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# UNIT 2 RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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## 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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Religions are pretty complex things –as complex as human beings themselves. Just as human beings are made up of mind and body, body and soul, intellect and emotions, the conscious and the unconscious, individual personality and a social nature, religions also exhibit a similar complexity. Faced with such complexity, it is very easy to identify religion with one or the other of these dimensions and miss out on the whole that religion is. This unit is meant to enable you to see in a holistic manner, not by studying all its parts, but by studying the spirit that animates religion as a whole, namely, religious experience. By the end of this unit, you should be able to:

- Say why religious experience is important in the study of religions;
- Identify some key authors and the title/s of their book on religious experience; and
- Have an adequate understanding of religious experience.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Let us begin with the last objective –an adequate understanding of religious experience. What kind of understanding can be considered adequate? Our understanding would be considered adequate if it identifies at least some characteristic features of religious experience in general. These features should be *general* enough because if we identify religious experience with Nirvana of the Buddhists, for example, we would be neglecting experiences that are typical of other traditions. Secondly, our understanding must pick out the typical of religious experience *alone*. In other words, it should not be so broad and general as to apply to other, non-religious experiences. If we identify religious experience with ecstasy and bliss, for example, such experiences might as well be induced by drugs and alcohol, but it may not have any features that religious people consider essential to religious experience. Given the complexity of religions, it is a difficult task to arrive at an adequate understanding of religious experience. Still this is what we shall attempt to do.

In coming to an adequate understanding of religious experience, we shall proceed, first by reflecting on the nature experience in general and come to the realization that such a procedure is problematic for considering the nature of religious experience. This, in turn, would lead us look at some of the classical texts in the study of religious experience. Armed with the insights gained from that study we shall proceed give a characterization of religious experience. Let us begin, however, with some considerations about the importance of religious experience.

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## 2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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When we think of religions the first thing that is likely to come to our mind are the temples, mosques and churches that dot our land. But when we think about them a little more we begin to realize that temples and mosques and churches are merely the tip of the icebergs that we call religions. It is merely one of the many observable, external aspects. There are also others. These external dimensions of religions can generally be brought under 4 Cs:

- Creed (beliefs systems and doctrines),
- Code (rules of conduct, some of which may even seem unethical to outsiders),
- Cult (worship and adoration),
- Community (some religions emphasize this dimension more than the others).

These visible, external, aspects of religions can be studied under various disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, history, sociology, psychology, and so on. But apart from these external aspects, religions also have an internal, spiritual side that is invisible. We could consider this invisible side of religions as religious experience. Doing yoga and *namaz*, attending worship and so on, for example, are visible; but the inner peace and tranquillity one achieves by doing such activities is something that happens in the invisible interior of persons. Religious experience, then, can be considered the spirit of religion in the sense that it provides the end or goal of the various religious practices and observances, in as much as this end is obtainable in this life. (It is necessary to add the clause “in as much as it is obtainable in this life” because most religions would not be satisfied only with gaining such experiences in this life, but also look forward to a life of immortality and eternal bliss.)

Religious experience can also be considered as the spirit of religion in another sense. This is best explained by considering historical religions like Buddhism or Christianity. Take the case of Buddhism. The foundational principle of Buddhism can be found in that profound experience of its founder, Gautama Buddha, which is his Enlightenment. Similarly Christianity is based on the experience of what the Christians call their experience of the Christ-event, namely, how a group of people who were the disciples of Jesus experienced their guru in his life, teachings, death and after death (they called it the resurrection of their master). Both the Buddhist and the Christian religions, then, can be seen as attempts at institutionalizing and perpetuating these foundational experiences in the form of certain records that has come to be accepted as their sacred scriptures and certain religious practices, like certain modes of worship and meditation. All the above mentioned externals of creed, code, cult and community are institutional instruments meant to perpetuate these experiences so that they can be passed on from one generation to the next. Religious experiences, therefore, can be seen as the source of these religions. Can we say that this is true, not only of historical

religions like Buddhism, but also of other religions like Hinduism? It seems true of Hinduism too, in as much as it accepts normative scriptures like the Vedas and the Upanishads which contain some of the primitive religious experiences of ancient Indians. Therefore, it seems reasonable to generalize our point and say that religions originate in certain religious experiences and seek to institutionalize those experiences.

Why to institutionalize such experiences? The answer is simple enough. 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. Religion itself, then, may be defined as institutionalizations of certain experiences with a view to inducing those experiences in its followers.

The last phrase is significant. For most people, being religious means to be a part of a community and share in its mode of worship, accept its belief system and doing what that traditions demands. We could call it conventional religiosity: it is a matter of following the demands of a tradition. Asking questions about the meaning of those practices, or seeking a personal religious experience is not a part of conventional religiosity. Conventional religiosity is a habit, a custom, a tradition that is received and is carried on. Such religious believers are dangerous. If they are ardent followers of a tradition, they become fanatics who want to maintain their tradition at any cost, even by killing others. On the other hand, if they are not ardent followers, they can be easily weaned away from their religion to atheistic and agnostic ways.

However, unlike these run-of-the-mill believers, there are others for whom religion is a personal and living reality. They may carry on a tradition if they find it meaningful, or abandon it when it is not found meaningful. For this group of people religious experience is extremely significant. If they criticise received traditions it is on the basis of their experience; if they maintain traditional practices it is because they see those practices as significant in terms of their experience. William James called such people “religious geniuses”. What he meant is that just as there are ordinary scientists and extraordinarily gifted ones (like Newton or Einstein), so too, there are geniuses in religion. Most religious founders and reformers belong to this category of religious geniuses. Whenever genuine religious spirit is threatened, they step in to bring about a new religiosity.

The long and short of this discussion is that religious experiences constitute the spirit of the complex entities we call religions. Religious experiences are the spirit of religions in the twofold sense of being the origin and goal, source and summit of religions (with the above mentioned qualification regarding goal). It is the religion of those who are genuinely religious and whom others try to follow.

If religious experience is the soul of religions, it is important to know what religious experience is.

**Check Your Progress I**

- Note :** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What are the requirements of an adequate understanding of religious experience?  
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.....  
.....

2) What are the external elements of religion?

### 2.3 WHAT IS EXPERIENCE?

A good starting point for considering what an experience is would be to reflect on the examples just given. When we speak of experiencing the breeze or the setting sun and so on, we are thinking of an object or an event (a happening). But it is also obvious that merely there being an object or event is not an experience. For anything to be an experience, besides the presence of an object or event we must also be aware of it. Therefore we can say that an experience is an object or an event which enters into our consciousness. But a little more reflection would show that this definition is still not correct. The First World War is an event that has entered into my consciousness in as much as I know about it; but it is not an event that I have experienced; I was not even born then. I know about it from history books and not directly from my experience. Therefore we need to qualify our statement further by adding a third element to our definition of experience, namely directness. Experience, then, is direct or immediate awareness of an object or an event. Thus, experience is an immediate or direct awareness of an object or an event, unlike such sources of awareness as testimony, inference and so on.

The definition of experience we have just given can be considered the episodic view because experience is understood as an episode, a particular happening in consciousness (as in “that was a memorable experience”). But there are others who argue that this view ignores the most important characteristic of experience, namely, the expertise that comes from many years of hard work. For example, when we talk some one as an experienced teacher, experienced architect, experienced politician, and so on, we are obviously not referring to a person who has undergone an episode. Teaching a class once does not make me an experienced teacher; it is repeated acts of teaching that makes me an experienced teacher. Experience in this sense is an expertise, the result of hard work. While episodes are occasional happenings, expertise is a more permanent achievement.

This view makes an important point and has special significance when it comes to religious experience, as we will have occasion to see. On the other hand, we have no reason to consider episodes and expertise as mutually exclusive. There would be no expertise were it not for repeated episodes of experience. Moreover, in some cases, repeated episodes may not even be necessary to have a lasting impact on the person (as in the conversion experience of St. Paul that we learn in the New Testament) and in some other cases, repetition may be impossible as in experiencing the death of a loved one. In such cases an “isolated moment of heightened awareness” makes all the difference and brings about lasting impacts on those who have the experience. Therefore, we shall stick to our episodic definition of experience, with its triple

components of an object or event, an awareness of the object, and the direct manner in which this awareness enters our consciousness. But we shall keep in mind that wherever possible, repeated episodes leading to expertise are to be treasured more than isolated individual happenings.

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 etc.) While it is not entirely false to speak of religious ‘objects’ there is a preliminary 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 a red-herring because these so called religious objects are not objects at all, in our ordinary understanding of objects since these are not available to our senses as other objects of experience are. If we are not 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 leads to a more serious problem: original religious experiences like the Enlightenment of Buddha would be excluded by such a definition, in as much as it took place outside the traditional religious context and gave birth to a new religion. 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. Let us turn, then, to the other alternative and see how experts have tried to deal with religious experience. For this purpose we shall turn to the classical studies on religious experience.

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## 2.4 STUDY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: A BRIEF HISTORY

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If religious experiences constitute the source and summit of religions, one would expect that they would find a prominent place in the philosophy of religion. However, this has not always been the case. Philosophical attention to religious experience is a modern development. Prior to the modern period, what used to arouse the interest of the philosophers of religion were matters dealing with the existence of God, the nature of Brahman, relationships between God and the world, God and the soul, and so on. They used to routinely engage in arguments for the existence of God, for example. The modern interest in the study of religious experience came about, paradoxically, with the realization that such arguments for the existence of God do not prove much and they do not take us far. Counter-arguments of thinkers like David Hume and Immanuel Kant were instrumental in exposing the shortcomings of such arguments. Many educated people even began to look down upon religious beliefs as unworthy of intelligent and educated people. Kantian philosophy made religion an adjunct of morality. It is under such adverse circumstances that the study of religious experience came to prominence. Let us briefly look at certain key thinkers who have contributed to the study of religious experience.

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## 2.5 SOME CLASSICAL TEXTS

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### *Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 - 1834)*

We noted that whenever genuine religious spirit is under threat there arise certain religious geniuses who can rise to the need of the hour. Schleiermacher was such a genius. He had a deep personal sense of religion. On the other hand, he kept the company of those who despised religion as a mix of meaningless inherited dogmas and practices that threatened free thinking and individual creativity. It is to this group of Romantic friends that he addressed his first great book, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799). His personal sense of religion enabled him to see that religion is not morality (as Kantian philosophy tended to see). Nor is it doctrines and dogmas detrimental to human flourishing, as his Romantic friends thought. He tried to persuade his friends that genuine religion is rooted in a kind of experience that is *sui generis*. Doctrines and practices have only a derived status; they arise from reflecting upon these experiences.

How does he understand religious experience? Religious experience, for him, is the “integrative element of human life and culture”. It is a feeling of absolute dependence on something that is infinite, but manifesting itself in all that is finite.

### **William James (1842-1910)**

If the many roles of a pioneering psychologist, medical doctor and philosopher with a flair for literature could be combined into one person, that is William James. His classic work on religious experience is *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. As the title suggests, the book is full of anecdotes from all over the world narrating all kinds of religious experiences. It is a veritable encyclopaedic collection of experiences enriched with his penetrating comments and insightful reflections. So very influential has this work been that it would be hard to find a book on the philosophy religious experience today that will not have at least a reference to it. But it is not a book that lends itself to summarising. James has something to say about all the major issues in religion that are being discussed today. But I shall merely point out two of his ideas selected almost arbitrarily.

The first concerns the existential character of religion. If Schleiermacher was instrumental in bringing about the Copernican revolution in religious thinking by emphasising human religious experience as the appropriate starting point (instead of received doctrines, scriptures and revelations) of religious reflection, James took it to a further level by pointing out the existential nature of religious experience. He pointed out that religion is primarily about a sense of wrongness or uneasiness about the human situation, a wrongness that is corrected by ‘making proper connection with the higher powers’.

Another key topic of his discussion is mystical experiences, which he considers to be ‘the root and centre’ of all religious experience. Although most mystical experiences involve elaborate training in different religious traditions, he also notes that nature seems to have peculiar ability to induce mystical moods in us. Such experiences have come to be known as “nature mysticism”. But what is mysticism? James’s study of mystical experiences led him to conclude that mystical experiences involve a ‘cosmic consciousness’ that tends toward monism and pantheism. He also points out the effects of such experience in terms the optimism it generates.

Rudolf Otto (1869-1937)

Otto was a widely travelled German who was exposed to different religions of the world. He, like Schleiermacher and James, was absolutely convinced that the religious realm is *sui generis*. In other words religious experience cannot be understood adequately in terms of anything else, say in biological, chemical or psychological terms. It needs to be understood in its own terms. What is even more disconcerting to the philosopher is that he holds religion to have a non-rational core which cannot be articulated in language. He does not deny the rational side of religion; his point is that if we focus only on the rational side, we miss out on what is properly speaking the religious character of religious experience. To this non-rational, non-explainable element of religion he gave the name “Numinous”. In order to show this non-rational character of such experiences he avoids using ordinary words to describe them, preferring to use Latin words instead. If the religious realm cannot be explained in words, how can it be known? It can be known because everyone has an inborn sense of the numinous. It cannot be explained, but it can be evoked indirectly. His classic work, *The Idea of the Holy* is such an attempt to awaken in the reader the sense of the numinous through a rational discussion and analysis of similar experiences in the natural realm. Numinous is said to be *mysterium tremendum* (awesome mystery).

Check Your Progress II

- Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

- 1) What are the three components of an experience?
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- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....
- 2) What is religious experience for Schleiermacher?
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....
- .....

2.6 WHAT IS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE?

It is clear that none of these authors talk about religious experience in terms of the object experienced. On the contrary, all of them do by turning to the subject of experience. How then, can we identify religious experience? We are not completely helpless in the matter. There is a special class of experiences that are often referred to as “nature mysticism”, that are relatively independent of such conditioning. 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 that; he sees 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.

While this example of nature mysticism makes us aware of a class of experiences that is universal and draws our attention to the “more” that is experienced in nature, it lacks a crucial component of religious experiences that James brought to our attention, namely, their existential character: an awareness of the wrongness of our situation and its overcoming. The following example is better in this respect than the previous one.

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. I 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 is in a state that is far from welcome. He 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. The realization that reality is just waiting for us to reach out beyond its natural covering so that we can find solace and understanding is remarkable.

Let us now cast our net wider than nature mysticism and find other kinds of experiences that are not conditioned by particular religions and cultures, but still maintain this sense of affinity with the wider universe. Ian Ramsey, who had an excellent understanding of religion, brought to our attention a class of experiences he called “cosmic disclosures”. He writes:

it may happen that when we are faced with some major problem as to vocation, or emigration, or the suffering of an aged relative, or marriage, there occurs a complex set of circumstances, too complex and too diversified to be the result of any one man’s design, which helps us to resolve the problem as well for those around us as for ourselves. ... A sense of kinship with nature strikes us; the Universe is reliable after all.



Having seen these examples, it is now time to analyse these experiences. 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 alone. 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, vyavaharika sat and Paramarthika sat 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, as James does, 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 Otto insists, these different ways of talking about that reality is not only understandable, but even necessary get us beyond our words. Moreover, there emerges an awareness that this reality is the really real such that “We only begin to wake 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.

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.

Religious Experience

**Check Your Progress II**

**Note:** a) Use the space provided for your answer.  
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is religious experience? Explain its characteristic features.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

Religious experiences can be considered as the clue to our understanding of religions, as it puts us in touch with the soul of religions. It is difficult however, to say what religious experience is. Our ordinary experiences (perceptual experience, for example) can be identified easily since we can refer to the objects perceived. But we cannot identify religious experiences in this manner.

In order to find a way out of this difficulty we browsed through three of the classical studies in religious experience and with their help came to the conclusion that religious experiences are primarily integrative experiences that overcome the existential wrongness of human situations. This involves being in touch with a reality that is present in nature, but is not nature. But it is a reality that does not impose itself on us against our will.

2.8 KEY WORDS

- Sui Generis

: *Sui generis* is a Neo-Latin expression, literally meaning of *its own kind/genus* or unique in its characteristics. The expression indicates an idea, an entity or a reality that cannot be included in a wider concept.
- Numinous

: Numinous (from the Classical Latin *numen*) is an English adjective describing the power or presence of a divinity. The numinous experience also has a personal quality to it, in that the person feels to be in communion with a *wholly other*. The numinous experience can lead in different cases to belief in deities, the supernatural, the sacred, the holy, and the transcendent.
- Mystery

: A mystery is generally described as something that is difficult to explain or understand. But ‘mystery’ could also mean that which is known and unknown at the same time since the experiencer of a mystery is deeply involved in it without being able to objectify it, e.g., life, evil, etc.

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## 2.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### Check Your Progress I

- 1) Our understanding would be considered adequate if it identifies at least some characteristic features of religious experience in general. These features should be *general* enough because if we identify religious experience with Nirvana of the Buddhists, for example, we would be neglecting experiences that are typical of other traditions. Secondly, our understanding must pick out the typical of religious experience *alone*. In other words, it should not be so broad and general as to apply to other, non-religious experiences. If we identify religious experience with ecstasy and bliss, for example, such experiences might as well be induced by drugs and alcohol, but it may not have any features that religious people consider essential to religious experience.
- 2) When we think of religions the first thing that is likely to come to our mind are the temples, mosques and churches that dot our land. But when we think about them a little more we begin to realize that temples and mosques and churches are merely the tip of the icebergs that we call religions. It is merely one of the many observable, external aspects. There are also others. These external dimensions of religions can generally be brought under 4 Cs:
  - Creed (beliefs systems and doctrines),
  - Code (rules of conduct, some of which may even seem unethical to outsiders),

- Cult (worship and adoration, *yajna*, and so on).
- Community (some religions emphasize this dimension more than the others).

These visible, external, aspects of religions can be studied under various disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, history, sociology, psychology, and so on.

### Check Your Progress II

- 1) An experience is an object or an event which enters into our consciousness. But a little more reflection would show that this definition is still not correct. Therefore we need to qualify our statement further by adding a third element to our definition of experience, namely directness. Experience, then, is direct or immediate awareness of an object or an event.
- 2) Schleiermacher had a deep personal sense of religion. Religious experience, for him, is the “integrative element of human life and culture”. It is a feeling of absolute dependence on something that is infinite, but manifesting itself in all that is finite.

### Check Your Progress III

- 1) 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 alone. Secondly, there is some vague awareness about the nature of this sacred reality. Some call this Sacred Reality “God,” others call this One reality Brahman, still others find none of these substantive terms appropriate and therefore call it *Sunyata*. Thirdly, 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. 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.