The primary effort of this study is to help move sociological studies of religious experience out of the realm of abstract theory and into quantitative analysis. While this is certainly not the first study to do this, the breadth of experiences assessed by the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey provides more detailed information on the topic than has previously been presented. Results indicate that over 65% of American adults claim to have had at least one of the religious experiences assessed. The different socio-demographic patterning found among specific experiences indicates that using a broad, all-encompassing question to analyze religious experiences is inadequate. A theoretical distinction is also proposed between experiences involving only feelings and those extending to other sensory sensations such as seeing, speaking, hearing, or healing. While income level does not influence claiming more normative religious experiences of feeling, it is an important predictor of more intense, deviant religious experiences.

Introduction

Despite increasing interest, religious experience remains a concept that suffers from poor conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement in sociology. Underlying these difficulties is the problem of defining religious experience satisfactorily, a problem whose solution has eluded many scholars of religion in theology, the humanities, and the social sciences alike (Poloma 1995:166).

There is a distinctive commonality found within much of the scholarly work attempting to study, classify, or describe religious experiences. Researchers often admit that investigating religious experiences can be similar to grasping sand, since “the normal requirements for scientific research, such as objectivity, systematization, and exactitude, are not easily adaptable in any kind of experience-related research” (Tamminen and Nurmi 1995:274-75). Defining the object of study can be daunting as well because a “precise referent of ‘religious experience’ is elusive” (Yamane 1998:179). No matter how thorough the conceptualization process or in-depth the information received from people claiming to have such experiences, there always remains an element of the unseen. Along with the difficulty of definition and measurement, those having religious experiences claim to be in contact with, to borrow a phrase from Smith (2003), the “super-empirical.” Consequently, the human side of this human-divine relationship can be studied, but researchers must accept that the “divine” end of the connection is a concept ontologically beyond the grasp of research (Tamminen and Nurmi 1995). Thus, research methods can never definitively assert