
UNIT 4 RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE-II

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

Our objective in this unit is:

- to study closely two eminent writers who analysed the dimensions of religious experience:
- **William James** looked at religious experience mainly from the psychological point of view
- **Rudolf Otto**, a well known phenomenologist of religion, who tried to bring out the aspects of Divinity and religious experience, which cannot be expressed through rational, deductive method.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

“Experience” is a word commonly used in everyday life. Ordinary use of the word “experience” refers to an active act of consciousness. The Western identification of experience with sense experience has its implications when it comes to religion. On the one hand, there is the Platonic stream represented by Augustine and on the other hand the Aristotelian stream represented by Thomas Aquinas. Both accept the identification of experience with sense experience but as is to be expected, Aquinas has a greater appreciation of it than Augustine. But an appreciation of Aquinas would be impossible without recognizing that unlike the Greeks, his main contrast is not between experience and reason, but between reason and revelation where the concept of reason includes sense experience. However, none of the medieval theologians, however, consider experience as central to their theological work. (> George Karuveleil, “Experience” in EICP). The situation began to assume a definite shape in the contemporary period with William James and Rudolf Otto. William James with his classic *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901) and Rudolf Otto with an equally important classic *Das Heilige* (1917) translated as *The Idea of the Holy* have opened up new horizons of thinking on religious experience.

4.2 WILLIAM JAMES' VIEW ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, is one of the most important books dealing with analysis of religious experience. The book may fairly be considered as a work in psychology. James himself did so. Therefore roughly we can say that his analysis of religious experience is done from the perspective of psychology.

Criteria to Judge an Experience

James' idea of religious experience is to be seen with the background of the Principles of Psychology and of his Radical Empiricism. In his book *The Principles of Psychology* he defined experience as the stream of consciousness. This idea of experience is very vital to his understanding of religious experience. Accordingly he pointed out organic and temperamental reasons for the various religious experiences. In his book *Radical Empiricism*, he underlines the importance of experience. He clarifies the meaning of experience as something continuous, changing and personal. According to him experience is self contained and self sufficient. Therefore, the principle of experience is to be experience itself. He held that everything real must be somewhere experiential. This principle of radical empiricism is something fundamental to James' epistemology. If there is genuine or authentic religious experience, it is based on this founding principle. He suggests a method and a theory of truth. His method proposes to interpret concepts in terms of their consequences. As a theory of truth James considers truth as an attribute of ideas rather than of reality. Truth can be verified by norm of usefulness. In other words truth can be verified by experience and experience is to be verified by experience itself.

Religious Experience

What is religious experience according to William James? It is "the consciousness which individuals have of an intercourse between themselves and higher powers with which they feel themselves to be related. This intercourse is realized at the time as being both active and mutual". The definition indicates that the religious experience is primarily a 'consciousness' of the individual who has an intercourse with the higher powers. He uses the term 'higher powers' to make it significant to all kinds of religious experience such as that of Buddhists, Hindus, Christians etc. According to him a conscious person is continuous with a 'wider self' through which experiences come. 'Wider self' according to him is not normal self of the conscious person but a dimension wider than the sensible world. It includes also the mystical and supernatural region. This unseen world also must be regarded as a *present reality* because it *affects* individuals and transforms their lives. Therefore religious experiences have positive content because they are conversations with the unseen, voices and visions, responses to prayer, changes of heart, deliverances from fear, inflowing of help, assurance of support etc. The religious experience in which there could be touch of the 'unseen' is only one form of religious experience. According to him there are many forms or varieties of religious experience. He puts forth certain hypothesis which could be applied to all forms of religious experience.

James states three hypotheses applicable to all forms of religious experience.

- 1) There is the touch of the 'more', which may be the 'higher spiritual agencies'.
- 2) The subconsciousness which is the intermediary either for divine encounter or for abnormal psychic invasion
- 3) The active consciousness in which the individual realizes the experience as something real.

James uses these hypotheses to explain all kinds of religious experience, both healthy and unhealthy, normal and abnormal. The unhealthy or abnormal cases remain as mere psychological phenomena. They are due to the invasions from subconscious region. Invasions from the subconscious take objective appearances and suggest to the subject an external control. James speaks of the reality of genuine, healthy and normal religious experience. In this case there is the touch of a 'more', the unseen or the 'divine'. As our primary wide-awake consciousness throws open our senses to the touch of the material things, so it is logically conceivable that if there be higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch man. The possibility for such experience, according to him, might be our possession of a subconscious region which should yield access to the spiritual beings. In short genuine religious experience is encounter of the 'more', the unseen, or the higher spiritual agencies, through the subconscious region of the self. In this sense subconscious region becomes the intermediary between the normal self and the higher spiritual agency.

Varieties of Religious Experience according to Temperamental Basis

James was convinced of the organic and temperamental basis for the varieties of religious experience. He says that according to different constitutions, temperament and organic structures, there will be varieties of religious experience. Mainly he speaks of two types: religious experience of the healthy minded and religious experience of the sick minded. According to him the characteristics of the healthy minded people are that they all have a healthy outlook of life and they seem to be happy and contented with themselves. But this is not the case of sick minded persons. Extreme incapacity to suffering and suffering to the extremities, with some foundation or without, is to be considered as neurotic or nervous constitution.

Validity of Religious Experience

James' analysis showed that some of the 'spiritual geniuses' were abnormal. He regarded some of them as neurotics and nervous. But such a condition did not prompt him to reject the truth of religious experience they had. Opinions are to be tested by logic and experiment. It is the same with religious opinions. Their value must be ascertained by spiritual judgements basing on immediate feeling, that is, in reference to experiential relations to our moral needs and to all other related aspects which we hold as true.

In the natural sciences and industrial arts we never try to refute opinions by showing up their author's neurotic constitution. Opinions here are invariably tested by logic and by experiment, no matter what may be their author's neurological type. He follows the same method of analysis with regard to religious opinions. Their value can only be ascertained by spiritual judgements directly

passed upon them, judgements based on our own immediate feeling; primarily and secondarily on what we can ascertain of their experiential relations to our moral needs and to the rest of what we hold as true.

In short, the criteria to judge the validity of religious experience indicated by James are three. They are:

- 1) Immediate luminousness
- 2) philosophical reasonableness
- 3) and moral helpfulness

These criteria for knowledge appear repeatedly in James' philosophy. *Immediate luminousness* means direct evidence of the fact as in the perception. It is the criterion to judge basing on our own immediate feeling. By *philosophical reasonableness*, he means that the fact must be consistent to logic and experiment. It is the consistency of the alleged fact with the accepted principles- in short, the indirect evidence of the fact. *Moral helpfulness* means the congruence of the fact with the passionate nature, especially with the resolute will. In short, the given fact should be contributing to the moral needs and to the rest of what we hold as true and good.

If one's experience can stand above the three tests, even though he is hysterical or nervously off his description makes no difference. James gives more importance to the last criterion. So in judging the validity of religious experience, James applies his pragmatic method. By these criteria James seeks the direct evidence of the fact, consistency with the existing truths and its moral usefulness. When a religious experience passes through these tests successfully, it can be considered true and valid. Then it becomes 'interesting' and important' to life. Applying these criteria, James finds that they are not fully verified in the case of religious experience. It is mainly because of its individual and private character. Religious experience is immediately evident and morally helpful to the person concerned. But they cannot be tested by scientific experiment. And so they lack scientific validity. But that does not mean that they are not valid or true on the individual level. In fact, he advocates that it is literally and objectively true and can be very well held so, on the individual level.

Mysticism – the Intense Form of Religious Experience

We were studying the criteria by which James proposes to judge a case of religious experience. The same criteria may be applied to check the validity of mysticism, which is a form of religious experience, perhaps, the supreme and intense form of it. Let us study briefly what he means by mysticism.

As we have seen, James holds, religious experience as the consciousness in which the individuals have a feeling of union with the higher powers. It is valid and true scientifically if it had immediate luminousness philosophical reasonableness and moral helpfulness. Mysticism is a peculiar and strange phenomenon in religious experience. James has no suggestion of its cause. But he has one thing to say as to what it is. Mystical intuition seems to him as a sudden and great extension of the ordinary 'field of consciousness'.

R.B.Perry quoting James' words, observes that for him mystical experiences are direct perception of fact by those who have them. James is concerned mainly

with the cognitive aspect of mysticism and their value in the way of revelation. He omits the mention of visual and auditory hallucinations, verbal and graphic automatisms such as marvels as 'levitation', stigmatisation and healing of disease. The mystics have presented these phenomena in their witnesses. But James does not consider them as essentials to mysticism. But for him, consciousness of illumination is the essential mark of 'mystical' states. Whatever may be the mental condition of the mystics, James does not take away the value of the knowledge of consciousness which the mystical states induce.

James does not see any scientific reason, in the strict sense, to account for mysticism. He also qualifies many of the mystical cases as pathological. But he was very particular to distinguish some cases as unique. James quotes "When mystical activity is at its height, we find the consciousness possessed by the sense of a being at once *excessive* and *identical* with the self: great enough to be God; interior enough to be me. The 'objectivity' of it ought in that case to be called excessivity, rather, or exceedingness." He further states that what he calls himself as his own 'over-belief'. He argues that there is no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. James says that so far as our ideal impulses originate in this region, call it mystical region, or the supernatural region, we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. Since the experience of the unseen world produces effects in this world, unseen region in question is not merely ideal. When we commune with it, the effect is actually imparted to our finite personality. Therefore that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself. Therefore James finds no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. The 'effect' the unseen world creates makes him to articulate its existence.

James elaborates four elements of mystical experience. They are ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity.

- 1) Ineffability means that the experience cannot be expressed in words: language is inadequate to express its nature and significance to one who has not experienced it.
- 2) Noetic quality of religious experience means that it is not just remarkable or pleasant and it contains a degree of knowledge: states of insight into depths of truth plumbed by the discursive intellect.
- 3) Transiency means that the experience is not long lasting. Mystical instances may last half an hour or at the most an hour or two.
- 4) The passivity highlights the fact that the experience, although often facilitated by personal concentration and discipline, involve the subject losing his or her own will. The person here is over taken by an experience that is, so to speak, forced upon him. That means this experience is not something that can be turned on and off at will.

For James the noetic quality and the sense of insight into the true nature of the world are important. He proposes the same pragmatic criteria to ascertain the scientific validity and truthfulness of mysticism namely, luminosity, fruitfulness and consistency with other truth. D. Browning observes that James grants mysticism the status of a hypothesis. Mysticism is also based on immediate

testimony of experience. So it may be said to have immediate luminousness. But how can we prove its philosophic reasonableness? How can it be verified? It may not be possible because the mystical experience is private and individual. As we have already observed, he admitted the coming of saving experiences in religious experience as a positive content. And he considers it as literally and objectively true. So he must admit on a greater degree the positive content or fruitfulness of mysticism because it is a higher form of religious experience.

For James there is no need of a God of the traditional sense to explain all the events of religious experience or mysticism. Many cases of religious experience and mysticism, he interpreted in terms of consciousness, as ‘subconscious continuation of one’s conscious life’ and as ‘sudden and great extension of the ordinary field of consciousness’ respectively. However, in both, he distinguishes some genuine cases in which the feeling of the ‘divine’ might be true.

Conclusion

Religious experience is the consciousness in which individuals have an intercourse between themselves and higher powers. The varieties of religious experience are varied as temperaments, organic structures and needs of man. Thus there are healthy minded and sick minded experiences. Even if the witness is not psychologically balanced, his or her witness can be considered valid and true. The condition for its validity and truthfulness is that it should stand the test of immediate luminousness, philosophical reasonableness and moral helpfulness. He specially treats mysticism because it is the intense form of religious experience. It has also a special effect on life in the world. He admits the reality of the ‘unseen’ in the mystical encounter. That is, according to him there are a farther side and a hither side for the genuine religious experience. On the farther side there is an encounter of the ‘more’, the ‘unseen’ and on the hither side we have the consciousness of it. There are many others who speak in the same line as James. If religious experience is possible and meaningful, it should be authentic. It can be authentic if the requirements implied in the authenticity are fulfilled. David L. Hall suggests four primary qualities for authenticity for normal propositions. They are validity, truth, interest and importance. According to Hall we can very well apply these principles to the religious experience and establish its authenticity.

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) Explain the logical conceivability of religious experience according to William James

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2) According to James what are the three criteria to judge the validity of religious experience? How does he consider the pragmatic criterion as important to prove the validity of religious experience?

4.3 RUDOLF OTTOS’S ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Rudolf Otto, a well known phenomenologist of religion tries to bring out the aspects of Divinity and religious experience, which cannot be expressed through rational, deductive method. *Das Heilige*, translated with the title *The Idea of Holy*, is the most important work of Otto. He describes the religious experience as the experience of the Numinous.

The Phenomenological Method

In contrast to the traditional rational method, Otto’s method is descriptive and phenomenological. Phenomenology tries to investigate into what actually appears to direct intuition. Husserl the originator of Phenomenology wanted to pay attention to the phenomena of experience. It is the study of immediate, direct experience with the intention to build an ‘exact science’ of description, or even a method of precise, sharable and testable description.

Phenomenology of religion is concerned with examining phenomenologically the character of religious experience taking this aspect or moment within the stream of experience as an object of analysis and reflection. In this way Schleiermacher analysed the structure of the religious self-consciousness. Rudolf Otto tried to describe the essential character of the Holy through phenomenological analysis of religious experience. In his book *The Idea of Holy*, he phenomenologically analyses and describes what he calls ‘non-rational or supra-rational in our religious experience. This section deals with Otto’s analysis of religious experience and the epistemological aspect of such experience.

Analysis of the Non-rational in Religious Experience

The deeply felt religious experience according to Schleiermacher, has peculiar quality, that is, feeling of dependence - more precisely an absolute dependence. Otto analyses the fundamental religious experience and tries to understand it in its own terms, especially by analysing the non-rational core of religion.

The Non-rational

What is even more attractive to Otto 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. Otto’s point is that if we focus only on the rational side, we miss the essential character of religious experience. To this non-rational, non-explainable element of religion he gave the name “Numinous”. 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. 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. Numinous is said to be *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. For instance what does one feel when one is in deeply felt personal prayer or when one partakes in a solemn liturgical service or when one is in an old church or temple? The appropriate expression to this feeling is *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans*. The feeling of it may come sweeping like a gentle breeze or tide, it may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasm and convulsions, or it may lead one to strong excitements or to ecstasy. It can also take wild and demonic forms and put one in horror status. It cannot be explained, but we cannot rule out the possibility to evoke it indirectly.

MYSTERIUM, TREMENTUM ET FASCINANS

mysterium: It denotes that which is hidden and esoteric, beyond understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar. Though what is enunciated in the word is negative, what is meant is absolutely positive.

Tremendum: The word is coming from tremor, which means normally the familiar emotion of fear. But here the term is used analogically to denote a kind of emotional response different from mere fear. It denotes an awe or awefulness due to *majestas* absolute ‘overpoweringness’.

Fascinans: *Mysterium* is expressed as *tremendum* and also as *fascinans* or fascinating. These two qualities, the daunting and fascination are combined in a strange harmony of contrasts. The reluctant dual character of the numinous consciousness is at once the strongest and most noteworthy phenomenon in the whole history of religion. The mystery aspect is for religious man not merely something to be wondered at but something that throws him into trans. The element of fascination brings out the properties of love, mercy etc. in the religious experience.

The “Wholly Other”

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...” Therefore it falls quite outside the limits of ‘canny’. According to Otto even on the lowest level of religious development, the essential characteristic of religious experience is ‘stupor’ before something ‘Wholly Other’, whether such an other be named Spirit, demon, *Deva* or be left without a name. This feeling of the ‘Wholly Other’ may be indirectly ‘aroused’ by means of objects which are already puzzling upon natural plane. “Wholly Other” as mysterious is something which is absolutely beyond our understanding. But that which merely eludes our understanding for a time is a ‘problem’ and not a mystery. Truly mysterious object is beyond our comprehension not only because our knowledge has certain limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently ‘wholly other’.

Mysticism contrasts the numinous object, the “Wholly Other” with the objects of ordinary experience. Not satisfied with contrasting with such objects of nature, mysticism finally calls it ‘that which is nothing’. By this ‘nothing’ is meant not

only that of which nothing can be predicated, but that which is absolutely and intrinsically other than the opposite of everything that is and can be thought. The ‘nothingness’ of the Western mystics is termed as *sunyam* or *sunyatha* or void and emptiness by Buddhist and Hindu mystics. All these refer to the Numinous ideogram of the ‘Wholly Other’.

The Epistemological Aspect of the Experience of the Holy

Otto tries to clarify a transcendental basis of the experience of Numinous in the subject as Kant did in his epistemology.

The Holy is taken in the broad sense to include both rational and non-rational elements. The Holy is the category by which we apprehend the transcendent both in its rational and non-rational aspects. In the case of non-rational elements of the category of the Holy we are referred back to something still deeper than pure reason to that which mystics call ‘the ground of the soul’. Otto follows the Kantian model to base religion and sense of God in man. According to Kant the knowledge arises from our faculty of cognition and sense impressions are occasions for such knowledge. The knowledge of the *Numinous* could be described in the same manner. It is derived from the deepest foundation of the cognitive apprehension of the soul. The experience of the Numinous arises by means of sense experience but not in and through sensory data. They are stimulus and occasion for the *numinous* experience to be stirred. The experience of the *Numinous* becomes purer when the soul disengages itself from this sense experience and takes its stand in absolute contrast.

Not only the rational but also the non-rational elements of the complex category of the Holy have *a priori* elements. The non-rational content has its own independent roots in the hidden depths of the spirit. The first stirring of demonic dread is purely *a priori* element. This could be pictured as the experience of the *Numinous* in the primitive and crude form. In the same way the developed form of the experience- *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans* is *a priori*. This non-rational element of the experience of the *Numinous* may be compared with the aesthetic judgement and the category of the beautiful. Intuitively I apprehend in the object only its sensuous qualities and its spatial form and nothing more. The meaning ‘beautiful’ is not given by the sensory elements. I must have an obscure conception of the ‘beautiful’ and in addition, a principle of assumption by which I attribute it to the object. If not the simplest experience of a beautiful thing is rendered impossible.

4.4 LET US SUM UP

The religions in general are convinced that the Holy or the sacred reality is attested by the inward voice of religious consciousness or longing. It can also be directly encountered in particular occurrences and events. That is, besides the inner revelation from the spirit there is an outward revelation of the divine nature. Religious language gives the name ‘sign’ to such demonstrative actions and manifestations. From the time of the most primitive religions people found means to arouse in them the sense of the holy. It can be known and experienced because everyone has an inborn sense of the numinous. It cannot be explained adequately because of its mysteriousness, but it can be evoked indirectly and experienced.

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) What is the appropriate expression to the feeling of *Numinous*?
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- 2) How does Otto follow the Kantian model to base religion and sense of God in man?
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4.5 KEY WORDS

- Mysterium** : It denotes that which is hidden and esoteric, beyond understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar. Though what is enunciated in the word is negative, what is meant is absolutely positive.
- Trementum** : The word is coming from tremor, which means normally the familiar emotion of fear. But here the term is used analogically to denote a kind of emotional response different from mere fear. It denotes an awe or awefulness due to *majestas* absolute ‘overpoweringness’.
- Fascinans** : The mystery aspect is for religious man not merely something to be wondered at but something that throws him into trans. The element of fascination brings out the properties of love, mercy etc. in the religious experience.

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4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) James speaks of the reality of genuine, healthy and normal religious experience where man has the touch of a 'more', the unseen or the 'divine'. As our primary wide-awake consciousness opens our senses to the touch of the material things, so it is logically conceivable that if there be higher spiritual agencies that can directly touch man. The possibility for such experience, according to him, might be our possession of a subconscious region which should yield access to the spiritual beings. In this sense subconscious region becomes the intermediary between the normal self and the higher spiritual agency.
- 2) The criteria to judge the validity of religious experience indicated by James are three. They are:
 - a) Immediate luminousness
 - b) philosophical reasonableness
 - c) moral helpfulness

He gives more importance to the pragmatic criterion. Since the experience of the unseen world produces effects in this world, the 'unseen region' in question is not merely ideal. When we commune with it, the effect is actually imparted to our finite personality. Therefore that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself. Therefore James finds no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. The 'effect' the unseen world creates makes him to articulate its existence.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) To the non-rational, non-explainable element of religion, Otto gave the name "Numinous". The Numinous experience is expressed by him by three Latin words: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. For instance, what does one feel when one is in deeply felt personal prayer or when one partakes in a solemn liturgical service or when one is in an old church or temple? The appropriate expression to this feeling is *mysterium, tremendum et fascinans*.
- 2) According to Kant the knowledge arises from our faculty of cognition. Sense impressions are occasions for such knowledge. According to Otto the knowledge of the *Numinous* could be described in the same manner. It is derived from the deepest foundation of the cognitive apprehension of the soul. The experience of the Numinous arises by means of sense experience but not in and through sensory data. They are stimulus and occasion for the *numinous* experience to be stirred. The experience of the *Numinous* becomes purer when the soul disengages itself from this sense experience and takes its stand in absolute contrast.