlier: disequilibrium, incompleteness, and tension. The divided self is unified. Self-centeredness is overcome. The self is re-born.

This Gestalt interpretation is in agreement with David Roberts' statement that salvation is

... that condition of wholeness which comes about when human life is based in openness (i.e., with "self-knowledge") upon the creative and redemptive power of God.²

Such "wholeness" is not achieved in isolation, but by devoting ourselves in fellowship to a way of life which reaches personal fulfillment along with, and partly through, the fulfillment of others. Centering in God brings not only inward harmony, but new interpersonal relations with men as the fruit of the self's new condition.

¹Farmer, The World and God, p. 201.
²Roberts, op. cit., p. 132.
The Gestalt interpretation of reconciliation demands a dynamic concept of salvation, not a static one. The church has always been faced with the danger of a dogmatic solidification of a specific reconciliation, the pattern of which it attempts to make meaningful for all people. But dogmas stand still; the fields of the person and of the group never do. Furthermore, it may take a lifetime for the self to work out the total ramifications of its original reconciliation, and the chances are that even then, new wonders of God's love would be revealing themselves to the self. We only see in part now.

F. The Experience of Faith or Belief

This may well be the high water mark of our thesis, for all that we have said thus far has led us to faith, and all that we shall subsequently say will be an analysis of the practices of the faithful. Furthermore, to talk of the "religious experience of faith" involves us in a contradiction: faith is religious experience. In the words of D. M. Baillie,

"... our question as to the nature and basis of religious belief cannot be answered by the statement that it is based on religious experience, in whatever sense that statement may be taken. In short, if you have the religious experience yourself, you need not go on to speak of building faith upon it, for you have the faith already, in the experience; whereas, if you have not the experience yourself, any conclusion as to the existence of God which you might build upon an examination of other people's religious experience would not be faith, and could never take the place of faith, which is religious experience."¹

¹D. M. Baillie, *Faith in God*, p. 115.
In this sense, our whole thesis is an interpretation of faith with the Gestalt instrument. Yet in another sense faith is the highest peak of the self's pilgrimage, somehow involving the culmination and meaning of all other experiences.

We also note in this quotation the interchangeable use of faith and belief. Are they the same? In general use, probably not, for reflection would seem to indicate that faith carries the greater meaning. Certainly it is faith, not belief, that Jesus and Paul constantly stressed through the New Testament. Most people in western culture will say that they believe in God. But if they say they have faith in God it usually signifies a great deal more. In such a person "it seems almost certain that the religious sentiment holds a prominent place in his personality structure." Our concern will be primarily with faith, which seems more complex psychologically than belief and also closer to the central Christian experience of the self.

When we seek to define faith we find that Christendom has used the term from the beginning of its history, but it is still elusive and difficult to define, probably because in a final reckoning it is "indeed identical with the essence of religion." The following attempts are suggestive. Daniel Williams says that "faith is response. It is the whole-souled

1 Ibid., chap. 1.
2 Allport, The Individual and His Religion.
3 D. M. Baillie, Faith in God, p. 51
giving of life into the keeping of God who is the absolutely trustworthy source and redeemer of life."¹ David Roberts is in close agreement when he says, "Faith is the responses a man makes to ultimate questions which in principle cannot be answered by means of knowledge."² John Baillie says that "Faith is a moral trust in the ultimate Source of power, a confident reference of our values to the real order of things."³ Finally, Herbert Farmer suggests that

Faith is that attitude of mind which, finding itself laid hold of by the truth concerning God's love as given through Christ, commits itself to it in adventurous trust and obedience, in spite of all the mystery and all the perplexity that remain.⁴

The agreement here seems to be that faith is the self as a whole committing itself completely to the goodness and power of God, in trust and obedience.

Thus, faith must surely be that one factor which helps organize the total field of the self into a meaningful whole. No wonder Jesus emphasized faith over and over again. "For I tell you, if you have faith the size of a grain of mustard, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here over to there!' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."⁵ The decisive thing is faith in God through Jesus

¹Williams, op. cit., p. 187.
²Roberts, op. cit., p. 74.
⁴Farmer, God and Men, pp. 159 f.
Christ. This is Christian religious experience. This is the factor which will put right all of the relationships of the self.

In the face of faith such as this and the revolutionary results it has produced through the ages, our Gestalt instrument seems sterile and almost presumptuous to attempt an interpretation. Theologians and churches alike have accepted the importance of faith, but an interpretation of faith has brought them face-to-face with the unknowable and infinite mystery of the way of God with man. Thus, though our Gestalt instrument is proving useful for interpretation, it in no wise fully explains the redemptive fact of faith in God through Jesus Christ.

With this qualification, we list the following notes which we hope will add to an understanding of faith.

1. The final mystery of faith along with its redeeming power is not condemned by the Gestalt instrument, as is the case with so many naturalistic and scientific instruments. Rather the Gestalt instrument accepts the testimony and provides understanding. The testimony of millions of selves down through the centuries has been that faith was the organizing center of their lives. If this is the unique perception of a self, then the Gestalt theory accepts it, and finds it valid precisely because each self lives in a unique field. The self is authoritative.

Furthermore, on Gestalt grounds, the final mystery of faith may be understandable as man's description of the condition in general; whereas, from God's side, He must needs speak intimately to each self, alone in its unique field. And thus there can be no agreement on the manward side, for what is saving faith for one man may be foolishness for another.

2. In the Gestalt interpretation, faith would seem to be that abiding center of organization in the light of which all else is done. It is redemptive only to the extent that it is the organizing center of the self's Gestalt. All parts of the self are interrelated in hierarchical fashion to this determinative center. There are no compartments in the self which are not under the influence of faith.

3. Faith demands the commitment of the self as a whole, not just one's reason or will or emotion. "The certitude of science differs from the certitude of religion in that the former proceeds primarily from the intellect but the latter from the personality as a whole."¹ In Christian faith the self is committed to what it feels is most important for all human life. Jesus Christ's faith in God was this complete commitment of the self as a whole and it has been a revelation for Christians in all ages. Christ's faith may also be a measure of the failure of all His followers to achieve such a faith.

4. Faith is the establishment by the self of a Gestalt

¹John Baillie, The Interpretation of Religion, p. 376.
in which God is the organizing center. But once established
does not mean that the pattern of faith is finished or that
it won’t change. Our Gestalt interpretation as well as the
facts of life would indicate that this faith goes through
differentiation and articulation at all times. Only in
this way can the self keep abreast of and in meaningful re-
lation to the ever-changing forces of its field. Only in
this way will the self grow in the grace of God. Faith is
a dynamic relationship of the self to God.

Two selves enter marriage with a certain faith in
the other person, that is, a trust in the other person. But
that faith is differentiated and articulated a hundred-fold
in the course of that marriage, until the two persons are
aware that their faith on that first day was but a dim sha-
dow of the final reality. Gestalt insists that this is true
in any dynamic system. It is the same with the self’s faith
in God. Christians have testified that it has happened to
them in all ages. Paul was continually amazed at the unfold-
ing riches of God’s love for him. Gestalt would say that
growth in the richness of faith is a mark of its authenticity,
while a rigid and static faith is not true to the nature of
the self and its world.

5. Attempts to impose faith or dogma on the self can-
not make for an abiding and saving orientation to ultimate
things, according to the Gestalt interpretation. Such manip-
ulation of the self does violence to its uniqueness. The ac-
ceptance of an imposed faith by the self is a surface
obeisance and not the inner change we have described. It is
only as the self discovers faith in God as the one factor
which organizes its total, unique field of suffering, guilt,
conflict, loneliness, sin and longing, that the saving
power of God is manifest. This interpretation is in line
with a contemporary writer when he says.

When we attempt to impose patterns of belief or be¬
haviour we forget the fact of individuality. We fall
into the same fallacy as those psychologists who talk
as though there were mind in general, persons in gen¬
eral, when there is no such thing. There are just in¬
dividuals expressing all the variety of their individ¬
uality. So in the religious life; there is a variety
of religious experience.

Faith is knowledge coming to us through a direct
encounter with God. The particular encounter with God
will depend very largely on the need that is driving us.1

This individuality is also the conclusion of Allport's recent
stimulating study, when he says,

A man's religion is the audacious bid he makes to
bind himself to creation and to the Creator. It is his
ultimate attempt to enlarge and to complete his own
personality by finding the supreme context in which
he rightly belongs.2

Finally, it is a chastening experience to find that
our Gestalt interpretation has not brought us to anything new,
so much as it has recalled us to something very old in
Christianity, for the New Testament admonishes us in these
words: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling
for it is God who worketh in you."3

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1McKenzie, Nervous Disorders and Religion, p. 179.
2Allport, The Individual and His Religion, p. 142.
3Phil. 2:12-13.
G. The Experience of Fellowship

In line with our Gestalt principles, minute analysis can destroy the vital unity of the living thing. Yet, possibly our analysis will clarify the ways in which the human spirit finds faith. Christ must needs speak to each generation in the language and thought patterns of that generation. We have traced the human spirit from its estrangement, through nurture and conversion, to reconciliation and the ultimate religious experience of faith in God through Jesus Christ. The love of God seeks man out and demands a response. Yet, as we have already indicated,1 man is in a dual relationship to God and his fellows, and the two demands are finally one demand. A new relationship to one means a new relationship to the other. And it may well be that God's love is first mediated through the fellowship or community, or at least that this is an alternative way to God's speaking to an individual. However, in the progression of religious experiences that we have chosen, the self which has experienced faith is under God's command to establish community and fellowship.

... the Christian doctrine of the love of God necessarily carries with it the thought that that love is set towards the building up of a community just as much as towards the salvation of the individual. Indeed these are not two ends, but one: a new individual means in principle a new community, and effective saving action on the part of God into the midst of history must therefore mean the bringing into existence of a new community in the midst of history. ... The idea of the

1See above, chap. v.
Church is part of the Christian doctrine of God. The Church is not an optional addendum to the Christian way of life.

We have already explored the implications of Gestalt for the relationship of the self to other selves, and made suggestions about group dynamics as a means of bringing depth to the life of any group. It remains for us here to relate those suggestions more closely to the experience and necessity of fellowship for the faithful.

The New Testament gives us our first clue when we realize that for the earliest Christians the church was interdependent "members in particular" of the body of Christ. "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God. in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

Martin Luther gives us a second clue when we take seriously his great idea about the priesthood of all believers. The modern world has tended to use this, inasmuch as it is aware of it at all, as a mandate for Individualism. But this is to completely miss Luther's meaning: Every man must be a priest to every other man. In his tract Concerning Christian Liberty, Luther raises the question, "Why are we called Christians? Who has a right to use the name?"

1 Farmer, God and Men, p. 142.
2 See above, chap. iv., pp. 115-133
3 Eph. 2:19-22.
sets down two qualifying conditions. The first is that we have faith in Christ. The second condition is the point we are now making—that we act "reciprocally and mutually one the Christ of the other, doing to our neighbor as Christ does to us." Paul and Luther looked for a depth of fellowship which most Christians never dream of, much less experience.

If Christianity could implement this kind of fellowship which is an essential part of its saving power, it would meet one of the greatest needs of our day. For individualism has run rampant, and the selves of the world are living in isolation. Many current writers have written on this theme. One of the most suggestive titles and books is The Lonely Crowd.¹ We have a great many groups and crowds today, but the individuals within them are lonely and isolated. And here our Gestalt interpretation is instructive. Today's crowds and groups are not dynamically interrelated wholes. They are very "weak" Gestalts, if they can be called a Gestalt at all. And the church has not escaped. Too many of our churches are assemblies of lonely individuals, not congregations. They fail to recognize that new life will mean a new relation to our fellowmen as well as to God.

In several brilliant passages, Paul Tillich describes this individualism of our world and its consequences.² Does

²Tillich, op. cit., pp. 125-131, 262-266.
not his statement of the problem also show clearly Christianity's opportunity?

The spiritual disintegration of our day consists in the loss of an ultimate meaning of life by the people of Western civilization. And with the loss of the meaning of life, they have lost personality and community. . . .

The loss of personality is interdependent with the loss of community. Only personalities can have community. De-personalized beings have social interrelations. They are essentially lonely, and therefore they cannot bear to be alone because this would make them conscious of their loneliness and, with it, of the loss of the meaning of life. . . . And there is no community because there is nothing to have in common.

What does our instrument of interpretation suggest by way of implementing a creative fellowship in the experience of those who believe? These three suggestions for the church fellowship grow out of our earlier discussion of group dynamics, and primarily stem from our basic assumption that the group or fellowship is a Gestalt.

1. The fellowship group, no less than the individual, needs an organizing center. The lack of an agreed-upon organizing center brings us to the pitfall elaborated by Tillich, that there is no community because there is nothing to have in common. Furthermore, the group, just like the individual, can choose to organize itself about a variety of centers, with varying results.

The group might choose, or more likely unconsciously develop, to be member-centered. That is to say, the fellow-

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1Tillich, op. cit., p. 262.

2Ibid., p. 264.
ship is organized around the needs and drives of each member. The individual members are primarily trying to get their own goals and methods adopted by the group. Needless to say, such anarchy in a group is extremely difficult to deal with, and would certainly never produce the experience of fellowship with other persons which a new relation to God demands.

The fellowship might organize itself around itself; it would then be **group-centered**. This would be a considerable improvement over the member-centered group, for morale and effort would be combined here. Individual selfishness would be overcome and some very effective work could be done. New relationships with other persons would be established in such a group. But there are dangers. The group-centered fellowship can itself become selfish and think only of itself. When it uses itself as the organizing center it cannot possibly relate itself to the largest possible field. For example, the communist party may be group-centered, but this does not bring a redemptive fellowship for those outside and probably not for those within. Likewise, we have seen young people's groups in churches which were so group-centered that a newcomer was excluded from the very fellowship the church professed to give.

Another alternative is the group which uses as its organizing center some task which all of the members share; a **task-centered** group. Again we find some values in such an orientation. Selfishness is not allowed much rein, and a common goal may give the group excellent morale, at least
until the task is completed. But task-centeredness may be the organizing center at the expense of other needs of the individual members. How often within the Christian Church committees are so intent upon their tasks that they are suddenly amazed to hear that one of their members has had a nervous breakdown. Task-centeredness may blind a fellowship to the needs of members, which must be recognized if a new relation to other persons is to be established.

Member, group, task may be the organizing center for the fellowship. But such orientation in the fellowship will never achieve the creative redemptive power which is possible and necessary for the church. This is not to say that there is not some good in each of these orientations. But the Christian fellowship is unique because it is God-centered. The members and the group have this in common: faith in God through Jesus Christ. The organizing center for the group as well as for the individual is God. A truly redemptive community is established when this is its basis, because the members really have something "in common." God-centeredness is the ultimate orientation giving meaning to the life of the group, and directive as to the relationships of the group both within and without itself.

2. The parts (members) of a fellowship group as a Gestalt are dynamically interrelated. With God as the organizing center of the fellowship, love must be accepted as the ground of all relationships and action of the group. "Perfect love casteth out fear." The experience of love in the fellow-
ship will cast out the fears of sin, guilt, loneliness, isolation, and lack of meaning. Love, as the prime factor of interrelationship in the fellowship, will create the "good" Gestalt. Fear would create a very "weak" Gestalt for once the threat was removed the Gestalt would break down. The church is a "Gestalt of Grace" to use Tillich's phrase.\(^1\)

In such a fellowship the members would "be a Christ to each other." Such a fellowship would share the burdens and cares of each other. They would give of themselves with complete honesty, knowing that they could trust and were trusted by the other members. The self would feel completely "at home" in such a fellowship, no longer finding it necessary to keep up his false front of status and prestige. For the first time the self would be completely able to "be himself." At the present time we have intimations that this kind of group is possible from the experience of some pastoral counseling,\(^2\) from some secular therapy,\(^3\) and from some experiments in group therapy.\(^4\) But should not this kind of fellowship be the true business of the church rather than of secular agencies? Why should people have to seek out psychologists for the kind of experience the fellowship ought to offer?\(^5\)

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\(^1\)Ibid., p. xx.


\(^3\)Cf. Rogers, *op. cit.*

\(^4\)Cf. Rogers, *op. cit.*, chaps. vii and viii.

not this intimate fellowship, dynamically interrelated through love, been the secret of the church throughout history, beginning with the disciples, the churches established by Paul, the band led by St. Francis, the Wesleyan meeting, the Quaker band, the church meeting of the Congregationalists, and a host of others?

Possibly the following pithy rhyme illustrates the operation of love in the fellowship in such a way that we all can recognize it.

I was angry with my friend;
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe;
I told it not, my wrath did grow.¹

3. But how can this glorious fellowship occur in the "weak" Gestalts which occupy so many churches? We recall the organization of a Gestalt and remember that a change in any part affects the whole. Following this line of reasoning, Kurt Lewin devised some ingenious experiments which led him to the conclusion that leadership is the key factor or at least the factor most readily available.² He was particularly concerned with democratic and autocratic groups and the German culture following the recent war, but his findings are equally true for the fellowship of the church.

... a change in methods of leadership is probably the quickest way to bring about a change in the cultural atmosphere of a group. For the status and power of the leader or of the leading section of a group make them

¹Kurt Lewin, Resolving Social Conflicts, p. 102.
²Ibid., Part I.
the key to the ideology and the organization of the life of that group.¹

The position of the minister within the fellowship would be the easiest place to begin such a change. Such a conclusion is somewhat similar to Emil Brunner's conclusion that "The day of the 'clergyman-church' is past for the single reason that it is no longer able to meet the spiritual needs of our time."² Brunner goes on to remind us of the intense pastoral work with individuals carried out by the apostles. They were not content only to preach and to tell people what to do. Even Paul, who might have been forgiven for not spending time with individuals and with groups because of his wide traveling and preaching, tells the Ephesians, "I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears."³ A very intense pastoral work was directed to individuals by the man who proselytized half the world.

The minister can change the fellowship by changing his own attitude and ways of operating in the group. Church groups are too often minister-centered, resulting in a very "weak" Gestalt of a group. How could the minister (often the leader) change so as to implement God-centeredness in the group and a consequent operation of love among the members of the fellowship? After all, the test is not in what the

¹Ibid., p. 49.
minister believes about this, but in the action which stems from the belief.

Gestalt psychology and group dynamics both would suggest that the minister try to create conditions (that is, create an atmosphere) where each member of the fellowship group feels free to give to the group his maximum contribution and to express his real needs. A "rule of thumb" might read: to the extent that the fellowship does not utilize all the ideas, call on all the skills, and recognize all the feelings of its members, the Gestalt of the group will be less "good" than it might have been. In a sense the minister (leader) is a catalytic agent attempting to help all these things happen. Here are some of the functions that the minister can perform in helping to create this atmosphere of love.

a) He attempts to understand all expressions of ideas and feelings in order to facilitate communication between members of the fellowship.

b) He accepts all viewpoints and feelings, so that honest expressions of the fellowship are brought out in the open where the group can handle them, rather than allowing such expressions and needs to be the close personal property of one individual to be nursed privately and defended.

c) He clarifies the feelings, ideas, meanings, and position of the group and of the members.

d) He listens to the group and its members.

e) He integrates contributions of individuals into
the total fellowship process.

f) He allows the fellowship to make all decisions.

g) He allows the fellowship to feel responsible, and waits for the group to take the responsibility.

h) He allows the group to do any evaluating which is done. Group dynamics sees the above actions as functions of leadership which are not the sole possessions of the minister but rather can be performed by any member of the group. Therefore,

i) He loses his leadership and becomes more and more an equal member of the fellowship as other members begin performing these functions. Every man is a priest to every other man.

j) He is a resource person. If the minister exercises this function too strongly in the beginning, before the fellowship has come to feel responsible and has begun to perform some of the functions of leadership, then the prestige and status of the minister, plus his training in some of the areas of church and religious life, will so overwhelm the members of the group that they will relax and "let the minister do it." Premature exercise of this "resource function" stifles the initiative of the members. For example, it is not enough that the minister be able to pray. Every member of the fellowship must have grown in the practice of prayer in order that the "good" Gestalt might be established.

These are some of the clues which our Gestalt instrument offers to Christianity for the deepening of the experience
of fellowship. We are not presumptuous enough to think that we have understood fully the workings of the God-centered group which the minister is privileged to lead. Yet it may be that a radical change of attitude on the part of the minister would do more to implement the experience of fellowship in the church than some of the preaching. There is a power and a relationship which can exist "between man and man," to use Martin Buber's phrase, which we only begin to touch. Our faith must not only reach to God but must venture out to our fellowmen with the love which God commands.

H. The Experience of Worship

Worship is "the response of the creature to the Eternal."1 "Worship is the approach of man as he seeks to establish a harmonious relationship with God."2 Here in those two definitions we find a beginning for our Gestalt interpretation of worship. The self in its struggle to relate itself to the largest possible field and to establish a Gestalt which takes into account all of the forces of that field, seeks finally to relate itself to God. We earlier described this process operating within nurture and conversion, and leading to the self's recognizing God as its organizing center. Worship partakes of this same Gestalt process and in it the self struggles for the same goal. In the words of Evelyn Underhill:

1Underhill, Worship, p. 3.
2Weatherhead, op. cit., p. 453.
Worship, then, is an avenue which leads the creature out from his inveterate self-occupation to a knowledge of God, and ultimately to that union with God which is the beatitude of the soul; . . . We see in its first beginnings man's emerging recognition of the Living Will which is the cause of all his living; and the gradual deepening and widening of this recognition, in diverse ways and manners, till at last all ways and manners are swallowed up in a self-giving love.

Thus worship purifies, enlightens, and at last transforms, every life submitted to its influence.1

Weatherhead says substantially the same thing.

Thus in worship, when we express the emotion of admiration for those qualities which God personifies, we are remade in His image, and the more we can look away from ourselves to Him, the more we benefit, paradoxical though this may sound.2

Worship may be private or corporate, but this is its goal. Corporate worship is made possible because the fellowship shares an organizing center, namely God, and thus seeks as a group to celebrate their common center and their common destiny. True worship does not take place apart from the kind of fellowship group we described in the previous section. A collection of selves, unrelated to each other, provides the weakest kind of Gestalt, a mere geographical Gestalt which has no communal aspects to celebrate in worship. "True worship is, at its best, an offering to God on the part of a beloved community united in the love of God and the service of man."3

1 Underhill, Worship, pp. 17 f.
2 Weatherhead, op. cit., p. 453.
3 Ibid., p. 455.
Let us look again at the Gestalt process of insight which we developed in the section on conversion,\(^1\) to see how it also provides us an interpretation of worship. The process is fourfold: involvement in the field, meditation, insight and verification.

1. Involvement in the Field

The fellowship of selves is met together for worship, and they begin when one of their number or the minister, leads them in a call to worship. (Prior to this, the organ prelude may help to create involvement in the field.) This is most often followed by a prayer of invocation, the singing of hymns, and readings from the scripture. All of these things are part of the adoration of God. Thus, the fellowship recalls to its mind the nature of the life to which they are committed, and "involve themselves in the field," by recognizing their common organizing center. Familiar scripture and hymns help recall them to this common field; thus have developed ritual and liturgy. This is a necessity if the congregation is to participate. Pattern is needed to allow the members to know where they fit in.\(^2\) But ritual also utilizes the general tendency of living creatures to repeat their actions and thereby re-experience the accompanying emotion.

"Ritual tends by means of appropriate sounds and gestures to

\(^1\)See above, p. 166 ff.

provoke the repetition of a given religious attitude which can be shared by all taking part in the rite."¹

To this shared field, the individual selves bring their own unique perceptions of the frustrations and joys which are their particular lot. As the fellowship recalls the glorious life to which it belongs, the life of the individual self is held up and examined in the light of this commitment. The individual self is further involved in the field by virtue of his particular needs for forgiveness, love, strength, thanksgiving, and inspiration.

2. Meditation

Recalled to his high commitment to God and His service of love, the individual self, as well as the corporate fellowship, finds itself in a struggle. There is a wrestling within the soul of each self as he confesses his shortcomings, ponders the pattern his life is making, and seeks for a better course of action in the face of God's demands. The self or the fellowship may actually be seeking answers to problems, and if not specific ones, then the general problem of finite creatures struggling to live up to the demands of the Infinite.

Corporate prayer may lift up these struggles of individuals and of the fellowship. Pre-eminently, the sermon is the time when the Word of God is related to the situations in which people find themselves. The minister attempts to be the vessel of God, bringing His message and commands into the

Ibid., p. 32 f.
lives of the people. In preaching itself, the minister is likely to be engaged in a struggle, trying to determine the message of God for this time and this place and this people. The sermon verbalizes the struggle of the people.¹

3. Insight

And then if the struggle is resolved, insight has come to the self's field and maybe to the fellowship's field. That is to say, a better Gestalt is established. The self feels renewed in spirit and conviction. This is the true goal of worship: not the selfish reinforcement of ego-centered behavior or neurotic desires,² but the redemption of life until God is the organizing center. Underhill says it in this fashion:

... Christian worship is always directed towards the sanctification of life. All worship has a creative aim, for it is a movement of the creature in the direction of Reality; and here, the creative aim is that total transfiguration of the created order in which the incarnation of the Logos finds its goal. Christian worship, then, is to be judged by the degree in which it tends to Holiness; since this is the response of the pressure of the Holy which is asked of the Church and of the soul. The Christian is required to use the whole of his existence as sacramental material; offer it and consecrate it at every point, so that it may contribute to the Glory of God.³

With this ultimate demand upon the life of the self, unachievable except for the power of God, is it any wonder that

²Weatherhead, op. cit., pp. 454 f.
³Underhill, op. cit., p. 77.
worship is always a time when new insight comes to the self? Recalled to his fundamental commitment to God, in worship the self will ever see new ways of serving Him. A better Gestalt will be established.

4. Verification

The everyday action of the self will be the verification of the insight of the worship period. The worship service often symbolizes new commitment in the offering laid on the altar or in a dedicatory prayer. By their fruits you will know them. The process of verification continues beyond the end of the service into "secular" life.

Thus we have seen that the Gestalt understanding of insight gives us an interpretation of worship which is not unrelated to the expectations of religious people in all ages. Farmer compares worship—and therefore our process—to individual revelation.

It is often said: "Oh, I have had no revelations"; Yet, if week by week, in the worship of the Christian fellowship, ordinary folk apprehend anew, in relation to their own individual situation, the challenge and the forgiveness of God, that is every bit as much revelation as ever came to the most gifted prophet or seer in history.¹

Surely the process of insight affords us a useful interpretation of how the self apprehends anew the demands of God.

The fact that there are so many types of worship ranging from the Catholic mass to the Free Churches to the Quaker service is understandable within our Gestalt inter-

¹Farmer, The World and God, p. 83.
pretation. Such wide variety is the outcome of the unique
dields in which people live. The pattern of worship which
is rewarding for one self cannot possibly be perceived as
useful or rewarding by another self. The selves of the world,
out of their own needs, must worship God in many ways, even
as they have perceived the nature of God in many ways. For
men are finite and fallible; only God is infinite. Underhill
agrees with this position when she says in her preface:

... my wish has been to show all these (the variety
of worship forms) as chapels of various types in the one
Cathedral of the Spirit; and dwell on the particular
structure of each, the love which has gone to their
adornment, the shelter they can offer to many different
kinds of adoring souls, not on the shabby hassocks, the
crude pictures, or the paper flowers. Each great form
of Christian cultus is here regarded, to use an Ignatian
simile, as a "contemplation to procure the love of God":
for its object is to lead human souls, by different ways
to that act of pure adoration which is the consummation
of worship.1

Thus the experience of worship can be interpreted by Gestalt,
not only in its process as we have seen here, but also in
terms of the gradual crystallization of the originally form-
less feelings and emotions of all peoples into some kind of
perceptible and unified forms of religion and worship. This
latter suggestion, which takes us far beyond the confines of
our subject and space, is admirably developed by Van Der
Leeuw.2

Our previous discussion on the dynamics of the fellow-
ship group gives us a word of caution in the consideration of

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1 Underhill, *Worship*, chap. xii.
2 Van Der Leeuw, *op. cit.*, passim.
worship. If it is to be a vital experience for all members there must be participation by all and not merely passive observation.1 There must be self-involvement if the experience of worship is ever to reach the high goal we have indicated. No one else can worship for the self. The self must organize its own field and therefore have an active part in the experience of worship. Mellon has raise the same question in the following passage.

The worshipper in the Protestant Church must be made to feel that something is really being done, and also—what the Roman Catholic cannot feel—that he himself has a personal share in doing it. The want of this condition accounts for the prevalent experience today: worship has become a passive affair; the people no longer pray, but listen to the minister as he prays; the congregation has become an audience, a body of listeners, waiting for a mental impression to be made on themselves. Those who feel in this way towards the Church sooner or later cease to go to Church at all. Protestantism, in its dread of idolatry, has concentrated its appeal to one of our senses only—the sense of hearing; and has fallen back on a static and sedentary form of service which has a fatal tendency to create the merely passive attitude. We fully admit that no single method is possible to the exclusion of all others. The variations in human temperament and taste are so great, that diversity of ritual among Christian Churches—even among those who believe alike—will remain desirable and necessary. But God is known to men as Activity; and man's natural response to God is in the action of good works and in the action of worship, which involves the whole man and not merely one of his senses.2

The Gestalt interpretation of worship recalls us to the necessity of first-hand experience by the self. No second-hand experience will ever achieve the "good" Gestalt, for it can

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not be the unique, and therefore reconciling, experience which every self needs. This conclusion about the experience of worship is equally true of the experience of prayer to which we now turn.

I. The Experience of Prayer

Our final experience of religion brings us to the personal life of worship, which is most often summarized and best described as prayer.1 James defined prayer in the wider sense as "meaning every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine."2 He goes on to say that the final reason for prayer is that we just can't help praying. We are in a world where we are often not entirely at home. Prayer is the "soul's sincere desire" to seek a reestablishment of right relationships with the total field. Selbie notes that prayer "springs ultimately from our relation to the universe around us . . . man feels himself to be not altogether at one with his world."3 Thus the Gestalt interpretation of prayer and its goal is not essentially different from that which we found in worship. Let us apply our Gestalt process of insight to the experience of the self as he comes to prayer.

2 James, op. cit., p. 454.
3 W. B. Selbie, op. cit., p. 219.
The self comes to prayer as a whole, that is to say, he has his world organized into a Gestalt in which all the interrelated facts of that world are perceived in a meaningful pattern. In prayer the self pours out his mind and heart, possibly moving through some of the familiar stages of thanksgiving, adoration, confession, intercession, and petition. Can we not say that this can be described as involvement in the field? Here the self is reviewing his Gestalt and the pattern his life is making. And in his prayers he may well bring forth perceptions of his situation which he does not admit to any other group or in any other way.

But the forces of the individual's field are constantly changing, and thus disequilibrium and tension threaten his Gestalt. Sickness, uncertainty, failure, argument, war or any one of the myriad stresses and strains of this life have brought upset and tension into the field. The Gestalt has been weakened, and gaps appear. Completeness and closure are needed. Here we have the period of meditation when the self struggles with its Gestalt, trying to bring all phases of its organization under the guidance of God. The individual may be restless and anxious because of this lack of wholeness, consumed by a feeling that now he does not possess the best possible Gestalt. He feels out of step with all of the factors of his world, of other men and of God.

In his prayer the self seeks for a new Gestalt which will give meaning and direction to his life. The individual is expectant, waiting, searching for an answer to his prayer.
That answer may come in the silence of meditation or in the
days that follow or in any of the manifold ways God has of
speaking to man. But however the answer comes, can it not
be termed insight? A reorganization of the field has oc-
curred. The new factors have been taken into the field and
assimilated to make it all meaningful once again. The an-
swer as insight may come suddenly, giving the individual a
new thought, a plan of action, decision about goals, a feel-
ing of forgiveness, or new understanding of his relationships
with other selves, the world and God. Verification occurs in
the subsequent action and feeling of the self, as he rises
from his prayer and goes into life. Such an interpretation
of prayer does not detract but makes more understandable,
William James' conclusion:

Through prayer, religion insists, things which can-
not be realized in any other manner come about; energy
which but for prayer would be bound is by prayer set free
and operates in some part, be it objective or subjective,
of the world of facts.\(^1\)

Dr. Williams has an illuminating paragraph on prayer as a re-
source in making moral decisions, which is in line with this
Gestalt interpretation.

There is no way to the deeper levels of moral in-
sight more important than the lifting of the mind and
conscience to the spirit of God. The humble act of
self-examination, the opening of the closed self to
the cleansing and healing work of God; the sealing of
moral resolve in dependence upon the power of God;
all this is what real prayer can mean in the moral life.
Divine guidance does not mean the insertion by supernat-

\(^1\)James, op. cit., p. 456
ural means of ideas in our minds. It is dangerous to take any particular notion which we derive in the moment of prayer and identify it with the will of God. We know too much about the ways of self-deception and wish-fulfillment to be satisfied with that. Dr. Buttrick in a classic phrase has said that the greatest service of prayer is "the courageous and creative acceptance of the terms of mortal life." One of those terms is the fallibility of human decisions. Prayer is the sword of the spirit even against its own evil. It is most effective when we approach it in the humility of confession that God's mercy is our first and last need. Then guidance does come in illumination and the power of resolve.

The self's glimpse of ultimate reality and of God's will is finite and limited, yet as his Gestalt is ever more inclusive of the whole of life and its relationships, he will find prayer a method in his maturing Christian experience and action. The figure-ground factor in the organization of a Gestalt gives us a further interpretation. The self enters prayer with his own concerns uppermost in his mind as figure. In prayer the self recedes and becomes as ground while God more and more becomes figure.

Gestalt also suggests that the uniqueness of the individual field and organization means that prayer must be a private formulation. Formalized prayers and devotional books can never be an adequate substitute for even the halting words of the individual soul precisely because, in the final analysis, no one else can organize the self's field for it; it just won't suit. No person can formulate the prayer for another self. Each must come into the presence of God with his own self as a whole. Such a conclusion has always been the ad-

1 Williams, op. cit., pp. 155 f.
vice of the masters of prayer. They have advised us to use their meditations and prayers only as beginnings and suggestions to our own private formulation. W. E. Orchard says it this way in the Introduction to The Temple:

They (the prayers) are therefore recommended rather as meditative preparations for private prayer with the idea that they may stir the soul to adventure for itself upon this greatest of all unexplored territories.

One can argue about prayer and religion indefinitely to very little effect; and although the writer is convinced that prayer is the highest exercise of the rational mind and religion is the very basis of all thought, yet it is impossible to give a full rational account of religion before one has awakened to the needs of one's own soul. And prayer is the very essence of religion; and the only way to solve the problem of prayer is by learning to pray.

The Gestalt concept offers an interpretation of prayer, but what of intercessory prayer? Here we approach a theological discussion, and our psychological principles can only be suggestive, certainly not authoritative. The man of Christian faith believes that he is in touch with a larger whole, ultimately the largest and best possible Gestalt: the world and God. As Christians we are part of that which holds the world together. The shifting of any factor in the whole effects the total organization. That is, the Gestalt must shift just that much to assimilate this new force and maintain its organization. For example, the prayer life of Albert Schweitzer has certainly many times been intercessory. Who can estimate the shifts in the total Gestalt because of his life.

and action? Leslie Weatherhead speaks of intercession and gives illustrations as well as beginning laws of prayer which are not foreign to our idea of a Gestalt.¹ Underhill suggests the same idea when she says:

Each Christian life of prayer, then, however, deeply hidden or apparently solitary in form, will affect the life of the whole Body. By the very fact of its entrance into the sphere of worship, its action is added to that total sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in which the life of the Invisible Church consists . . . each distinct life of prayer, with its particular rhythm, time-span, and capacity makes its essential contribution to that total response which is the essence of worship. . . . it is only from within such intensive lives that intercessory power—the application to particulars of the Eternal Love—seems to arise.²

Perhaps the following quotation from George S. Stewart further emphasizes the relationship of this Gestalt interpretation of prayer to the ideas of religious writers. Dr. Stewart offers his testimony about intercessory prayer.

I have no evidence to offer beyond the religious interpretation of history, the example and instruction of our Lord, the revelation He gave of the Heavenly Father, and the testimony of those who have been so helped. These are sufficient to give vigor to an assertion that every earnest act of intercession affects the situation towards which it is directed so vitally as to create a new situation. Through it circumstances are often changed, and even if these are unchanged hearts are changed, and when hearts are changed circumstances are transformed, till temptations become altar stairs, and a cross becomes a gate into life. No situation remains the same when prayer is made about it. There are influences of many kinds, good and evil, operating in every cause and in every soul, and each of these has power as an element in the battle between good and evil, but the decisive and essential factor

¹Weatherhead, op. cit., chap. vii, sec. III.
²Underhill, Worship, pp. 164 ff.
in each case is the loving power of God called forth, or rather made way for, by the intercessions and prayers of Christian folk. For a time things may seem to go on much as before, but the decisive power has entered in, and even mountains must move. Prayer always creates a new situation.\(^1\)

We are beginning to understand the interrelationships in the physical world; we have only begun to surmise the interrelatedness of the spiritual world. It, too, may form a total Gestalt, in which the whole is radically different from the sum of the parts, and in which each part is dependent upon the whole. Such Gestalt interpretation may lend contemporary enrichment to Paul's great image of the body of Christ. "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."\(^2\)

**J. Conclusion**

Our Gestalt instrument offers us one interpretation of religious experiences. That is to say, the basic experiences of religion taken individually as sub-wholes or taken collectively as the religious life of the self as a whole, are illuminated and understandable with the Gestalt concept.

Obviously, Gestalt does not tell us everything about these experiences. There are other interpretations. There is the advantage, however, that our interpretation is itself a Gestalt. Thus, we do not have to shift our argument or

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\(^2\) 1 Cor. 12:27.
technique at any point, but rather are able to refer to this single-minded interpretation. Such a unified position is a distinct advantage. In our next chapter we shall see how this unity applies in an interpretation of the types of religious experience.
CHAPTER VI

TYPES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

A. Introduction

We have already been confronted with the variety of definitions of religious experience,¹ and so will not be surprised to discover that efforts to classify religious experiences into several major types have proved very difficult. It often seems that the one consistent item about typologies of any kind is the exception and overlapping which is invariably necessary. This has proved equally true for the psychologists of religious experience. It will also be true for us, for Gestalt finds it necessary in the words of Allport, "to accommodate the one disturbing truth that there are as many varieties of religious experience as there are religiously inclined mortals upon the earth."² We might well accept the warning of another writer,

There is no shallower method in psychology than that of those who arrange types in a neatly numbered series and then proceed to fit the infinite varieties of human life into their rigidly conceived framework.³

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¹See above, chap. 1.
²Allport, The Individual and His Religion, p. 27.
However inadequate typologies may be, it is always useful to attempt to analyze phenomena. Though the types are not a final or authoritative division they do help us sort out problems within the whole, and lead us to a new understanding of the relationship of various kinds of religious experience.

Our purpose is twofold: first, to consider some types which have been a continuing concern of religious psychologists, and second, to observe how the type or pattern of religious experience is in a sense a "whole" which determines the "parts" or basic experiences of religion which we examined in the last chapter. And, finally, to anticipate our conclusion, the three "types" which we shall consider are really parts of a larger whole. If any one type is exaggerated as the type at the expense of the others, the breadth and richness of Christian religious experience suffers. Within the confines of this thesis we cannot be exhaustive in our consideration of religious typology but Gestalt is suggestive of an interpretation of this perennial problem. Let us look at some of the typologies which have been used.

William James did not rigidly systematize his findings in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, but in general he found two main classes of religious persons: the healthy-minded and the morbid-minded with many sub-species in both. Two fundamental types of religious experience correspond to these classes, the once-born experience and the twice-born experience or conversion. To these two types he adds the
mystical experience, making three great classes with many species in each. James did not elaborate a typology so much as he gave us masterful descriptions of the religious experiences of certain individuals.

William Adams Brown suggested three main types of religious attitudes: imperialistic, individualistic and democratic.

By imperialism we agreed to understand the type of religion whose representatives believe that they serve God most acceptably when they submit to the control of some existing institution, the supremacy of which in the world they identify with the triumph of God's will. By individualism we agreed to understand a type of religion whose representatives despair of satisfaction through any existing institution and find solace in the immediate communion between the individual soul and God. By democracy we understood a type of religion whose representatives are convinced that they serve God best when they discover His presence in other persons and unite with them in the progressive realization of the ideal social order which it is God's purpose to establish on earth through the free cooperation of men.

These three types are not unrelated to the two types which Erich Fromm develops: authoritarian and humanistic religious experiences. The essential element in the former is the surrender to a power transcending man.

... the reason for worship, obedience, and reverence lies not in the moral qualities of the deity, not in love or justice, but in the fact that it has control, that is, has power over man. Furthermore it shows that the higher power has a right to force man to worship him and that

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lack of reverence and obedience constitutes sin.\textsuperscript{1} Humanistic religion is centered around man and his strength. Religious experience in this kind of religion is the experience of oneness with the All, based on one's relatedness to the world as it is grasped with thought and with love.

Faith is certainty of conviction based on one's experience of thought and feeling, not assent to propositions on credit of the proposer. The prevailing mood is that of joy, while the prevailing mood in authoritarian religion is that of sorrow and of guilt.\textsuperscript{2}

Martin Buber's \textit{Two Types of Faith}\textsuperscript{3} adds a further distinction to our analysis. He finds in the end that there are only two kinds of faith; both are accepted by the individual without his being able to give a sufficient reason. One is trust and the other is the acknowledgement of truth. Buber's own contrast of the two types will illuminate his meaning.

In one the man "finds himself" in the relationship of faith, in the other he is "converted" to it. The man who finds himself in it is primarily the member of a community whose covenant with the Unconditioned includes and determines him within it; the man who is converted to it is primarily an individual, one who has become an isolated individual, and the community arises as the joining together of the converted individuals.\textsuperscript{4}

We might go on multiplying these attempts at a typology of religion and religious experience. For example,


\textsuperscript{2}Ibid., p. 37.

\textsuperscript{3}Martin Buber, \textit{Two Types of Faith} (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1951).

\textsuperscript{4}Ibid., P. 9.
Hocking's distinction of revealed and non-revealed religions is useful in some situations. He is in agreement with Soderblom here who discusses two types of revealed or prophetic religion: particular and general. Soderblom also adds the religion of mysticism. Rudolph Otto recognized the great changing patterns of religious experience, made even more complex by psychological and cultural factors. In consequence we have correspondences and "convergences of types," as Otto calls them, which manifest interesting and instructive similarities and differences. Therefore, Otto attempted to find the one basic element in religious experience. Henri Bergson made the important distinction between static and dynamic religion. Moore suggested the possibility of dividing religious experience into mystical and non-mystical types. A great deal of work has been done in analyzing the religious experience of mysticism, and it seems to be one of the clearest types.

1W. E. Hocking, Living Religions and a World Faith (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1940), passim.


4See above, chap. 1.


6Moore, op. cit., pp. 190 ff.
Such examples will suffice to demonstrate that any typology must be a tentative thing, as McKenzie\textsuperscript{1} and Moore\textsuperscript{2} have said. Furthermore, any analysis will be incomplete. In line with our own Gestalt interpretation we can agree with C. C. J. Webb when he says, "... I would see in the religious experience of mankind as a whole a genuine unity."\textsuperscript{3}

However, Gestalt will not let us rest content in any comfortable feeling about the whole, for the various principles of organization insist upon an analysis to discover sub-wholes and the interrelationships of the parts. Thus, though we can agree with Webb, we must at the same time proceed to the problem of discovering a possible typology based upon our Gestalt principles and the typologies we have been reviewing.

In considering this whole which is the religious experience of mankind, any part might be a logical starting point which would lead us to the other parts. Because of the Gestalt emphasis upon the process of reorganization, we choose to start with the unique individual experience of reconciliation. Such a starting point also does justice to the Gestalt understanding of the individual's unique field and perception. We shall designate this first type as the

\textsuperscript{1}McKenzie, *Psychology, Psychotherapy and Evangelicalism*, p. 3 ff.

\textsuperscript{2}Moore, *op. cit.*, pp. 187 ff.

It is marked by freedom and spontaneity, and by knowledge gained through experience as distinguished from knowledge by doctrine.\(^1\) This evangelical type has often been the starting point for religious reform and new insight into the nature of God. The most intense religious experiences of this type lead to the founding of a religion, in the sense elaborated by Joachim Wach.\(^2\) Dr. Dickie has given us a clear definition of the type in Christian terms when he says,

A Christian in the full evangelical sense of the word is not simply one who accepts as true certain propositions about God and the world, man, sin, redemption and the other topics which are ordinarily set down as belonging to the cycle of Christian Doctrine. He is one who has made the Christian salvation his own, and thus knows himself as reconciled to God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and knows God as reconciling the world unto Himself . . . A man is not a real Christian, however correct his views upon all these subjects, unless he has this personal knowledge of the Christian salvation of which God is the Author and Christ the Mediator . . . For Christianity has always lived and functioned in the world, not as a body of ideas or doctrines but as a religion, that is a felt personal relationship to God.\(^3\)

The evangelical type is akin to James' "twice-born souls" and to Buber's "converted" type of faith. This type is also related to Whitehead's definition of religion as the "art and theory of the internal life of man," which he considers "the direct negation of the theory that religion is primarily a

\(^1\)McKenzie, Psychology, Psychotherapy and Evangelicalism, chap. 11.
social fact."1

Thus, the evangelical type results in the formation of a Gestalt which becomes further articulated and differentiated. If this process remains a personal thing, in which the individual continually refines and deepens his own communion with God, then we can designate a second type of religious experience: the mystical. J. H. Leuba defined mysticism as

... any experience taken by the experiencer to be a contact (not through the senses, but "immediate," "intuitive") or union of the self with a larger-than-self, be it called the World-Spirit, God, the Absolute, or otherwise.2

The mystical type of religious experience overcomes the disintegration of the self and achieves a unity. It usually remains a private matter between the self and God, something beyond communication to other selves.

The articulation and differentiation of the individual's religious experience may take another course, in which he shares his experience and enters into communion with other selves as well as with God. This results in what we shall call a third type of religious experience: the church-type. Doctrine, dogma, cult are articulated from the basic evangelical experience. Implicitly or explicitly, the way of salvation becomes prescribed within the system of the church. This is equivalent to Buber's man who finds himself within a community

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1Whitehead, Religion in the Making, pp. 6, 48.

of faith. It may also be the experience of James' once-born souls. Joachim Wach has described this process of religious organization stemming from the primary religious experience of the founder. The result is that selves are subjected to an exaggeration of dogma or what Thouless calls the "traditional element in belief." Examples of this type of religious experience are to be found in the Roman Catholic Church and the majority of major Protestant Churches, whether they are authoritarianly or democratically organized.

We turn now to a more detailed interpretation of these three types of religious experience: evangelical, mystical and church. Our interpretation will utilize the Gestalt requirements laid down in Chapter III. It will be apparent already that all three types must be somehow dynamically interrelated in a total Gestalt if there is to be a genuine unity in the religious experience of mankind as a whole.

B. The Evangelical Experience

This type of religious experience is distinguished by its emphasis upon the first-hand experience of the self with God. As we have seen in Dr. Dickie's statement, the important thing is not opinion about the subject but "personal knowledge of the Christian salvation." Through the centuries men and

1Wach, Sociology of Religion, chap. v.
2Thouless, op. cit., chap. ii.
3See especially, McKenzie, Psychology, Psychotherapy and Evangelicalism, passim.
4See above, chap. vi, p. 220.
women of varying theological positions have found themselves returning to this primary emphasis upon personal experience. J. C. McKenzie illustrates this type by contrasting knowledge by description and knowledge by acquaintance.

The Evangelicals emphasize knowledge by acquaintance; they believe because they have an experience; they realize Christ rather than know Him; experience Him rather than believe in Him. The experience of the forgiveness of sin for example is not reached by methods of rationalization; the assurance of salvation is knowledge by acquaintance. Strictly speaking, the reference of their experience to God is outside knowledge by acquaintance; but it is not outside the psychological experience of realization. The experience, whatever reference it may be given, is real.

It is this experience, this realization, this knowledge by acquaintance which the Evangelicals emphasize, and which the great leaders of the Evangelical Movement attempted to evoke.¹

The knowledge which comes in this way is immediate; and A. N. Whitehead would agree that all such immediate knowledge is infallible.²

The contrast to the church-type of religious experience is seen when we realize that doctrine and dogma grow out of these primary experiences. The emphasis is upon the experience which the doctrine merely describes. "The contention of the Evangelicals was that what the doctrine conceptualizes must be experienced anew by every believer."³ C. G. Jung also finds that though these evangelical experiences do not estab-

¹McKenzie, Psychology, Psychotherapy and Evangelicalism, p. 24 f.
³McKenzie, Psychology, Psychotherapy and Evangelicalism, p. 25.
lish dogmas or doctrines, they are the starting point for both.

Religious experience is absolute. It is indisputable. You can only say that you have never had such an experience, and your opponent will say: "Sorry, I have." And there your discussion will come to an end. No matter what the world thinks about religious experience, the one who has it possesses the great treasure of a thing that has provided him with the source of life, meaning and beauty, and that has given a new splendour to the world and mankind. He has pítas (Faith) and peace... Nobody can know what the ultimate things are. We must, therefore, take them as we experience them.

Whitehead also finds this primary experience of religion to be the starting point for elaboration of doctrine.

The fact of religious vision, and its history of persistent expansion, is our one ground for optimism. Apart from it, human life is a flash of occasional enjoyments lighting up a mass of pain and misery, a bagatelle of transient experience.

It is from the most intense evangelical experiences, that Christianity has received its new visions. Joachim Wach finds this primary experience to be the beginning of a religion; it develops from this original experience of the founder. The evangelical experience may also lead to protest against the established forms of theology, cult and organization. Luther and Wesley protested because of their own basic experiences. Paul Tillich goes so far as to interpret the nature of historical Protestantism as permanent.

1Jung, Psychology and Religion, p. 50.
4Ibid., chap. v, sections 10-12.
Because of this emphasis upon the unique evangelical experience for each individual, Protestantism is always in a dialectical tension between form and protest.2

The evangelical finds the source of his direct experience in the Person of Christ and His Work and the authority of the Bible. There are necessarily great differences of interpretation, but it is from these two theological themes that the evangelical draws his inspiration.3 Thus, "the real mark of Evangelicalism is not so much a new doctrine as a new emphasis on ancient doctrine, and in particular, a new fervour."4

The essential thing in the evangelical experience is the inner conviction which comes to each self, regardless of theological outlook. McKenzie sees the Cross as crucial to this experience and also as symbolizing the unity of all who experience this inner conviction.

It is the conviction that something was done by God in relation to sin and its forgiveness, and not what was not done that unites into one class men and women of such different cultural, social and theological outlook. This unity of conviction regarding the cross with great diversity of interpretation points decisively to the fact that it is the experience that the Cross evokes--the conviction of sin, its forgiveness, the final breaking of the power of sin, and the removal of the last barrier to free fellowship with God--which is the stable and


2Tillich, The Protestant Era, chap. xiv.

3McKenzie, Psychology, Psychotherapy and Evangelicalism, pp. 27 ff.

4Ibid., p. 22.
permanent element in evangelical religion. It is not a concept of sin that is believed, but concrete sinful tendencies which are experienced, and which alienate the heart from God, that divide the soul and burden the mind. The Cross, it is believed by every type of Evangelical, removes the alienation, lifts the burden, unifies the soul, reconciles the soul to God, and thus the sinner and God are at At-one-ment.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 39 f.}

With this description of the evangelical type of religious experience in mind, what interpretation does our Gestalt instrument lend to this experience?

1. The evangelical type of religious experience emphasizes the process of reorganization and the achievement of a new Gestalt by the self. We have already developed this process in several sections of our thesis\footnote{See above, chap. v, especially the sections on Conversion and Reconciliation, pp. 166-180. Cf. also chap. iii, section 7, pp. 92 f., on Reorganization; and chap. iv, The Self in Relationship to God, pp. 138 ff.} and we will not repeat the discussion here. It is essentially the process of insight as we related it to conversion, whether gradual or sudden.

Gote Bergsten has admirably described this process of conversion in terms which are not alien to our Gestalt instrument.\footnote{Gote Bergsten, \textit{Pastoral Psychology} (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1951), Part 6, chap. 1, "Conversion and Growth in Grace."} He utilizes the life of John Wesley in illustrating this primary religious experience. "... at his conversion John Wesley moved from a state of Christian living governed by law to another marked by a strict and single-
minded evangelism." Thus, May 24, 1738, marked a boundary line between a religious past and present.

2. The evangelical type of religious experience fulfills the general Gestalt requirements of recognizing the self as a whole as authoritative for itself, within a unique field. In the evangelical experience, it is the personality as a whole that is involved in conversion.

Conversion is not simply the eradication of a complex or the correction of a few faults. The whole attitude to moral and spiritual reality is changed. Conversion, whether slow and gradual or sudden and dramatic is a New Birth in the literal sense of the term.

McKenzie is also aware of the unique field within which each self must discover his own new Gestalt. He agrees with Freud that it is one thing for a minister or psychotherapist to know what is wrong with a soul, and another thing for that soul to know it.

The maintenance of the Gestalt principle that the self is finally authoritative for itself, is a difficult one for those who espouse the evangelical type of religious experience. There is a tendency to generalize from the initial experience and expect others to have the same kind of experience with the same perceptions of form and content. Such an attitude is more akin to a church-type of religious experience.

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1 Ibid., p. 204.
2 See above, chap. iii, pp. 73-77.
3 McKenzie, Psychology, Psychotherapy and Evangelicalism, p. 85.
4 Ibid., pp. 83 f.
in contrast to the evangelical experience which is marked by freedom and spontaneity. Bergsten and McKenzie in the books already cited seem to be aware of this, though their thorough descriptions of the process and content sometimes causes the reader to forget this individual authority.

The author of the thesis speaks out of his own personal experience and conviction at this point. He grew up within an Evangelical Church which insisted upon conversion, and thus early in adolescence he went through the experience. But the process and content were all cut and dried. Although called evangelical, such an experience is more like a church-type experience which we shall discuss later. The authentic inner experience of conviction did not happen until much later, because this denomination was not willing to let God's power work in its mysterious ways and allow the individual self to come to its own unique Gestalt. It was only after the writer had left this denomination and found a fellowship willing to respect his unique nature, that the inner conviction of an evangelical experience occurred.

3. The evangelical type of religious experience is dependent upon the Gestalt principle that behavior is determined by the forces of the field including those within the self. Bergsten recognizes this fact when he speaks of the "pre-history of conversion"\(^1\) in John Wesley's case in particular, and also with conversion in general. Wesley's conversion

\(^1\)Bergsten, op. cit., pp. 203 ff.
was a continuing development within his own church. In 1725 he underwent a revival according to the law; while his evangelical conversion which was made by increasing insight and spontaneity came in 1738. The external forces of the field are important forces in the evangelical experience. Indeed, conversion is usually not the introduction of new material so much as it is the seeing of the old material in a new light and relationship; that is, insight.

The most important forces may be those within the self. An urge to completeness or felt need for reconciliation may drive the individual on toward the unifying experience. Thouless has a long quotation from Dr. Jung about the conversion of St. Paul, which illustrates the work of these field forces. Though the experience on the road to Damascus was sudden, there had been a long period of unconscious incubation.

4. The new Gestalt which is established in the evangelical experience is organized through the operation of the principles of organization which we have previously examined. Perhaps we can illustrate this simply by referring to the evangelical experience of the Apostle Paul. The factor of closure was operating in Paul's zealous search for salvation.

2Thouless, *op. cit.*, pp. 189 f.
With the coming of the insight that he was justified by faith and not by works, Paul attained a sense of direction as to how the whole would fit together. The factors of similarity and proximity were operating in that Paul began to perceive many of his old beliefs in the light of Christ and this new insight of justification by faith. His subsequent letters and descriptions of the life of the Christian draw heavily on the factor of past experience or habit. The new Gestalt was not a bolt from the blue, but a new perception of all the old forces, seen in relationship to the central fact of Christ.

5. The Law of Pragnanz operates in the new Gestalt achieved in the evangelical experience to bring about equilibrium and precision. The articulation and differentiation of the Gestalt will be as good as the field conditions will allow. Thus in the months and years which followed Paul's primary experience, he articulated and differentiated his Gestalt until we can speak of a Pauline theology. Such differentiation leads to the mystical and church-types of religious experience. In the Roman Catholic Church this elaboration of belief has been carried to such a rigid extreme that it clashes with the other Gestalt requirements for the authority of the individual self as a whole.

Thus the evangelical religious experience, though recognized as basic by all churches, is often frustrated in

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1See above, chap. iii, p. 88.
the practice of the churches. Baron Von Hugel claims that even Roman Catholicism is "essentially a twice-born temper."¹ David Roberts describes the dilemma in these words.

The practice of the Christian Churches, however, has often been at odds with what is thus acknowledged in theory. Even when doctrine is explicitly regarded as derivative from the experience of conversion and from continuing fellowship with God, it has nevertheless been employed as a norm for evaluating the genuineness and depth of such experience and fellowship. At the worst, the Churches have acted as though Christianity could be transmitted by getting people to say "yes" to dogmas. But even at best, the primary aim of Christian education and evangelism has been to evoke religious experiences and conversions which fit into accepted conceptions of God and Christ, instead of to uncover at the outset whatever is going on at the deepest, most immediate, and most genuine level.²

The Gestalt interpretation of the evangelical type of religious experience shows us that it is not an isolated and self-sufficient type. Rather it is interrelated dynamically to the other two types of mysticism and church.³

C. The Mystical Experience

We have already suggested the direction which a Gestalt interpretation of mysticism would take: namely, a more intense experience of the self in relationship to God, possibly developing from an initial evangelical experience. If the new Gestalt is differentiated mainly in terms of the self

²Roberts, op. cit., p. 69.
and God, and not communally, mysticism would be the result. Before elaborating our Gestalt interpretation let us look at some of the definitions and theories of other men. We are immediately confronted with the same variety which we have discovered in other areas of religious experience; there seem to be as many definitions as there have been men with the experience.\(^1\)

We noted Leuba's definition of mysticism as contact or union with God.\(^2\) This definition would be something of a half-way house between two extremes: on the one hand mysticism which denies the world and seeks union with God, on the other hand mysticism which gains intuition into all things of the world through its contact with God. Friedrich Heller represents the first instance when he says: "Mysticism is that form of intercourse with God in which the world and self are absolutely denied, in which human personality is dissolved, disappears and is absorbed in the infinite unity of the Godhead."\(^3\) A similar conception is described by John Oman when he says

\[\text{The essential marks of this mysticism are, first, its attitude toward the Natural, as in no form a manifestation of the Supernatural, but a mere confusing manifold, the illusory evanescent; and second, its attitude towards the empirical personality as the source of the unreal. It is}\]

\(^1\) Cf. James, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 399 and Moore, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 190 ff.

\(^2\) See above, chap. vi, p. 221.

the mysticism for which the task of religion is to rid ourselves of the Natural, both as the world and as concrete personality.¹

Such a view has had its extreme expression in Eastern religions, especially some forms of Hinduism, but it has also been influential in the West, resulting in what Canon Raven describes as a negative mysticism, as contrasted to positive mysticism which discovers insight into this world through its contact with the Divine.² The pathological accompaniments or characteristics which have sometimes marked the mystical experience would be of this negative kind.³

Bertrand Russell marks the other extreme when he goes so far as to say that "Mysticism is, in essence, little more than a certain intensity and depth of feeling in regard to what is believed about the universe."⁴ Such a definition is obviously too broad. A more adequate psychological explanation of positive mysticism is given by H. N. Wieman who feels that it occurs in subjects of favorable psychical constitution when something interferes with the individual's ordinary habits of response to the environment. Then one no longer reacts to habitually selected data but "becomes aware of a far larger

²C. E. Raven, Gifford Lectures, Edinburgh, April 21, 1952.
³Cf. Moore, op. cit., pp. 197 ff. and James, op. cit., Lectures xvi and xvii.
portion of that totality of immediate experience which con-
stantly flows over one."¹ He also describes mysticism as a

... state of diffusive awareness, where habitual
systems of response are resolved into an undirected, un-
selective aliveness of the total organism to the total
event then ensuing.²

The experience involves temporary dissolution of meanings,
but it has positive value in that it may help one to develop
new meanings and values in life or to reinterpret the old.
On this view mystical experience is not necessarily religious,
but becomes so only when through it the individual finds mean-
ings which contribute to the religious quest for the apprehen-
sion and attainment of the highest values.

Evelyn Underhill combines these negative and positive
forms of mysticism and feels that both aspects are necessary.³
For her, mysticism is

... the reaching out of the soul to contact with
those eternal realities which are the subject matter of
religion. And the mystical life is the complete life of
love and prayer which transmutes those objects of belief
into living realities: love and prayer directed to God
for God Himself, and not for any gain for ourselves.⁴

With these definitions in mind we must look briefly at
the process which seems to be involved in mysticism. William

¹H. N. Wieman, Religious Experience and Scientific
²Ibid., p. 39.
³Canon Raven reached the same inclusive conclusion in
his Gifford Lectures, Spring, 1952.
⁴Underhill, Concerning the Inner Life, p. 35.
James made a broad attempt to designate the psychological criteria by which mystical experience may be marked off from non-mystical experience. Mystical experience, he maintained, is characterized by two principal marks, ineffability and noetic quality, and two somewhat less important characteristics, passivity and transiency. This interpretation extends the boundaries of our subject too far to be definitive.

Many writers have worked out a doctrine of the "mystic way," which divides the mystic life into three main stages. These are really various methods whereby such experiences can be induced or strengthened. Three stages are commonly distinguished: (1) the via negative or purgativa, (2) via illuminativa, and (3) the via unitive. Obviously, each stage is capable of subdivision and variation, but they give the connotation of process.

First, the negative or purgative stage is essentially the awakening of the soul from a smaller into a larger world. It may be roughly equivalent to the conversion process; but every conversion is certainly not the prelude for a mystical experience. This awakening is something which happens in the intellectual as well as spiritual life. The life of the self is swallowed up into a larger whole. Purgation is more

1 James, op. cit., pp. 370 ff.

clearly a unique part of mysticism. Here the self begins to slough off its self-centeredness and deny some of its selfishness.

Second, the state of purification leads to that of illumination. Here the consciousness of the self is sharpened and intensified to such a degree that direct contemplation of the unseen and eternal becomes possible. There is not only a joyous apprehension of the absolute but a new awareness of the meaning of everyday things. Rufus Jones describes this stage with this quotation:

I only remember finding myself in the very midst of those wonderful moments, beholding life for the first time in all its young intoxication of liveliness, in its unspeakable joy, beauty, and importance. I cannot say what the mysterious change was—I saw no new thing, but I saw all the usual things in a miraculous new light—in what I believe is their true light... Once out of all the gray days of my life I have looked into the heart of reality; I have witnessed the truth; I have seen life as it really is—ravishingly, ecstatically, madly beautiful, and filled to overflowing with a wild joy and a value unspeakable.

Third, this illumination and vision leads directly to the unitive life when the soul is opened and it is at rest in the One, the absolute, God. The self "feels an overmastering conviction that actual contact is attained with a divine, life-giving, joy-bringing Presence." The mystic has established union with the Divine and he feels a flood of power come into his own life. The love of God has encompassed him.

1Jones, The Inner Life, pp. 176 f.

2Jones, Pathways to the Reality of God, p. 24.
about, giving him peace.

What interpretation can Gestalt make of the mystical type of religious experience? The clue is certainly found in the close parallelism between the stages in the mystic life and the Gestalt process of insight. The same general movement is to be noted, though we do not intend any rigidity about the interpretation.

The first stage in which the soul moves from a smaller into a larger world, in an experience comparable to conversion, is the **involvement in the field.** We see here a further reason why the evangelical experience may be the beginning of the mystical experience, and thus the interdependence of the two types within a larger whole. The initial experience may well reveal glimpses of vast unexplored vistas in the soul's pilgrimage toward God, and this brings us to the period of **meditation** in the Gestalt process. The time of purgation and search in which the self engages in intense and random effort, is filled with brooding and meditation. The self may well feel as Underhill says, "poised uncertainly between two orders."¹ There is a struggle going on between physical and spiritual values. The aims of the soul are more clearly formulated, albeit they are still baffled. Resignation, times of quiet and stillness, listening, are part of this period.

And then the moment or period of **illumination,** so

¹Underhill, The Golden Sequence, p. 53.
clearly related to the Gestalt concept of *insight*. The self feels itself to be in the presence of God or in actual union with God. New meaning fills the life of the self. Completion and fulfillment have come. Hocking describes this practice of the presence of God, as the characteristic mark of the mystic's experience. Verification comes in the individual self's testimony of the presence of God, and also in new insight into the everyday world. The self has regained its poise and its sense of value. The idea of verification in the arena of human relationships may be one way of guarding against the extreme esoteric and negative type of religious experience. The great mystics have done just this, objectifying their hard-won visions in terms of social action and practical living. Suso on his apostolic visit discoursing to multitudes upon the love of God, Catherine of Genoa managing her hospital as a good Samaritan, St. Theresa engaged in her life work as founder of the reformed monasteries were all objectifying the illumination of their mystical experience.

It will be obvious that the mystical type of religious experience involves the self as a whole, and that the self is authoritative for itself. Generally speaking the church has recognized this latter principle (which we have also found in Gestalt) and left the mystic free to go his way. William James came to a similar conclusion.

Mystical states, when well developed, usually are,

and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.\(^1\)

The mystic is, in short, invulnerable, and must be left, whether we relish it or not, in undisturbed enjoyment of his creed. Faith, says Tolstoy, is that by which men live. And faith-state and mystic state are practically convertible terms.\(^2\)

James goes on to say that no special authority should emanate from the mystic's experience which forces others to accept their revelations uncritically. This raises our Gestalt concern with the total field. The mystic has related himself to God, but what of the world and other selves? We noted that the great mystics had attempted to do this in their action, but their actual experience often remains incommunicable. The "good" Gestalt in the relationship to other selves will require a kind of sharing and understanding in which the mystic may not be able to engage,\(^3\) thus frustrating the largest possible whole.

Furthermore, the mystic's behavior is determined by the forces of his field, including his self forces. Evidence of this is to be seen in the fact that most mystical experience occurs within the Roman Catholic Church, while Protestant mystical experience appears to have been almost exclusively sporadic.\(^4\) Why? Is it not because the forces in the field of the Roman Catholic include many references to mystics and their experiences along with a methodical mystical theology.

\(^1\) James, op. cit., p. 414.
\(^2\) Ibid., p. 415.
\(^3\) See above, chap. v, pp. 187-198.
\(^4\) Cf. James, op. cit., p. 397.
outlining a discipline for all who would make the venture? The forces in the field of the Protestant include very little reference to mysticism and certainly no discipline. In fact the Protestants have almost been embarrassed by the subject in recent years. Consequently there are very few Protestant mystics. Furthermore, as we shall see in the next section, the Roman Catholic experience is a church-type, within which the only alternative to acceptance of the authority is mysticism, which is tolerated by the authority.

Thus our Gestalt interpretation of the mystical type of religious experience has shown it to be dynamically interrelated in a larger Gestalt to an evangelical experience on the one hand, and to the church experience on the other hand. If we are seeking the "good" Gestalt for all the forces in the total field of self, world, other selves, and God, then the mystical experience cannot be considered adequate.

D. The Church-Type of Religious Experience

In contrast to the evangelical and mystical types of experience where the self organized a new Gestalt for itself, the self in the church-type accepts the Gestalt of some external institution for its own. The self is born within or adopts a system which guarantees salvation to those who accept its Gestalt. Doctrine, cult and organization are important parts of the Gestalt, and often the sacramental system makes for a once-born type of experience. Granted that
most churches make room in theory for the twice-born and mystical experiences, in practice, unique Gestaltten on the part of individual selves tend to be rare and are often frowned upon by the church group. The self finds himself within a community whose faith he accepts uncritically. David Roberts describes this dilemma of an institution very well.

Yet no institution or tradition can be maintained except through the assent of individuals, one at a time; the only question is the extent to which this assent is free or constrained. Even Roman Catholicism recognizes that each individual must make the basic decision concerning acceptance or rejection of its authority; but it specifies that once the decision is made affirmatively the believer is under obligation to accept unquestioningly whatever the Church teaches as essential, and to confine his critical and independent thinking to areas where the Church has not reached a closed verdict. Obviously the same question concerning the freedom or constraint of assent can be raised in connection with Protestantism. Allegiance can be transferred from an infallible Pope to an infallible Book without abandoning the theory of religious authority outlined above. And even the liberal theology of a creedless branch of Protestantism can be so taught that any child growing up in it comes to regard it solely as a deposit external to him.\[1\]

This last sentence sets the problem for the church-type: the danger that the Gestalt accepted is not a life-changing shift in the organizing center of the self, but a mere external, surface allegiance. Whenever this is the case the real center of the self will be found in some non-religious idea or value.

Bergsten feels that the Roman Catholic Church at the present time emphasizes this acceptance of an external Gestalt to the complete frustration of the unique self.

In the Roman communion the care of souls has ceased to be a concern for the individual or for his growth in

\[1\]Roberts, op. cit., pp. 67 f.
personal freedom. Between the officials of the Church and those to whom it ministers there is a great gulf. The laity are the object of the care of souls, and its purpose is to discipline them. Opposite to them and contrasting with them are the clergy, a privileged class, a spiritual aristocracy. The priesthood has the knowledge and the power of mediation. Those who seek salvation are referred to the priest, who is related to them as the doctor is to his patient; and as the qualified physician is alone authorised to prescribe dangerous drugs, so the priest alone is authorised to prescribe remedies for the spiritual disorders of mankind.¹

How does such a situation of uncritical adoption of a prescribed religious experience come about, either in the explicit Roman church-type or the more implicit Protestant church-type of religious experience? It is the result of the articulation and differentiation and refinement of the original "evangelical" experience or unique Gestalt of a founder of the religion or of a group of like-minded individuals sharing their common experiences. In speaking of this development from the "founders of religion," Wach says,

In the vision (prime intuition) of each of them is contained a germ of theory, later to be developed into doctrine and from there possibly into dogma either by the founder himself or by his followers.²

Wach elaborates this development,³ but the essential process can be described in our Gestalt terms, as differentiation of the original Gestalt and possible solidification of it. Such a situation violates our Gestalt principles of the dynamic nature of all Gestalten. Thus, the church-type of religious

¹Bergsten, op. cit., pp. 17 f.
²Wach, op. cit., p. 25.
³Ibid., pp. 132-198.
experience in practice tends to give him his Gestalt, rather than allowing him to formulate his own within his unique field. If it is an imposed external Gestalt for the self, then it obviously will not affect the self as a whole. Certain parts of the self will be organized around other centers. Hughes analyzes the results of such a situation.

Religious truths and theological statements are always, in the first instance, interpretations of religious experiences. It may be possible for men to accept traditional statements, or to believe a creed without having the experience which the doctrine or creed sought originally to express. Such acceptance, however, is not really religious. It has no more moral or spiritual value than any other piece of credulity. We may perhaps speak of such acceptance as "faith," but it is faith of the lowest grade, an intellectual assent to certain beliefs which have never become a vital reality in the soul, never stirred any real experience of God in the spirit of the man who accepts it. 1

Furthermore, it will be obvious that in the church-type the self is not authoritative for itself. Illustrative of these conclusions is the discussion by Bergsten 2 where he quotes an American priest and psychiatrist, Dr. J. R. Oliver, to the effect that he is convinced that the priest usually hears very little about the serious mental and religious difficulties of the penitent. The talk is about the legalistic aspects of the sacramental system, and not about the things which are really concerning the self, and out of which a unique Gestalt would come.

Yellowlees has an interesting point about the effects

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1 Hughes, The Philosophical Basis of Mysticism, p. 403
2 Bergsten, op. cit., pp. 29 ff.
of such "repentance."

It is psychologically much more important that a man should be true to himself than true to an institution, and it is a matter of history, as well as being psychologically obvious, that progress comes not from the institution as such but from individuals.¹

Thus far we have belabored the faults of a church-type of religious experience, but we realize that there are some positive and necessary values in the institution. We see these values in relation to our Gestalt principle which says that "behavior is determined by the forces of the field, including the self as a whole." We have already seen that the evangelical and mystical types are to some degree dependent upon the field. Baron von Hugel struggled with this problem of the individual within the institution. He found three difficulties in institutional religion. First, the churchmen were too much attached to temporal power and riches. Second, the large place given by God to laymen was practically unrecognized by the Roman Church. Three, it was the church's duty to welcome light from outside her bounds, but in practice the opposite prevailed.²

But while recognizing the defects of the church, he gladly acknowledged three specific needs which it fulfills. First, other disciplines such as art, science, philosophy, etc., are developed in and through academies, schools and

traditions. This is necessary in religion too. Second, if you look at the history of religion itself, you find that the creative religious personalities sprang from religious institutions. Von Hugel mentions Jesus and Paul, and we might add Luther and Wesley. Third, there is an impoverishment of religious experience when the social intercourse within an institution is rejected. In other words, the field forces within the church can be helpful and formative for religious experience.

A. N. Whitehead comes to the conclusion that there must always be a tension between dogma and new forms of thought, because of the process nature of the world in which we live. Both are necessary.

Dogmatic expression is necessary. For whatever has objective validity is capable of partial expression in terms of abstract concepts, so that a coherent doctrine arises which elucidates the world beyond the locus of the origin of the dogmas in question. Also exact statements are the media by which identical intuitions into the world can be identified amid a wide variety of circumstances.

... (But) though dogmas have their measure of truth, which is unalterable, in their precise forms they are narrow, limitative, and alterable.

Kurt Lewin was also intensely aware of this tension, both theoretically in terms of the field concept and Gestalt, and practically from his experiments in group dynamics. We have already noted some of the concern to protect the unique-

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1 Ibid., pp. 259-265.
2 Whitehead, Religion in the Making, p. 144.
3 Ibid., p. 145.
ness of the individual within the group.\textsuperscript{1} Lewin, however, was very much aware of the influence of the group upon the individual. "Belongingness" is an important determinant of the individual. Human beings cannot escape membership in some groups. If the church is not one then some other group will be.

This dependence of the individual on the group for a determination of what does and what does not constitute "reality" is less surprising if we remember that the individual's own experience is necessarily limited. In other words, the probability that his judgment will be right is heightened if the individual places greater trust in the experience of the group, whether or not this group experience tallies with his own. This is one reason for the acceptance of the group's judgment, but there is still another reason. In any field of conduct and beliefs, the group exercises strong pressure for compliance on its individual members. We are subject to this pressure in all areas—political, religious, social—including our beliefs of what is true, or false, good or bad, right or wrong, real or unreal.\textsuperscript{2}

We get another indication of the overpowering influence of the church if we recall the factors which operate in the formation of the self's Gestalt.\textsuperscript{3} The factors of past experience and habit will condition the self so that its objective set will be towards the Gestalt of the church. Once the factor of direction is established, it will be hard for the self to change, to see things in a new and different light. The factors of proximity and similarity will cause the self to adopt the Gestalt of the community in which it is born.

\textsuperscript{1}See above, chap. v, pp. 187-198.

\textsuperscript{2}Lewin, \textit{Resolving Social Conflicts}, pp. 57 f.

\textsuperscript{3}See above, chap. iii, pp. 85-91.
So it is that the church-type of religious experience can be perpetuated only at the expense of the uniqueness of the self as a whole.

But such perpetuation is also at the expense of the church itself. If the church as an institution is going to exist in the world, then it, too, must be undergoing reorganization when new forces enter the world field, or else the church's Gestalt will be less than "good." Generally, churches have not developed a method of incorporating new insights into their Gestalts. They have tended to remain rigid, thus forcing individual selves with new insights to leave the church and set up new institutions. This gives us a Gestalt interpretation of reform, denomination and sect developments.

Our conclusion in respect to the church-type of religious experience is that it must be dynamically interrelated to the evangelical and mystical experiences. These latter two experiences provide the corrective for the church. They allow room for the uniqueness of the individual self and they contribute to the reorganization of the Gestalt which is the church itself, allowing it to maintain and enhance itself in a world of process. New light from God's Word is continually breaking forth. Both individuals and institutions must be ready to incorporate man's insights about the nature of eternal truths into their Gestalts.
First and foremost is the conclusion which we have anticipated, namely, that there is a unity to the religious experience of mankind, precisely because it is a Gestalt. We have seen the interrelatedness of these three "types" of religious experience, and the indications are that the same condition would exist with any typology. Thus no type is self-sufficient, but is a part of a whole.

Second, the types appear to be parts of a whole. They are a point of emphasis for an individual self. In a sense one type is figure while the other two are part of the ground within the whole which is the religious experience of the self. Churchmen are not unaware of this, though it may be an intuitive feeling rather than rational consideration. When they object to peripatetic evangelists unrelated to the churches of a city, they are expressing the fact that the evangelical experience is only part of the whole.

Third, the Gestalt suggestions for the interpretation of religious experience which we developed in Chapter III are only fulfilled by all three types, when the three are part of the total field, contributing to the "good" Gestalt. The church must allow consciously and practically for the evangelical and mystical experiences, and the latter must be seen as part of a whole which includes the institution.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

We have completed our task of interpreting religious experience with the Gestalt concept in psychology. All that remains is some assessment of the usefulness of the instrument. We cannot enter into a detailed criticism of the Gestalt concept either on psychological or religious grounds, or into a comparison with other psychological interpretations. Interesting as such discussions would be, they would take us beyond the space and scope of the present thesis.

Another difficulty arises when we consider a summary of our findings: the thesis itself is essentially a Gestalt. When one tries to dissect out statements for inclusion in a summary, it is impossible to stop. For this reason we have carried our conclusions along with us throughout the body of the thesis. Therefore, we shall content ourselves here with some general statements about the instrument and its usefulness.

1. Psychological criticism of Gestalt theory has usually fallen under two categories: a) Gestalt-theory is vague and inconsistent; and b) Gestalt-theory is mere repetition of what is already well-known. Critics of the first kind say that no satisfactory definition of the term has ever
been given. What is the nature of the whole and the parts
and the relationships between them? Such criticism is in
part true because no exhaustive definition has yet been
framed, and for a very good reason. Gestalt is true to one
of its own tenets, that of being in process, and not dogmatic.

Gestalt theory is based not merely on theory but on
careful scientific investigation of a fact; the fact that
segregated wholes, both psychical and physical, do exist as
wholes, with parts which are real, but not more and no less
real than are the wholes. Now any theory which deals with
facts, which are proverbially stubborn, and not with artefacts,
which can always be made to order, will necessarily be vague
at some points. It is a situation comparable to that of the
physicist with his atom theory, which is still necessarily
vague but very useful and not to be discarded. The Gestalt-
theory has also produced results. What theory worth anything
ever came full-blown into the world? Gestalt will work toward
its own clarification in continued research and application.

The second criticism, that Gestalt-theory is mere reper-
tition, must also be accepted as containing some truth, not
only in the sense that there is nothing new under the sun, but
also because of resemblance to other theories. Some critics
have compared it to Plato's Idea or Aristotle's Form and to
a variety of subsequent theories. In our limited space we
can only say to this that Gestalt obviously, like everything
else, is dependent upon all that has gone before. But the
Gestalt theorists have stated a consistent and unified
theory in a way which had never been done before. Furthermore, as we have seen in the application of the concept made in this thesis, it is a generalized interpretation of all psychical and physical phenomena, and thus stands beyond any theories to which it is compared. It may not be the only method of interpretation, but it has proved a useful and consistent one.

2. The Gestalt concept has proved to be a useful instrument for the interpretation of religious experience. We are not making a claim that it is the only method of interpretation. However, it has afforded us a unified interpretation of all the experiences of religion and the problems raised by our survey in Chapter I. This unity would seem to be a real advantage, for the psychology of religion has often lacked a consistent approach. Various psychological theories have been used to interpret the experiences of religion, resulting in a kind of hodge-podge of interpretation, which could easily be sloughed off by the theologian or the church.

The Gestalt concept gives us a consistent framework and hypothesis within which to think about the problems of religious experience. The value of this can be seen if we take the liberty of paraphrasing the Biblical statement, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." Without a hypothesis the student flounders around. Whitehead has said much the same thing someplace when he says that a theory is the most

1 Prov. 29:18.
useful of all things. Thus the Gestalt concept provides a consistent frame of reference within which the theologian or minister can view his task and to which he can refer in seeking to interpret and foster the religious experiences of the people.

3. The importance and worth of the individual is emphasized by the Gestalt concept. The individual within his unique field must be the final judge of his religious experiences. Thus the Gestalt concept leads to a pluralistic interpretation of religious experience. However it also suggests that inasmuch as meaning comes through a "good" Gestalt in the largest possible field, the individual has a responsibility—even a demand—to enter into relationships with all other factors: other selves, the world and God. The genuine fellowship experience can lead beyond pluralism at least for a small group and theoretically for all persons.

However, the finite nature of man effectively limits his ability to know all truth, and the Gestalt theory is a firm reminder of this finiteness and understanding of it. Truth comes through a sharing of the meanings each person finds within his Gestalt. This is essentially what happens in the scientific field too. No self or group of selves ever comprehends the total field of the universe or the stresses and strains therein. Certainty, therefore, must always be tentative and not final. The Gestalt view therefore supports a progressive revelation theory in such a way that it brings
together both liberals and neo-orthodox people. It does this not by deciding whether or not God was finally and completely revealed in Jesus Christ, but by recalling all men to their own finite nature. Thus even if Jesus Christ was the complete revelation of God, finite man's limited perception would always keep his knowledge of God limited.

This leads us to a Gestalt way of saying that we are saved by faith. However all of the experiences leading to this state can be interpreted by our instrument, though as we have said the interpretation must be provisional and not final. This brings us to the task of the psychology of religion which John Baillie calls its fundamental business.

The truth is that not until it (psychology) has tackled this cardinal problem—the analysis of the real and inward nature of what James calls overbelief and most men call faith—has psychological science begun its real and deeply significant task with reference to religious experience. ¹

It is fair to say that Gestalt theory does tackle this problem and affords very real insight into the process whereby faith or religious experience comes to the individual. It would violate its own principles if it claimed this was in any way final, but it is a beginning which goes beyond the descriptive efforts of the earlier psychology of religion.

If some theologians are inclined to reject Gestalt theory as "scientific" and not relevant to Christianity, then they have interpreted their task in a different manner from Paul Tillich, for example, who says:

But the task of theology is mediation, mediation between the eternal criterion of truth as it is manifest in the picture of Jesus as the Christ and the changing experiences of individuals and groups, their varying questions and their categories of perceiving reality. If the mediating task of theology is rejected, theology itself is rejected; for the term "theology" implies, as such, a mediation, namely, between the mystery, which is theos, and the understanding, which is logos.1

Gestalt theory can lend important help to this task.

4. A dynamic interpretation of religious experience is suggested by Gestalt theory. The only dogma of Gestalt would be that of continuous recognition of the need for reorganization within the ever-changing field. Gestalt remains neutral on the content of this Gestalt but does lend an interpretation of the process. No particular Gestalt or religious content is deprecated. In contrast to some other psychologies, acceptance and understanding is given to any Gestalt. To the extent that there is a value judgment in Gestalt, it revolves around the value of the individual and the "good" Gestalt.

An understanding of the processes of Gestalt formation could be of great help to churches in their understanding of individuals and the provision of the kind of setting best calculated to allow the individual to achieve his unique Gestalt, and thus his peace with God. This would be practical help in all the areas mentioned throughout the thesis, for it would give the church a hypothesis on which to operate.

1Tillich, The Protestant Era. p. xiii.
5. Religious criticism of the Gestalt concept is likely to come from two sources: first, those who deny the validity of any scientific instrument in the field of religion, and, second, those who misunderstand the intention of Gestalt theory and the kind of interpretation it makes. With the first criticism we cannot argue if this be their point of view. We have both made our assumptions which do not permit of intercourse, except in the sense that Gestalt theory carries its own interpretation of why people would hold this viewpoint, and thus has its own defense.

The second criticism is more one of misunderstanding. Gestalt does not support a definite theological viewpoint or illuminate the objective claims of the creator, unless you wish to push the interpretation to an extreme. It may be that the claims of God and the nature of His universe can be interpreted in Gestalt terms but such consideration must wait for another thesis. What Gestalt theory does, is offer any person interested in the religious experiences of individuals, one way of looking at the whole gamut of these experiences; the process whereby these experiences have come about in the individual and the resulting content. An understanding of the Gestalt process must forever make each one of us humbly recognize that God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform. Gestalt theory gives us some understanding of the wonders of God's way with each man, from our human
viewpoint, but also reminds us that in the infinite field of God's universe where we live, no finite man will ever understand all of God's view of the process.
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