

UNIT 3

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

The religions are complex realities. A religion is not something that one sees externally. It is true that there are temples, ceremonies, religious art, religious communities etc. These are visible aspects. But their significance is to be approached through the inner life of those who use these externals. The inner life or the spirit that animates religion as a whole is religious experience. These two units are attempts to clarify religious experience which is the spirit of any religion.

By the end of these units, you should be able to:

- Say how religious experience is different from other 'normal' experiences
- Have an understanding of the role of religious experience in the religions
- Have an adequate understanding of the religious experience as it is different from other experiences.

- Say how William James looked at religious experience mainly from the psychological point of view and Rudolf Otto phenomenologically analysed the non-rational aspect of the religious experience

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Philosophy of religion today gives much interest in the study of religious experience. However, this has not been the case before modern period. Traditionally the philosophy of religion dealt with the matters concerning the proofs for the existence of God, His nature, God's relation with the world, problem of evil and so on. Interest in the study of religious experience arose due to many reasons. The serious study on religious experience began with the realization that the traditional arguments for the existence of God do not bring in the desired result. Moreover, there were believers who were dissatisfied with the 'way of the proofs' to establish the existence of God. Secondly the interest began as a reaction to the trends that underestimated the religious belief. Many educated people began to look down upon religious belief. As a result it was a need of the time to base religious belief on something that is experiential. Kantian philosophy too made religion an adjunct of morality. It is under such adverse situations that the study of religious experience began to be a prominent theme in the philosophy of religion. It was mainly because of the realization that the religious experience would give a good foundation for belief in God if we look at the kind of experiences which some of the people claim to have had of the divine. The concentration on inner experience can be also seen as one aspect of Romantic Movement's concern for subjectivity, the life of emotions and intuitions of the individual. This trend was in another way in harmony with the understanding of science: without experience nothing can be sufficiently known.

The first unit deals with certain preliminary analysis of religious experience. The first section of the unit analyses the experience in general and the levels of experience. The second section deals with relationship between religion and religious experience. The third section tries to define the religious experience with the help of certain descriptions of experience and thereafter we see important categories given by Richard Swineburne to define religious experience. The Second unit is a study of two eminent writers who analysed the dimensions of religious experience:

William James who looked at religious experience mainly from the psychological point of view and Rudolf Otto who phenomenologically analysed the non-rational aspect of the religious experience.

3.2 THE EXPERIENCE AND THE LEVELS OF EXPERIENCE

What is Experience?

To start with what is religious experience we must clarify what experience is in general? Experience is such a common thing that nobody bothers to reflect on. But a reflection on the very experience will shed some light on the reflection on the religious experience.

The English word 'experience' is derived from the Greek '*emperia*', the Latin translation of it is '*experientia*'. Earliest connotation of this word reflects its origin in terms that designate the action of testing the proof by actual trial (experimenting). Later the word expressed more generally the actual observation of acts or events considered to be the source of knowledge. At present the dominant meaning of experience is the actual living through an event (object) or events. The following example will bring out the meaning of experience.

An example of experience is as follows. As we are walking in the garden, a thorn runs into the sole of our foot, and consequently we have the experience of pain, and we withdraw our foot. The important aspect here is an immediate contact with an object and a reaction on the part of the person. In the same way I can speak of an event (a feast) I experienced. In this case such an event becomes the object of my experience. Therefore we can define experience as a direct contact with an object or objects. We emphasize in the definition 'direct' because a direct contact with the object is necessary for something to be an experience. For instance, I know much about the two World Wars but they are not events that I experienced. I was born after two World Wars so I had no direct contact with these events. That which gives rise to experience is a contact that must be immediate. In the above example of thorn running into the sole of the foot is immediate. If we are wearing sandals, the thorn will not run into our foot, because there is a medium between foot and the object. The reason for immediacy in the experience is the body. This fact is evident in the

case of experiences involving pleasure and pain, sweetness and bitterness etc. Aesthetic experience involving seeing or hearing of something beautiful and intellectual experience involving the understanding of something too have their source in the body. So we conclude that experience is always experience of something which is direct.

Levels of Experience

Since experience is always an experience of something, every experience must have an *object which can belong to various levels of existence*. 1. real or imaginary 2. material or spiritual 3. human, sub-human or superhuman 4. divine or diabolical 5. pleasant or unpleasant, causing reverential awe, admiration, attraction, fear, horror, disgust, revulsion etc. 6. having to do with body or soul

Contact means 'tactus with' or touch with and it can be of various kinds inasmuch as *it is realised* (by the subject) on various levels. First, the physical level: the thorn running into the foot as described above. Second, non physical level which are of different kinds: the level of the nervous system: headache, because some nerves are irritated – in this case no physical contact from outside; the level of emotions: good news (rank in the examinations, first prize in the lottery) stimulates the emotions, and there is had the experience of happiness; cognitive faculties: an artist gets an original idea which puts him in a state of tremendous happiness. What is had in this state of the artist is perception of, or intuition into something of the intellectual order, or of the order of fantasy.

Third, interpersonal level, where again we have to distinguish several varieties: one, contact through mere presence: a mother looks lovingly at her child that is asleep, or is at play without realizing that she is watching; two friends sitting together without talking, without even looking at each other. Two, contact through call, which can be various kinds: vocal, a look, a glance, a gesture, a slight movement can serve as a call. Three: a contact through intentionality, on the level of memory and affection: a man recalls to the mind his deceased mother who had been most dear to him. Finally, on the level of the apex of the soul- the highest point of contact: God touches the soul. This is admitted by all the mystics who teach that God can touch us.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) What is an experience? What are the important aspects of experience?

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2) The object of experience can belong to various levels of existence: what are they?

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At present the dominant meaning of experience is the actual living through an event (object) or events. Therefore we can define experience as a direct contact with an object or objects. So we conclude that experience is always experience of something which is direct.

2. Since experience is always an experience of something, every experience must have an *object which can belong to various levels of existence*. 1. real or imaginary 2. material or spiritual 3. human, sub-human or superhuman 4. divine or diabolical 5. pleasant or unpleasant, causing reverential awe, admiration, attraction, fear, horror, disgust, revulsion etc. 6. having to do with body or soul

3.3. RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

What is the relation between religion and the religious experience? The simple answer is that the religious experience is the internal aspect of religion. Let us examine below in what way the religious experience could be considered as the internal aspect of religions.

The external and Internal Aspects of Religion

The religion is not something that one can see. It is true that there are temples, ceremonies, religious art. These are visible aspects. But their significance is to be approached through the inner life of those who use these externals.

The External Aspects of Religion

The religions have visible external aspects and internal spiritual side within them. Temples, mosques and churches are observable or visible signs of various religions. Together with these visible signs religion gives emphasis also to the aspect of community which has a common belief system, rules of conduct and way of worship. All these aspects of the religious community are external aspects of religion.

Religious Experience as the Internal Aspect of Religion

We can also speak of an internal aspect of religion: the religious experience. Why do people go to churches or temples or being in touch with a community of believers? It is because of an experience which creates in the believer peace and tranquillity. This religious experience then is the spirit of religion and in this sense it is the internal aspect of religion. Consider the ceremony of baptism of a baby in Christianity. How can we understand it, save by knowing what the baptism means to Christians and by knowing the hope and feelings of those who participate in the occasion? The Buddhist monk hopes for *Niravana*, this includes the contemplative experience of peace and of insight into the transcendent. Therefore the internal aspect of experience and external aspects of ceremony are fused together so intimately in every religion.

Religious experience can also be considered as the spirit of religion in another sense. A religion originates from the religious experience of its founder. This is very evident when we take into account the historical religions – Buddhism and Christianity. For instance, the foundational principle of Buddhism is the profound experience of Gautama Buddha. Jesus called his disciples to be with him and to experience his life. Christianity came into existence as a result of the disciples' experience of Jesus. Both Buddhist and Christian religions can be seen as attempts to institutionalise and perpetuate these foundational experiences. The reason behind this institutionalization is that those who have had these experiences consider them to be so valuable that they want all the others to have a share of what they have experienced. In the beginning the believers who had the religious experience recorded the experiences. These records were later accepted as the sacred scriptures. Gradually each community began to follow certain practises such as mode of worship, 'way of life' etc. The intention behind doing so was to perpetuate these experiences and to pass it on from one generation to the other. This mode of development is applicable not only to the historical religions but also to other religions like Hinduism. The *Vedas* and the *Upanisads* are the result of the religious experience of the ancient *Gurus*. They propagated the ways and means to perpetuate this experience to others. Therefore, reasonably we can say (a) religions originate from certain religious experiences of their respective founders (b) Religious experiences are institutionalised and perpetuated by the believers and thus formal religions come into existence. (c) The basic attractive element of the religions is religious experience. (d) Religious experience is the ultimate criterion and rule of faith in all the religions.

Religion and Types of Religious Experience

There are various types of religious experience in reference to the established religions - *Nirvana* is central experience in the Buddhist traditions, *Kevala* in the Jain tradition, *moksha* in *Advaita Vedanta* and God experience in theistic religions. *Nirvana* experience is consisted of an awareness of the fleeting consciousness, or else of their cessation and inner stillness that this involves. *Kevala* experience is an awareness of the abiding self that underlies our fleeting conscious states and is presupposed by, though ignored in, *Nirvana* experience. *Moksha* experience involves an awareness of the identity of oneself with Brahman. There is *Numinous* experience which, according to monotheistic tradition, is awareness of God. There is Nature

Mysticism which involves a sense of empathy with nature directed at whatever part of nature. It is perceptually available to the subject of the experience while one has the experience. This is not viewed as religious experience because it does not have a direct connection to religion (to the institution and practices).

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) The Spirit or the internal aspect of any religion is religious experience: explain?

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2) What are the various types of religious experience in reference to the established religions?

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3.4 DEFINING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The Question of Beginning

A religious experience is most commonly known as an occurrence that is uncommon in the sense that it does not fit in with the structure of 'normal' experience. It normally refers to individual's perception of the 'divine'. Studying religious experience is a difficult task. We face also difficulties in identifying common features in the religious experience. If we identify religious experience as experience of God then we would be neglecting Buddhist religious experience.

Therefore it should be general as to embrace all the religions. At the same time it should not be as general as to include other non-religious experiences such as ecstasy or such happy experiences induced by drugs or alcohol.

However, taking into account the above mentioned difficulties and complexity of religions; scholars have tried to categorize important aspects of religious experience. They have tried to identify common elements found in the religious experiences of different individuals and groups. Many religious and mystical traditions see religious experience as real encounters with God or gods, or real contact with 'other' realities. There is a small group of scholars who look down upon religious experience and say that such an experience is an evolved feature of human brain amenable to normal scientific study.

If we apply our general understanding of 'experience' to characterize religious experience, we will have to say that religious experience is an experience of religious objects. This is not entirely false; people do speak of experiencing divine 'objects' or 'persons' (God, Virgin Mary, Krishna, etc.) While it is not entirely false to speak of religious 'objects' there is a difficulty with this definition: What would qualify to be a religious object? There seems to be numerous candidates that qualify to be such objects (God, Nirvana, Brahman, Virgin Mary, Kali and so on). Moreover, to speak of God or any other as "objects" of religious experience is not easy. The reason is that the so called religious objects are not objects of our ordinary understanding. These are not available to our senses as other objects of experience. If there are difficulties to define religious experience in terms of experienced objects, how else are we to define religious experience?

One way of doing it is to say that a religious experience is an experience that occurs in a religious tradition or in contexts like that of religious worship or meditation. This is sure to include the Buddhist experience. But it will lead us to a serious omission. That is, such an explanation would exclude the original religious experiences like the Enlightenment of Buddha, in as much as it took place outside the traditional religious context. It is this sort of fundamental religious experience that gave birth to new religions. How, then shall we go about defining

religious experience? Ordinarily we define something either by appealing to common experience or to those who are proficient users of that idea. We did not have any serious difficulty in circumscribing the meaning of 'experience' because it was possible to appeal to common experiences. But that does not seem possible in the case of religious experience. It is also clear that majority of the authors do not talk about religious experience in terms of the 'object' experienced. On the contrary, they do it by turning to the subject of experience. But at the same time we cannot exclude completely the natural objects because they play an important role in religious experience.

Analysis of Religious Experience

In many occasions the religious experience is occasioned by reflection on the natural world. In other kinds of religious experience, a person's encounter with the divine arises not when the contemplation of the world gives way to religious perceptions, but when all such normal perception is interrupted and ruptured. In other occasions the whole range of experience may lead one to a special experience of the unity of all things. In these experiences, there is an awareness of the limit (wrongness according to William James) of a given situation and an overcoming of that limit by being connected to a larger reality that is hidden behind the natural covering. We try to analyse certain concrete experiences to illustrate this point.

Here is one of the most commonly quoted examples from William Blake:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

What is noteworthy is that the poet sees the same grain of sand and wild flower as the rest of us, but what he sees on this occasion is not just merely these objects; but a 'world' in a grain of sand, a 'heaven' in a wild flower; he experiences 'infinity' and 'eternity'. In other words, such experiences take place *in and through the nature* but are *not an experiences of nature* that all of

us have in our ordinary state of consciousness. There is something more than nature that is involved here.

William James describes the experience of a man who had a sense of a presence which filled him with joy. It happened at night when everything was still.

“There was not mere consciousness of something there, but fused in the central happiness of it, a startling awareness of some ineffable good. Not vague either, not like the emotional effect of some poem, or scene, or blossom, or music, but sure knowledge of close presence of a sort of mighty person, and after it went, the memory persisted as the one person of reality. Everything else might be a dream, but not that.”

Here the encounter with the divine (the person who had this experience did not interpret it theistically) aroused not when the contemplation of the world gives way to religious perceptions, but when all such normal perceptions are interrupted and ruptured.

We can speak of an experience in which one is aware of the unity of all things. Poet Wordsworth’s narration of the beauty of Wye Valley is an example of this sort. Wye Valley led him to detect

A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things and all objects of all thought
And all rolls through all things.

Here, this delightful perception of nature leads towards a more profound, pantheistic intuition of a spirit coursing through the world.

Here we have another example of a man who is healed of his depression that disturbed him.

One day I was feeling deeply depressed by the severe criticisms a colleague had received –a person who was living his life in an honest and truthful sense.... Nothing was real...

After the children had gone to bed, I decided to go for a walk. The night was dark, filled with black clouds. Large white flakes of snow fell on and around me. Inside, a surging restlessness replaced my benumbed state. ...Suddenly without understanding in any way, I experienced a transcendental beauty in the white darkness. It was difficult to walk on the glazed, iced surface... Immediately I felt a chill but at the same time I felt the

ice being warmed as my fingers touched it. It was a moment of communion, an experience of knowing and understanding, and a feeling of complete solace. If felt my inward heaviness lifting, and discovered a new capacity for...facing conflicts which existed around and in me.... We need only reach out in natural covering to come face to face with creation.

The person feels depressed, restless, benumbed; life is seen as meaningless and futile (“Nothing was real”). But it is the transition from that stage which is astounding: from a sense of depression and desolation, he is transported into a sense of communion and solace, knowing and understanding. It is realization that reality is just waiting for us to reach out beyond its natural covering that gives us the possibility to find solace and understanding.

First of all, all these experiences make us aware of a twofold nature of reality: there is the natural world that we are ordinarily aware and something “more” than the natural world that comes to our awareness in these experiences. The second example alludes to it in talking about reaching beyond the natural covering; the third example alludes to it more vaguely in terms of a kinship with nature. The “more” is an expression used by William James to refer to this reality that cannot be identified with the natural. Otto referred to it as the “wholly other”, “that which is beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar...” This twofold character of reality usually finds expression in such terms as natural and supernatural, profane and sacred, *vyavahariksāt* and *Paramarthikasāt* etc.

Secondly, there is some vague awareness about the nature of this sacred reality. Although it may not be entirely appropriate to talk of monism to refer to it, what is clear is that there is an intuitive awareness of certain unity or connectedness of all reality that is ordinarily seen as many. Some call this One reality God, others call this One reality Brahman, still others find none of these substantive terms appropriate and therefore call it *Sunyata*. Since this is a non-rational, non-conceptual reality as Rudolf Otto insists, these different ways of talking about that reality is not only understandable, but even necessary to get us beyond our words. Moreover, there emerges the awareness that this reality is the really real such that “We only begin to wake up to reality when we realize that the material world, the world of space and time, as it appears to our senses, is nothing but a sign and a symbol of mystery which infinitely transcends it.”

Thirdly, religious experiences have this existential character that is obvious in the second and third examples. There is an awareness of the wrongness of a given situation and an overcoming of that wrongness by being connected to a larger reality that is hidden behind the natural covering. However, we should always be wary of talking about this connectedness of reality in terms of a purely intellectual or abstract cosmic order as may be done in physics and cosmology. Rather, this connectedness is always in relation to human existential situations. Devoid of that context, no talk of a cosmic order or inter-connectedness of reality would have a religious character.

Fourthly, although we relied on spontaneous experiences that occur without any prior preparation so as to keep our understanding of religious experience broad enough, we should also be aware that most religious experiences do involve some prior preparation in the form of practices like yoga and meditation, regular prayer and interior silence, acts of worship and adoration. But what is remarkable is that even when prior preparation is involved, the experience itself is not seen as an automatic result of those practices. There is a sense of passivity in such experiences, a feeling of having been gratuitously granted a favour. Theistic traditions call it grace; but this sense of passivity is also present in the other traditions in some form or another. The Buddhist Enlightenment (including the Zen “satori” or awakening), for example, might come at the end of years of study and meditation; but when it comes it is experienced as a sudden flash and not brought about by one’s will. The very term ‘Enlightenment’ signifies this. Spiritual masters often warn their disciples that too intense an effort can be counter-productive. One is advised to “let-go”. Taking both these points together, we could say that religious experience is more like a change of *gestalt* than accumulation of knowledge or data.

3.5. LET US SUM UP

Taking these points together we could briefly say that a religious experience is an experience of cosmic connectedness and personal integration achieved through that connectedness; its opposite would be an experience of disintegration and alienation. In this context, we may pay attention to Richard Swinburne who offers the following categories to define religious experience.

1. Experience which the subject describes in terms of God or supernatural, based on the perception of an ordinary non-religious object. So, for example, I might witness a rather beautiful, but perfectly ordinary, sunset, and suddenly one sees it in terms of God's creation. Someone else could experience the same phenomenon and, while moved, would not talk of the experience as 'religious'.
2. Experiences which are 'out of the ordinary', and public. So, the disciples of Jesus 'witnessed' the re-appearance of him after the death. However, as with the previous experience the sceptic will have the same visual sensation and yet have not had the religious experience.
3. Experiences that involve sensations private to the individual. I might have a dream that an angel tells me to follow a particular course of action, which, on waking, I pursue. In many ways, the dream experience; in other words, the angel can be described in terms of a woman wearing white cloths.
4. The fourth example goes beyond the previous one. Here, the subject has a religious experience that cannot be described by using the normal every day language. Swinburne notes the example of mystics, who find it difficult if not possible to describe their religious experiences, and yet feel that there is something to be described if only they had the words to do the describing.
5. The final category occurs independently of perceived sensations. So a man may be convinced that God is telling him to do certain things. But there is no evidence of auditory or other sensations occurring.

Swinburne suggests also two principles for the assessment of religious experience

1. The principle of Credulity: With the absence of any reason to believe it, one should accept what appears to be true. Eg. If one sees someone walking on water, one should believe that it is occurring.
2. Principle of testimony: with the absence of any reason to disbelieve, one should believe what the eye-witnesses or believers are telling about religious experience.

In categorizing religious experience in this way, Swinburne highlights two key issues. Firstly, the experience may be in response to some public event, or it may arise in a purely private way.

Secondly, it may involve sensations (sight, sound, etc.) which can be clearly spoken of or it may transcend human language and concepts. Yet despite these differences, the crucial factor is the individual and his interpretation of these phenomena. This interpretation refers to ‘the more’, ‘the meaning’, ‘the effect’, ‘the beyond’.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) Evaluate of the statement “religious experience is an experience of religious objects”!

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2) What are the two principles of Swinburne for the assessment of religious experience?

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3.6 KEY WORDS

Experience: Experience may be defined as a direct contact with an object or objects. The word ‘direct’ in the definition is emphasized because a direct contact with the object is necessary for something to be an experience.

Mysticism: Mysticism is the highest form of experience. Herein people have indescribable experiences that transcend language and expression. The reality opens up to the seeker in ways that will turn him/her into the awareness of reality.

3.7 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. Earliest connotation of the word experience refers to the action of testing the proof by actual trial (experimenting). Later the word expressed more generally the actual observation of acts or events considered to be the source of knowledge. At present the dominant meaning of

experience is the actual living through an event (object) or events. Therefore we can define experience as a direct contact with an object or objects (event). So we can speak of two important aspects of experience: that is, it is always experience of something (object) and it should be direct.

2. Since experience is always an experience of something, every experience must have an *object which can belong to various levels of existence*. 1. real or imaginary 2. material or spiritual 3. human, sub-human or superhuman 4. divine or diabolical 5. pleasant or unpleasant, causing reverential awe, admiration, attraction, fear, horror, disgust, revulsion etc. 6. having to do with body or soul

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. People go to churches or temples or being in touch with a community of believers because of the religious experience they have in doing so. This religious experience then is the spirit of religion and in this sense it is the internal aspect of religion. Secondly as far as the origin of a religion is concerned religious experience plays an important role. A religion originates from the religious experience of its founder. This is very evident when we take into account the historical religions – Buddhism and Christianity.

2. There are various types of religious experience in reference to the established religions - *Nirvana* is central experience in the Buddhist traditions, *Kevala* in the Jain tradition, *moksha* in *Advaita Vedanta* and God experience in theistic religions.

Answers to Check Your Progress III

1. If we apply our general understanding of 'experience' to characterize religious experience, we will have to say that religious experience is an experience of religious objects. This is not entirely false; people do speak of experiencing divine 'objects' or 'persons' such as God, Virgin Mary, Krishna, etc. While it is not entirely false to speak of religious 'objects' there is a difficulty with this definition: What would qualify to be a religious object? There seems to be

numerous candidates that qualify to be such objects: God, Nirvana, Brahman, Virgin Mary, Kali and so on. Moreover, to speak of God or any other as “objects” of religious experience is not easy. The reason is that the so called religious objects are not objects of our ordinary understanding.

2. Swinburne suggests also two principles for the assessment of religious experience

- a. The principle of Credulity: With the absence of any reason to believe it, one should accept what appears to be true. Eg. If one sees someone walking on water, one should believe that it is occurring.
- b. Principle of testimony: with the absence of any reason to disbelieve, one should believe what the eye-witnesses or believers are telling about religious experience.