

## Religious Experience: Nature and Dimensions

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Religion has been defined by various scholars from different aspects or dimensions. Of all these the experiential dimension is considered to be the most important because personal religion normally involves the realization of experience of the invisible world.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of religious experience broadly falls in the concept of experience. The earliest connotation of word 'experience', which is derived from Greek word *emperia* reflects its origin in terms that designate the action of testing or proof by actual trial (experimenting).<sup>2</sup> Later on the word generally expressed the actual observation of acts or the events considered to be the source of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> *Standard Dictionary* defines experience as "the actual living through an event or events, actual enjoyment or suffering."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand various theories of experience emphasize volitional, intentional, attractive, attitudinal or foundationally cognitive elements of experience.<sup>5</sup> Theories of religious experience, in turn, have similarly emphasized one or more of these components.<sup>6</sup>

In classical Greek philosophy the empirical or experiential mode was considered to be less significant. The term 'empiricism' came to denote either an appeal to forms of experience considered to be foundational for various human concerns.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, theories of religious experience have emphasized one or more of these factors and meanings. However, the experiential theory has the value of giving insights into the way religion looks from the 'inside' or from, an immediate personal perspective.<sup>8</sup> In this respect, William James is considered to be responsible for generating interest in the concept of religious experience as a key to the understanding of religion.

For purposes of his inquiry, William James defines religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."<sup>9</sup> Reference to "feelings, acts and experiences" reflects many dimensions of human life that William James believed to be involved in religion.<sup>10</sup>

William James found in his material a few general types of religious experience and personalities, which he labeled as the religion of 'healthy mindedness' or of 'the sick soul', and of the 'once-born' or the 'twice-born'. The depth and scope of material relating to the sick soul and the twice-born 'led-him' to an extensive analysis of the phenomenon of conversion.<sup>11</sup> Religious experience nevertheless is a claim of an encounter with the divine. This accounts for its uniqueness in comparison to all other types of experiences. Jesus' experience at his baptism by John and Buddha's enlightenment while sitting in meditation are illustrative of this prime characteristic.

Their experience was of God or of transcendental truth. Joachim Wach expresses this understanding by describing religious experience of as Ultimate Reality.<sup>12</sup> This is the experience of ‘wholly other’, as Rudolf Otto, termed it. It results in as a typical sense of the ‘numinous’ which is unlike any other human perception.<sup>13</sup> This type of dimension pertains to the supernatural quality of the event and the perception of the experience.

Not only religious experience is unique in terms of its nature but it includes three other characteristics also. According to Joachim Wach, religious experience is a total response of the total being to what is apprehended as Ultimate Reality. That is we are involved not exclusively with our mind, our affections, or our will, but as integral persons.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, religious experience is the most intense experience of which man is capable. That is not to say that the expression of all religious experiences testifies to this intensity but that, potentially genuine religious experience is of this nature, as it is instanced in conflicts between different basic drives or motivations. It is religious loyalty that wins over all other loyalties. The modern term ‘existential’ designates the profound concern and the seriousness of this experience.<sup>15</sup> Thirdly, religious experience is practical that is to say it involves an imperative, a commitment which impels man to act. The activistic note distinguishes it from aesthetic experience with which it shares the intensity, and joins it with moral experience. The moral judgment however, does not necessarily represent a response to Ultimate Reality.<sup>16</sup> These are considered universal essentials in all the religious traditions. They typify the experience of founders of great religions, mystics etc. Evidently, “the feeling, thinking and willing have been declared the essence of religious experience.”<sup>17</sup>

Religious experience as mentioned earlier is experience of the Holy. It enfolds itself in definite attitude and different forms. Rudolf Otto in his study entitled *The Idea of Holy* defines three characteristics of an experience of ‘the Holy’. To specify the experience, Rudolf Otto has used the terms of *tremendum*, *mysterium* and *fascinans*, for these three characteristics. First is the *tremendum*, a sense that refers to a feeling of awefulness and overpowering might. Second, *mysterium* refers to the mysteriousness that pervades the experience. In the *fascinans* there is an element of fascination and individual seems to participate in an aspiration toward some ultimate value.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, J. Milton Yinger has emphasized to classify religious experience by its important characteristics, viz; intensity, temporal reiterate and attitude towards the surrounding social order.<sup>19</sup> For all religious experiences intensity does not seem to be the same. Some times, one feels more engrossed, grasped or involved than at others. To suggest the intensity as a variable affecting religious experience, Milton has relied on taxonomy developed by Rodney Stark. According to Stark there are four levels of intensity i.e., confirming, responsive, ecstatic and revelational experience, which represent sense of ‘intimacy with divine power’.<sup>20</sup>

In ‘confirming’ a person merely senses the existence of the divine. These are the perceptions of the divine presence that validate faith.<sup>21</sup> In ‘response’ there is the

additional perception that the divine has also responded or acknowledged the presence of the believer. Another illustration is the often-resorted pilgrimage experience in Hinduism, where a devotee is said to receive a 'favourable glance' from the chosen deity.<sup>22</sup> In 'ecstatic' the intensity of contact goes one step further. An affectionate<sup>23</sup> friendship type relationship between the person and divine occurs.

'Revelational' experiences are those in which the divine takes the worshipper into his confidence and a message is given. The prophets of Old Testament evidenced this type of experience with God.<sup>24</sup> Obviously, Stark's scheme proposes that intimacy varies from simple acknowledgement to deep mutual sharing according to the intensity of experience.

Second variable suggested by Milton Yinger is temporal referent by which religious experience may be classified.<sup>25</sup> It has been observed that the variable of temporal referent is closely related to the various dimensions of religious experience suggested by Malony.<sup>26</sup> Here the emphasis is on the locale, frequency, the import, the duration, the direction and the age at which the experience occurs. These parameters as defined are as follow : (i) emphasis—whether the experience is primarily emotional or intellectual or a combination of both; (ii) locale—whether the experience occurs alone or in a group; (iii) frequency—the extent to which one has had a similar experience before; (iv) import—the relative impact of a given experience has on the life of the believer; (v) duration—whether the experience lasts for a moment, an hour, or a day; (vi) direction—whether the impact of the experience is to confirm present faith, to revive the old, or to convert to a new one; (vii) age—at which the event occurs.<sup>27</sup> Any religious experience can be understood along these descriptive continuum.

The third variable, suggested by Yinger Milton has close connection with social dimensions of religious experience. Religious experience invariably involves escape or withdrawal, acceptance or attack upon the social order.<sup>28</sup> Taking into account these factors, famous sociologist Max Weber have suggested that religious experience could be denoted as : ascetic, mystical and prophetic.

**Asceticism :** Concentration upon the actual pursuit of salvation may entail a formal withdrawal from the 'world', from social and psychological ties with the family, from the possession of worldly goods, and from political, economic, artistic and worldly activities in short from all mundane interests.<sup>29</sup> The history of the world religions abounds with ascetics who had renounced the family, society and the world at large to live in seclusion. Nearer home in India there are numerous examples of ascetics belonging to various religious denominations who had renounced the worldly pleasures in search of enlightenment or liberation.

**Mysticism :** There is a great difficulty to draw a line between the ascetic and mystic experience. As compared to the ascetic a mystic experience emphasizes the acceptance of the world as it is. Unlike an ascetic a mystic engages himself in contemplation, which in turn results in illumination. Though like an ascetic, a mystic

sometimes resorts to self-abandonment but on the other hand he engages himself in unselfish service to others. The contemplative mystic minimizes his activities by resigning himself to the order of the world as it is, and lives incognito, so to speak, as a humble person, since God has ordained once and for all that men must live in the world.<sup>30</sup> In every religion examples of such mystics can be easily identified.

**Prophetic Experience:** The genuine prophet preaches, writes or demands new obligations. The prophet is above all the agent of the process of break with the social order in which he is born. He unfolds a fresh world order which is more rationalized and systemized cultural order, an order at the level of religious ethics, which in turn has implications for the nature of society in which it becomes institutionalized.<sup>31</sup> Prophetic experience is very different and unique in its own form. It involves criticism and revision of the social order and calls for radical change in the name of God. A prophet always emphasizes that he is the mouth-piece of God. This in its practical shape neither withdrawal nor compromise with the evils of the society.

The gift of prophecy itself indicates that certain men had a spiritual endowment and possessed by mankind in general, which enabled them to attain the knowledge of God, and to receive it as the result of a direct immediate experience, that He had to revealed to them. This type of prophets not only struggled against the evils, but also established the practical social order against these evils. The experience of Moses, the old Testament prophets, Jesus Christ, Muhammad and Guru Nanak can rightly be placed in the category of prophetic experience. On the above pattern we come across the religious experience of the ascetics, mystics, and prophets. Each in turn responds to the social order in a different way and have influenced the society in the forms of conservation, reformation or revolution.

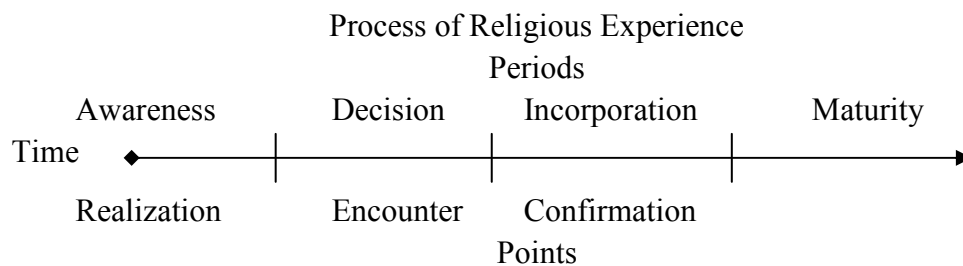
Many scholars have devoted a great deal of study to conversion of a particular variety of religious experience. William James found in his material a few general types of religious experiences and personalities which he labeled as religion of 'healthy-mindedness', or the 'sick-soul' and the 'once-born' or the 'twice-born'.<sup>32</sup> The depth and scope of material relating to the 'sick-soul' and the 'twice-born' led him to an extensive analysis of the phenomenon of conversion.<sup>33</sup> The conversion experience is usually a one-time experience wherein the individual goes through a process—gradual or sudden by which the self hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy becomes unified, consciously right, superior and happy.<sup>34</sup> On the basis of his material William James has identified two types of conversion experiences i.e. the sudden and gradual. In the sudden type the self in profoundly changed in an almost instantaneous manner. Sinful habits disappear in a moment. James labeled them as "once-born". Such type of examples can be found in every religion. In Sikhism we can enumerate the examples of person like Sajjan Thug who under the influence of charismatic personality of Guru Nanak immediately came on the right path to give up the evil deeds. According to William James sudden type of conversion occurred in "sick souls" who were unable to bear the inner stress. To achieve peace of mind or serenity, these type of persons

underwent radical change which in the words of William James is called “twice-born”.<sup>35</sup> The persons who were strong willed or were “healthy minded” and who were optimistic that they can conquer evil, witnessed conversion in a slow manner. Their conversion was not an over-night change but a conscious and voluntary act.

An other distinction in the sphere of conversion experience relates to the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ conversion. Inner conversion is the experience that results in internal peace, unity, purpose and meaning of life. The outer conversion is the experience that one finds after joining a new faith.<sup>36</sup> The inner conversion can bring a transformation in life but it does not necessarily include ‘outer conversion’ i.e. joining of a new faith. In any case the conversion is normally thought of as an overt shift in allegiance either from the no faith to a faith or from an old faith to a new faith.

While James emphasized the personality traits underlying the different types of conversion experience, others have noted situational and social concomitant which also underline these phenomena. Lofland studied those who were not converted to cult and felt the end of the world was near. He suggested that for conversion to occur it was necessary that a person; “1) Experience enduring, actually felt tensions; 2) Within a religious problem solving perspective; 3) Which lead to defining himself as a religious seeker; 4) Encountering the cult at a turning point in his life; 5) Wherein is formed (or pre-exists); 6) Where extra cult attachment are low or naturalized; 7) and where to become a deployable agent exposure to intensive interaction is accomplished.”<sup>37</sup>

This conversion is both a social opportunity as well as psychological tendency. It occurs where a combination of psychological stress and social situation coincide but not when they are absent.<sup>38</sup> The process of conversion has been explained by Tippett as including both periods of time and points in time as under :



Initially there is a period of awareness in which a person is minimally conscious that he lives in an atmosphere where religious experience occurs. This period is followed by a point of realization act where the person focuses consciously on those who are having religious experiences. Then occurs a period of decision during which the individual considers the possibility for the first time, that he could have such an experience. This results in a point of encounter act, which the person responds in faith and experiences conversion. It can thus be seen that the event ‘conversion’ may be a part of a longitudinal process, which has been generating consciously or sub-consciously for some time.<sup>39</sup>

Tippett’s final period pertains to religious experience which occurs after conversion. First there is the period of incorporation during which the person joins with others in a fellowship of teaching, training and discipline. This is typically followed by a

point at confirmation at which time the new convert undergoes a 'rite of passage' which signifies that he is now a full-fledged member of the religious body and can experience religion in its depths. Finally, there is the period of maturity during which the person grows and develops in the life of the religious community. At this time religious experience increasingly takes on a stylized, ritualistic and traditional character.<sup>40</sup>

Above mentioned process of conversion has a close resemblance to the expression of religious experience described by Joachim Wach. According to him the doctrinal (theoretical) and practical (cult or worship) are two great fields of religious expression.<sup>41</sup> Theoretical expression is always enshrined in the original religious institution oftenly represented in symbolic forms, that too in mystical language. In this context sacred writings and rationalized fundamental concepts are the expression of particular religious experience. Then theologian develop normative system of faith, which eventually produce philosophy i.e. intellectual expression of religious experience. Normally the intellectual expression revolves around three topics of God, world and man.<sup>42</sup> However in the original experience it is difficult to differentiate between theory and practice. In Wach's opinion what is formulated in theoretical statement of faith is done in religiously inspired acts.<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, this is the second category of expression of religious experience. The cultic or practical expression : in a wider sense all actions which flow from and are determined by religious experience are to be regarded as practical experience or cults, i.e. the acts of symbols (images), sacraments and sacrifice.<sup>44</sup> In other words it is the experience that one experiences in a church (place of worship) or congregational worship. It incorporates all the ritualistic activities prescribed by religious bodies of the various faiths around the world. The appropriate religious behavior or participation in the rituals results in the experience of the holy which in turn can deepen one's faith.

Actually the religious ceremonies, sacraments, rites and rituals are different modes to communicate with the divine. While performing these acts individual definitely passes through a unique kind of experience, though its intensity can vary from persons to person.

As the nature, characteristics and varieties of religious experience are very wide ranging, similarly it performs diverse role in the religious life of individuals and cultures. Sometimes religious experience makes the devotee to realize his duties.<sup>45</sup> *Bhagavadgita* typifies this type of experience. Here religious experience performs a means to salvation that finds echoes in many other religions. Fundamental to both the Hindu and the Buddhist tradition is the primacy of *dharma*, the path or way that is uniquely fitting and obligatory for the devotee in the devotee's unique situation. Something of this sense is continued by Kant when he views all duties as divine commandments. Religious experience is the experience of duty as sacred obligation.<sup>46</sup> Meditational inside also helps to gain religious experience, subsequently leading to salvation. Here the conceptualization of the Transcendent emerges from the experience of ritualized worship engendered by speculation about the character of the Ultimately Real and Ultimately True. The meditational disciplines serve as acts to attain inactive sight.<sup>47</sup> The normative religious experience of this way is associated with the concept of mysticism.

There are those who would maintain that mystical experience is the paradigmatic religious experience. But the scholars have offered more extensive and more highly advanced analysis and descriptions of religious experience as mystical. These have included such suggested distinction as that between nature of mysticism and experience of transcendence that are specific to a religious tradition.<sup>48</sup>

There are descriptions of experience believed to be relatively instances as well as of experiences that deepen in patterns that are believed to be shared by the mystical traditions of several religious faiths. Distinctions are also made between traditions in which the goal of experience is believed to be the attainment of union with or absorption in the Transcendent and traditions in which the goal is perfect communion between transformed and fulfilled self and the Transcendent subject.<sup>49</sup> Devotee instructed in the ways of duty and meditative knowledge finds himself in the presence of divine which is deeply personal in nature. The experience of this presence however is both stutteringly awesome and overpowering as well as inwardly transforming and liberating.<sup>50</sup>

The concept of religious experience is very complex and unique. The scholars, who have sought to employ it in the study of religion, agree that it is very difficult to describe the state of religious experience. Firstly, it is personal and is only to be realized. Secondly, we have to rely on the testimony of those who have gone through the experience and our interpretation of their reports may be off the mark. The religious experience of many individuals has not only influenced the large segments of mankind in various cultures but genesis of great religions can be traced back to the religious experience of their founders.

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