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Kathryn Tanner

Religious Joy

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It seems to me that many of the issues and distinctions raised in the initial planning documents could be helpfully refined by treating religious joy in much the same manner as Schleiermacher treats the feeling of absolute dependence (and religious emotion) in the *Glaubenslehre*. I have in mind the following issues: the degree to which religious joy is sui generis; the relationship between religious joy and natural joy; whether (and, if so, why) the latter is rare in contemporary society; the objective referent of religious joy; its communal (or relational) character; its connection with human well-being (which I take to mean, that things are going well for me and for those whom I love and whose well being is therefore crucial for my own); and the universal or limited scope of religious joy.

With Schleiermacher I take religious feeling to have a whence, and in this sense to be an objective and not merely a subjective state. Whether religious or not, joy is, like most (particular) feelings (e.g., fear), objective in the same general way: feeling is occasioned by something that makes the feeling appropriate and to which the feeling refers. For example, feeling fear requires one to be in the presence of something terrifying; one is fearful of that thing. One might be wrong about it—e.g., it is a toy gun rather than a real one being pointed at one’s head. But the fact that one can feel fear when it is not appropriate is a marker of fear’s objectivity in the sense I mean it; the possibility of being wrong (i.e., feeling without an appropriate object) does not suggest the subjectivity of fear—i.e., that fear is a self-contained,
purely self-referential internal state. I can, it is true, be afraid of myself—e.g., of my own vengeful feelings and what they might portend—but in feeling that I distinguish my subjective state—my feeling fear—from what I’m fearful of—fear’s object, what I fear (e.g., my capacity to turn myself into a horrible person and do harm to those who’ve harmed me). Even in such seemingly simply subjective cases, one’s subjective state, in other words, has an object (under a particular description), which makes the feeling appropriate. In every case, one could say feeling is objective in expressing a relationship to something that I distinguish from myself (as the one feeling) and know to be having some sort of influence upon me. In the usual case this something is actually outside myself, part of my external environment, whether natural or social.

(Natural) joy is in this sense objective. To feel joy is (almost always) to take joy in something beyond oneself and affecting one from without. E.g., joy arises in response to my loved one entering the room after a long absence; I feel joy in the presence of a newborn baby; I feel joy while taking in the sunset on a mountaintop. I take joy in those facts that are the occasions for joy; they are joy’s basis and referent.

Religious joy (like other religious feelings/emotions for Schleiermacher—the distinction between the two is not—yet—relevant here) is a (broadly-speaking) affective response to something not obviously de-limitable that is having an effect on me from outside myself—namely, God. Religious joy, in other words, has a peculiar whence, God, accounting for its designation as religious. [I assume a theistic context here.] What makes a religious feeling one of joy in particular is the fact that feeling takes the form here of an affective response to God’s goodness and beauty, a
response to God's goodness and beauty in and of themselves but also as those qualities are manifested in God's creating and saving of us. [I assume a Christian context here.] Because of their goodness, graciousness, beauty (the sorts of things that 'naturally' elicit joy), God and what God has done for us in Christ—creating us from nothing out of no divine need, mercifully saving us from sin, offering eternal life to us in Christ, and so on—appropriately call forth from us the affective response of joy, an affective response that is therefore heightened when the latter facts are called to mind or when God's presence is felt—e.g., in worship. Worship (as so many biblical passages attest) should be joyful; one should feel joy in the presence of the Lord, especially when one recalls what God has done for humankind. But clearly the presence of God might be felt and God's gracious working recalled at any time, thereby eliciting a feeling of joy.

Contra perhaps to Schleiermacher—although perhaps not if religious joy, unlike the feeling of absolute dependence, is a specific religious emotion—I am presuming here that religious joy depends on a particular description of its object. In other words, there has to be some reason for joy and that reason is found in one's understanding of what it is that one is taking joy in. A developed sense of religious joy's whence or object is not therefore simply to be derived from the fact of one's having been affected in such a joyful way (as Schleiermacher says is the case for the feeling of absolute dependence); a logically prior account of who God is and what God has done is necessary for religious joy. Because a religious feeling of joy logically presupposes an object under a particular and at least implicitly evaluative description—that is, a particular understanding of its object as beautiful, good,
gratuitous, beneficent, etc—it is possible not to feel joy in what should rightly prompt it—e.g., to see one’s dependence upon God’s free gift of salvation as insulting to one’s own dignity as a free person—and therefore not to take joy in it.

Because religious joy depends on a particular, evaluative description of its object, religious joy tends to be cultivated socially; it usually in fact has social prerequisites. E.g., it generally requires someone teaching one about who God is and what God has done for us. It helps to be surrounded by other people who call to mind the facts that elicit joy. Church is very obviously (for the reasons mentioned above) conducive to joy. Church also heightens the joy one could feel alone since religious joy is, like other (natural) feelings, contagious (e.g. laughter is contagious, one crying baby leads to other crying babies [in part due to the workings of mirror neurons]. And church services form persons in a practice of eliciting joy that can be extended beyond church—e.g., whenever one says the Lord’s Prayer. The objective character of religious feeling—indeed of feeling per se—also suggests its social character; one is generally in relation to something or someone else in feeling joy. It’s rather difficult therefore to feel joy in strict isolation.

The universal relevance of the referent of religious joy makes its universal appearance in human life a possibility. Since God’s presence and action for us are pertinent to the whole of life—because (for example) God is at work everywhere and God creates and saves the entire world—religious joy can, in principle, appear at any moment in one’s life and span the whole of it. For the same reasons, the intensity of religious joy need not, in principle, vary from one moment to the next; even in circumstances in which God is not thought to be immediately present and in
which God is not thought to be directly at work—circumstances, for example, of suffering and sin—God’s presence and aid can still be sought with confidence, perhaps especially in those moments, and in virtue of that fact joy can still be felt. Religious joy in such circumstances would not be substituting for sorrow, lament, or a contrite heart; indeed what prompts sorrow, lament, or contrition is the very thing that calls to mind reasons for joy (i.e., calls to mind the facts that make religious joy appropriate—say, the mercy of Christ that remedies one’s lamentably sinful state). In such cases, religious joy would presume and indirectly build on, rather than push out and exclude, (natural) feelings of sorrow and pain that are ordinarily incompatible with (natural) joy. In all these ways, religious joy would distinguish itself from ordinary joy: because of its compossibility with emotional states of a contrary nature, its potential universal scope, potential constancy of intensity, and (for these reasons) relative indifference to particular circumstance.

If religious joy is in fact felt to some extent at all times, whatever the circumstances, religious joy must be as inchoate or subconscious as one’s awareness of the facts of the matter that elicit it. In some sense one ‘knows’ and has not forgotten who God is and what God does, and, just to the extent one remains aware of all that, religious joy in some form is elicited.

One might identify religious joy in this constant form with a disposition to find joy (in something like the Kantian sense of a disposition [to subordinate the moral law to other interests] that, for Kant, constitutes the fundamental maxim underling one’s particular acts and what makes those particular acts good or bad). Religious joy, insofar as it characterizes one’s whole life as a religious person—and
therefore in a fundamental sense—would amount, in other words, to the steady disposition or inclination to call to mind God’s presence and ‘mighty deeds’ in every circumstance (not just in church). Such a disposition would go to form, in short, one’s religious character. Rather than being like a particular feeling, religious joy at this fundamental level would be more like a mood (in a Heideggerian or simply commonsense sense). Whatever happens—good or bad—I remain in a bad mood or anxious and see only the worst, the potential for disaster, in whatever happens.

Religious joy might become a particular emotion—meaning by that a feeling with a more definite beginning and end and with an intensity that pushes out other, equally particular feelings—in circumstances with a direct (rather than indirect or merely oblique) reference to the facts—God’s being and deeds—that elicit joy. In church, for example, religious joy is often felt with great intensity (because there is a strong sense of God’s presence in the midst of the gathered people and in the bread and wine of communion, and because the service actively recalls all that God has done for us); while it can suffuse an entire service, joy, perhaps just because of its explicit intensity, often seems to alternate over the course of the service with other particular, and equally strong religious feelings—for example, sorrow for sin temporally succeeded by joy at sin’s forgiveness. Religious joy as a strong, quite explicit feeling would in this way conform more to natural religious feelings of joy (or otherwise) in its general, formal characteristics—e.g., in being directly tied to particular external circumstances that call for an equally particular feeling exclusive of others. In some such cases (usually in non-religious contexts), religious joy could build on natural joy (that is, joy in objects one finds beautiful, good, gratuitous, that
remind one of the good of simply existing etc, but that are not given a religious
description) and perhaps this is part of what can contribute to religious feeling's
intensity (besides the salience of the religious referents of the feeling). E.g., my
religious feeling of joy easily becomes more intense in the presence of a healthy
newborn baby or a lovely sunset than it would be in the presence of a suffering child
or when pelted by hail and buffeted by wind in a howling storm.

Finally, what I've said so far suggests that religious joy is only loosely tied to
(natural) well-being (and therefore with feelings of [natural] happiness). Religious
joy, if what I've said so far is right, does not require that things be going well for me
or those I love. While things going well might certainly contribute to the intensity of
religious joy, it need not make up any part of religious joy's object; it need not form
part of what elicits religious joy. Indeed, although as essentially relational joy
connects me with what effects me, unites me affectively, so to speak, with it, the
object of religious joy might otherwise have nothing to do with me—e.g., I can feel
joy in the beauty and goodness of God even if God does nothing for me, contributes
nothing to my happiness. In similar fashion, I can take (natural) joy in another’s
accomplishment or beauty or goodness (even as I remain an ugly, sinful, failure).
Predicating even natural joy on one’s own happiness perhaps reflects the
competitive, isolating, and individualizing character of contemporary capitalism;
one can't take joy in others but only in oneself perhaps in part because capitalist
circumstances hamper one’s affective identification with others (by making them
seem potential rivals to one’s own well-being); capitalism, especially in its current
configuration, encourages an affective disconnection from others. Rather than being
predicated on or presupposing one’s own (natural) happiness, religious joy would instead itself constitute a specifically religious form of happiness, one, that is, that need not build on, or indeed have anything to do with, natural well-being. In this way, religious joy, properly understood, would counter any impression that Christianity is a religion of good fortune.