
UNIT 1 RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to understand religious experience from a philosophic perspective. Religious experiences are basic to religions and so should be studied carefully. Religious experiences are often understood better by believers, and it is most likely easy for them to appreciate them. Although non-believers may be able to get knowledge of such experiences, they are often not considered too important in their sight. Our aim in this unit is to get a few glimpses of religious experiences, neither as believers or non-believers, but as academicians who seek to understand philosophy of religion. Thus by the end of this unit, you should be able:

- To understand the relevant concepts of religious experiences
- To differentiate them from ordinary experiences
- To be able to know the various types and the factors involved in religious experiences

1.1 INTRODUCTION

We humans are primarily dependent beings, pushing us into relationships. Relationships with human beings create societies and communities, and relationships with God or the Divine create religions. Our experiences in human relationships are quite often paradoxical. We experience unity and estrangement, power and dependency, membership in the society and alienation from it. Such paradoxical experiences cause us also to look beyond human relationships. One such act of 'looking beyond' is religious experience. Religious Experiences are the core of any religion. They inspire and act as the model to be followed. Very often Religious Experiences give an impetus to the individual or the community (for instance, the Pentecostal experience to the Disciples of Jesus, or the Buddha experience) and take the community ahead. As the nucleus or the epicentre of a religion, Religious Experience is carefully guarded and held high within the religious tradition. It is an ideal to be looked up to.

Religious experience is defined in many different ways by various scholars, each emphasizing a particular aspect. Norman Habel understands Religious Experience as out of the ordinary type of experiences in which, within the setting of a particular religious tradition, a believer enters into a relationship with the sacred, or becomes aware of it. Such experiences could be either mediated (through rituals, special persons, religious groups, totemic objects, nature etc) or immediate (without any intervening agency)

In today's context of religions becoming rigid and institutionalized, growing fundamentalism and orthodoxy, it is essential to understand and relook at Religious Experiences of various traditions. Religious Experiences are also important as they justify religious beliefs (for instance, they are used to justify the existence of God). From a philosophical perspective, there is also a need to discover the importance, the factors and the wisdom embedded in Religious Experiences. This unit is a help and an introduction to such a process of discovery.

1.2 THE NEED FOR RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Why do human beings enter into a relationship with sacred things? There are various theories answering this question. According to Emile Durkheim, humans seek religious experiences because humans are filled both with uncertainty and powerlessness, and dramatic and traumatic experiences teach them of their limited power (natural happenings). This view appears to be one-sided view. To say that the cosmic or natural objects or events serve only to symbolize social power is a bit far-fetched. According to Van der Leeuw, not only the unusual in nature, but also “a manifestation of immutably ordered regularity” can become a revelation of power- the power that lies behind ordinary things, “the power of the sacred world above”.

According to N.D.Fustel de Coulanges, in his book *The Ancient City*, there are two sources of religion – internal and external. The internal sources refer to the psychological projections of humans and religion expresses the subjective elements of their experience. The external factors refer to the reactions to natural forces. These objective and subjective aspects of reality experienced by humans are concerned with power(s) and religion is concerned with this. It seeks a deeper ground of reality or existence.

According to Edward Sapir, an American Anthropologist, humans seek religion and religious experience because they continuously seek spiritual serenity beyond the humdrum, confusion and the dangers of everyday life. There is a deep realization that ultimately we are powerless in this world and so, in order to gain some mystical security, one associates oneself with what can never be known. This leads to religious experience and religion. When this response to the ultimate sacredness is institutionalized in thought, practice and organization, there is religion. According to Paul Tillich, humans encounter the holy, something beyond themselves. This ‘something beyond’ draws them closer to sacred things. In a religious experience, the centrality lies in this encounter with the Ultimacy.

1.3 TYPES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Religious experiences can be classified into four types: mystical, paranormal, charismatic, and regenerative.

Mystical experiences occur when the believer discovers that he or she is not distinct from the cosmos, the deity or the other reality, but one with it. Although very difficult to define mysticism, it could be said to be an experience of union with the divine. Herein, there is no “otherness” and the believer becomes one with the transcendent. The believer is able to identify oneself completely with the other reality. Underhill defines Mysticism as “the science of ultimates, the science of union with the Absolute, and nothing else, and that the mystic is the person who attains to this union, not the person who talks about it. Not to know about, but to Be, is the mark of the real initiate.” William James describes four characteristics of mystical experiences – noetic, ineffability, transience and passivity, in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

Noetic: This is the cognitive aspect. Cognition could be understood as the reasoning part of the mind, but here it is not to be understood as simple rationality, but is to be understood as wisdom. Wisdom is a power of discernment that is able to assess the facts properly (its position, value and function), ranks them and organizes them into meaningful entities. This is the “insight” giving stage – revelations, illuminations, significant and important.

Ineffability: Words cannot sufficiently express the experience. It has to be experienced first hand and it cannot be transferred to another. A musical ear can experience a symphony and it cannot describe the experience to another and ask him/her to get that same experience. Very often the mystic finds that his experiences are given incompetent treatment.

Transience: Mystic experiences do not last long. Their occurrence is short-lived. (for example an apparition or a vision). Those who have an experience report the feeling of being in the present and have a distinct awareness of it.

Passivity: The seeker may take efforts to reach a stage where she/he can receive an experience, but when the experience occurs, the seeker is overtaken or overpowered by a superior force. For instance, one who is in trance has no more control over the self, a superior force has taken over. There could be then a secondary or alternative personality, such as prophetic speech, automatic writing, or the mediumistic trace. (take the e.g of *sami aadudal*)

All mystical experiences are not the same. There are unique characteristics of each type of mysticism. Zaehner identifies two distinctively different mystical experiences: natural and religious mystical experiences. Nature mystical Experiences (or panentheic or nature mysticism) are those in which one may experience a deep oneness with nature. Such experiences are different from the typical religious mysticism, because they are independent of any particular tradition. They are however, deeply spiritual experiences that can have lasting effects on those who experience them.

Even in religious mystical experiences not all experiences are the same. One may experience an identity with an impersonal absolute (monistic mysticism) as found in Advaita Vedanta. The Christians, would experience mysticism as an union or intimate relationship with a transcendent, personal Creator God. Such experiences depend much on their understanding of God or the Divine. In many such religious experiences, an experience of travelling beyond the body is also felt and an ecstasy is deeply realised. The mystic feels that his/her soul/spirit has left the body and is now experiencing transcendental realities. Such an experience is also a characteristic of the shaman.

Paranormal Experiences

These are less intense experiences unlike mystical experiences. It is also possible that sometimes these experiences can go unnoticed as in the case of unconscious telepathy. They can be described just as other ordinary experiences. However, they are not ordinary experiences either as they occur without the usual involvement of the senses. For instance, telepathy and clairvoyance take place without the usual means of communication. Some other paranormal phenomena like psychokinesis, precognition, materialization and levitation occur without the usual framework of time, space, and matter.

However, these experiences are considered less religious than that of mystical experiences. The above could be considered as one type of paranormal experience. A second type which involves certain religious phenomena is normally called spiritualistic. Apparitions or ghosts, mediumistic communications, out-of-the-body experiences come under this category. Some would understand this phenomenon as evidence for the reality of a spirit-world and life-after-death. Such types of experiences are normally discouraged in organized religions. For instance, Buddhism recognizes that in the path to enlightenment, such experiences would occur but these are to be left behind considering them as distractions and hurdles. In these experiences, God is considered to be outside, other than or beyond the believer. The sacred power takes possession of the believer and uses it as a medium to communicate messages to the outside world.

Charismatic Experiences

Charismata is used to mean gifts or blessings given to individuals by God. In theistic religions, this is considered to be upon the founders, prophets, leaders and heroes of religions or religious movements. For instance, miracles, prophesying the future, healing ecstatic praying, exorcism etc are considered to be gifts bestowed upon a few by God. The Christians term this as ‘spiritual gifts’. A few examples of this type of religious experience are recorded in the New Testament of the Bible – tongues-speaking, prophecy, revelatory dreams, knowing others’ thoughts, healing powers, miracles etc. Those bestowed with such gifts are holy men and women. They are found in almost all religious traditions – prophets and saints in Judeo-Christian tradition, walis in popular Islam, sheiks and pirs in Sufi Islamic traditions, gurus, sadhus, acharyas in Hinduism. In non-theistic religions like Buddhism, monks or holy persons also have charismatic experiences. These are blessings of the Dhamma and should not be used for personal gains but for compassionate purposes only for the well-being of humanity.

Max Weber, in his “The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation, defines Charisma as

“... a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader”.

According to him, Charisma has three characteristics:

Charisma was unusual – radically different from the routine and the ordinary and everyday

Charisma was spontaneous- in contrast to stable, established forms and it is a source of new forms and new movements

Charisma was creative in a fundamental sociological sense.

Charismatic experiences do not focus only on powers of healing, visions, speaking-in-tongues, revivals, messiah cults and prophetic movements. These, although extraordinary spiritual gifts, are not the only gifts. Other less-spoken but still important gifts such as wisdom, courage, peace of mind are also important in charismatic religious experience and these are also found in charismatic people. William James, pondering on saintliness affirms these gifts too. The charismatic people have classic signs of sanctity – devotness, purity, tenderness and charity, asceticism and poverty etc. James also warns that these elements can sometimes be overdone by excesses, due to over zealous and obsessive or fanatic thinking. Being aware of such extreme excesses, Buddha warned his followers and asked them to take a moderate midway.

Regenerative Experiences

One other category of religious experience is the experience of being ‘born again’. There are persons who experience being renewed, revived or ‘filled with new life’. Such persons take a new U-turn in their lives, begin fresh, add hope and new meaning into their lives and their quality of life improves. Such experiences could be placed under the category of regenerative experiences. Such experiences may be sudden or gradual, but in themselves are less extraordinary than paranormal and charismatic experiences.

Regenerative experiences occur at the time when there is a two-fold consciousness that happens simultaneously - A creature-consciousness and a Creator-consciousness. When one becomes aware of one’s own state of life in the beginning and in the present, guilt and remorse occur. The person realises his/her own status in the world - a creature, a created being. The person then also becomes aware of the Creator. This awareness is accompanied with feelings of fear and dread but also with feelings of attraction and fascination. This is Creator consciousness. The person is overpowered with a sense of worthlessness in the presence of the majestic Creator. When one experiences this, the need for conversion and regeneration grows and the response of the person is an arousing or an awakening within- the experience of beginning a new life. This type of experience is generally had by ordinary people who continually gain meaning through such experiences.

Some also ‘turn over a new leaf’ when they have some escape or deliverance from evil, or bad health, or a sudden or gradual escape from death or injury. Such events are considered as more-than-natural event, and the one who experiences (or the community that experiences) attribute this to God being in favour of them. Such regenerative experiences bring about a religious rebirth, not only in the spiritual and physical life, but more visibly in their moral lives.

Another variety of regenerative experience is the inner feeling of compulsion to follow a new way of life, or to take up a new course of action. This feeling is accompanied by a strong conviction that although the future course is unclear and the task ahead is risky, strength and guidance from the divine would follow. The faith in a never-abandoning God and the continued assurance of the grace of God makes this experience stronger. This is sometimes called as a ‘call’, or a ‘vocation’ or ‘divine commissioning’, ‘God’s will’, etc. Another word that is also used for such experiences is Spiritual Awakening. It is also used to denote any of the above four mentioned religious experiences.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Why do human beings enter into a relationship with sacred things?

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2) Explain the four types of Religious Experiences.

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1.4 FACTORS INVOLVED IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

There can be several factors involved in Religious Experience which can be of help in identifying such experiences. With the help of a few thinkers, such factors are identified in this section.

Richard Swinburne

In his book Faith and Reason, Richard Swinburne asserts that all Religious Experiences fall into five categories. The first category is a Religious Experience in which a believer 'sees the hand of God at work'. Such experiences are explicable and are public in nature. E.g., looking at a beautiful sunset. The second category of Religious Experience is one which is still in the public domain but is an unusual event that is considered breaching the natural law. E.g. walking on water. The third category is a private Religious Experience which is describable in a normal language. E.g. Jacob's vision of a ladder in the Old Testament of the Bible. The fourth category is a private Religious Experience but one that is indescribable. E.g. a mystical experience. The fifth category is more general. It is non-specific and general in nature. This category is for such Religious Experiences where one feels the working of God in one's own life.

Martin Buber

We have two types of relationships: I-It and I-thou. As members of this world, we have a relationship with the world which is slightly more than a mere technical or mechanical relationship. An I-It type of relationship is a relationship in which I, the subject, view the other as an object. An I-thou type of relationship is a relationship in which I treat the other also as a subject. This second type of relationship is primary in human experiences, which also extends to the non-human world, in which an integrated approach is found – emotive, imaginative, intuitive, rational etc. In an I-Thou relationship, there is a response to a Presence, which is beyond the visible objects or beyond appearances. Religious experiences are such responses to the Presence, that is beyond sense-perception and ordinary common-sense knowledge.

Our ordinary experiences involve attitudes and relationships. When such attitudes and relationships are deepened, refined or heightened, different experiences occur. Science occurs as a refinement and a completion of the various tools and methods used in ordinary life situations. An artistic experience occurs when the aesthetic elements get focused, isolated and heightened. A religious experience occurs when faith and relationships are isolated and heightened. Religion is based on relationship. In this isolated and heightened relationship, there is a peculiar mixture found. Selfless surrender and fervent desire, humility and glorification, concreteness of the senses and abstractness of the spiritual take place in religious experiences.

Joachim Wach

Wach, a sociologist, offers four universal criteria involved in identifying a religious experience: First: In religious experience, a single or finite phenomenon is not responded to, but what is realized is the foundation or the base upon which our world of experience is built upon. This is experienced as the ultimate reality. Second: In this experience, what is involved is not exclusively the mind or the will, but the total and integrated, holistic personality. Third: Religious experience is one that is intense of the highest order that humans are capable of. All expressions of religious experience may not be that intense but are pointers towards this factor. This intensity can be found in religious loyalty. Of all other loyalties, religious loyalty wins the best. Fourth: Religious experience is different from other experiences as it involves not mere admiration as in aesthetic experience, but an imperative, a commitment leading to action and morality.

Emile Durkheim

Religious experience is an experience of the sacred. Developing this idea of the sacred, Durkheim in his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious life*, brings out the Characteristics of the sacred. Fundamentally, he argues that the sacred is different and opposed to the profane. Sacred is superior to the profane: Human experience can be divided into two: Sacred and the profane. The sacred is superior to the profane in dignity and it expresses a superior seriousness. Rites and rituals in religions are not performed primarily to achieve something, but to express an attitude. Religion is an attitude towards the sacred and it has no other hidden agenda.

The Sacred recognises the belief in a power or force. When sacredness is attached to a symbol, or an object, it is indeed the power that it symbolises or that it holds. The Sacred is ambiguous. The Sacred contains both contrasting factors: physical and moral, human and cosmic or natural, positive and negative, propitious and unpropitious, attractive and repugnant, helpful and dangerous to humans. The Sacred is non-utilitarian. Work belongs to the realm of the profane. Utility and everyday affairs do not belong to the space of sacredness. The Sacred is non-empirical. Sacred quality is not intrinsic to objects but is conferred on them by religious thought and feeling. It is superimposed upon it. The Sacred does not involve knowledge. It is not a knowledge that is based on the experiences of the senses. The Sacred strengthens and sustains the believers. Worshipers and believers draw strength from the sacred, because it exalts them and raises them above their own selves. The Sacred makes a demand on the believer and the worshipper. There are some obligations made on the believer, especially on the moral side. Certain do's and don'ts come up on the believer, as part of the understanding of the sacred.

Rudolf Otto

There are three types of feelings: the feeling of dependence that arises from the fact that we are mere creatures and we are submerged and overwhelmed by our own nothingness, the feeling of religious dread or awe, and the feeling of longing for the transcendent being that fascinates us. Religious Experience is an experience of these three feelings. In his book *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto analyzes the term holy. Holy or Numinous cannot be reduced to mere ethical norms; it is something beyond rational or ethical goodness. Holy is close to Hb qadòsh, Gk ayios and Lt sanctus or sacer. This refers to the “innermost core” of all religion. The holy is a “pre-eminently living force”. An experience of the holy is an experience that involves awe. There is awe because of a great sense of mystery surrounding life – this can only be experienced in feelings. There is admiration combined with fear of the “wholly other”. There is fear and admiration, horror and fascination, terror and attraction. The holy is thus “the *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*”.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.s.

- 1) What are the opinions of Richard Swinburne and Emile Durkehiem on Religious Experience?

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- 2) How does Rudolf Otto understand the *NUMINOUS*?

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1.5 METHODIC CULTIVATION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Yoga

The Indian system of Yoga has been known for its rigorous practices. Yoga attempts to bring to the fore the higher nature of the person and in that stage, he/she can have a the highest religious experience, called Samadhi. Yoga proposes eight limbs to attain this stage. The body, in Yoga, aids in this process of attainment of enlightenment. Breathing, exercises, diet, postures etc. cause the right atmosphere to reach a higher level of concentration, and consciousness. The practices prescribed in yoga help the mind to understand that it has a higher state of existence, a superconscious state, a state beyond reason. This is a mystical state.

Buddhism

The Buddhists use Dhyana to denote higher states of contemplation. There are four stages in Dhyana. In the first stage, the mind concentrates on one point.

It excludes desire, but not discernment or judgment. This is still intellectual. In the second stage, the intellectual functions are also excluded and there is a satisfaction of a sense of unity that remains. In the third stage, even this satisfaction is excluded and there is an indifference, along with memory and self-consciousness. In the last stage, the indifference, memory, and self-consciousness are perfected. Nirvana is then attained, where there exists absolutely nothing.

Sufism

The highest religious experience is cultivated by detachments. Detaching from the heart all that is not God, and meditation of God is the method of the sufis. A contemplative life that consists of humble prayers and on complete meditations on God is necessary for religious experience. Intuitions and revelations precede the highest – namely, a total absorption in God.

Christianity

“Orison” or meditation is the methodical elevation of the soul towards God. The first thing to be done is to detach the mind from outer sensations because they disturb the concentration of ideal things. The concentration on holy scenes, such as the spiritual exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola, would then fill the mind. This will lead eventually to move higher and even shed off these imageries. The consciousness is so enraptured that verbal description becomes impossible. This is ‘union of love, as John of the Cross would term it, which is attained by ‘dark contemplation’.

1.6 CASES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

A few representative examples of individual religious experiences from a few traditions and periods will show the intensity and the impact of the experiences on the individual and their communities

The Lutheran Experience

Martin Luther, an important figure of the 16th Century Protestant Reformation, was struck to ground by a bolt of lightening in a thunderstorm. He prayed to St Anne and vowed that he would become a monk if he was saved. He was saved and he joined the monastic life. As he grew, he was not satisfied with the medieval way to salvation that included confessions, charitable works, and sacraments. During 1513-19, while being at Wittenburg, he lectured elaborately more on the Psalms and letters to the Romans and Galatians. This helped him to realize and discover a new meaning of the Gospel of Christ. This was his religious experience. He now found an answer to his constant quest, namely, how can one stand in holiness before the demanding righteousness of a just God? He discovered that a life led by faith, which is itself a gift of God, is the answer. God justifies us by faith. This discovery made him feel like a new born person and he felt he entered paradise itself.

The Buddha Experience

Gautama Buddha, hailed from a noble family in India. As he grew up without knowing many realities of life, his first exposure to the harsh realities of life, pain and suffering, made him raise several questions. Searching for the right and the most satisfying answers, he joined several others who were also in their spiritual sojourn. He gained extensive knowledge of the Vedas and the Upanishads, and practised extreme asceticism. However, even after six years,

he could not find answers. Then, he sat in deep meditation with a determination to find answers for his search. During these meditations, he was enlightened. This unique religious experience that he had left on him and on the wider society a deep indelible mark. He had now moved to a state of pure consciousness. He understood and realized several realities, the chief of which being the Four Noble Truths. He shared this experience of enlightenment with others and this was the foundation of a new religious movement- Buddhism.

The Zen Experience

A Japanese version of Buddhism, this type of meditational practice is gaining more attention today. True reality is within oneself. When one experiences this, he/she would be able to understand the reality outside better. Such an experience is in Zen language – ‘awakening’. This intuitive enlightenment comes only with a rigorous self-discipline under the care of a master. This self discipline has many forms – meditation, archery, judo, etc. This experience is unique and personal. A pure selfless being emerges at enlightenment, and one feels that all beings are primarily Buddhas.

The Pentecostal Experience

This religious experience is found in the Bible, Acts of the Apostles (2:4). The apostles and the disciples of Christ, filled with fear, locked themselves up in a room in Jerusalem. While being at intense prayer, they were suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit and they ‘began to speak in other tongues’. They then opened the door, and now filled with courage and strength, spoke to the other Jews and many who heard them speak in their own language were astounded. In modern times the emphasis on such an experience is being found in many groups. Speaking in tongues, healing, ecstatic prayer, witnessing etc are expressions of such experiences.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answers.s.

1) Can Religious Experience be attained through training?

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2) Give a few cases of Religious Experiences.

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

Religious Experience, as the core of a religion, has an important role in the life of a believer. Several factors that determine Religious Experience contribute to its uniqueness. Faith and Belief in the Divine, with a firm quest for the Divine

is a basic necessity to prepare oneself for a Religious Experience, although the experience itself may dawn at the most unexpected moment. Although there are several types of Religious Experiences, all of these point to a term of relationship with the Divine. Such a relationship, when firm and strong, reaches a climax with a Religious Experience, and leaves a lasting impression in the mind of the one who receives it. It also leads to a different approach to life in the society. While some experiences are private, a few are public, but the quality of the Religious Experience is often known through the life one lives thereafter. This unit was an exposition of the various aspects of Religious Experiences – the need, the types, the factors involved, and its methodic cultivation. Giving some samples of persons who have had Religious Experience, this unit has shown how Religious Experience also brings about a dynamic and charismatic effect in the surrounding.

1.8 KEY WORDS

Religious Experience	: an out-of-the-ordinary experience, within the setting of a religious tradition, in which the believer enters into a DEEP relationship with the Divine or God, either through some means or directly.
Numinous	: holy
Mystical Experience	: an experience in which the believer becomes “one” with the divine.

1.9 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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