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## AN EXPLORATION OF THE NEW AVENUES FOR ANALYSING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Religious experiences are at the same time fascinating and 'mystic.' Many kinds of experiences have been reported to us from Vedic age onwards. The seeming contradictions in them are only apparent. All the ancient and recent mystics hold that they have tradition and scriptures to support them. Various methods employed to analyse and understand the experiences proved to be unsuccessful. Aesthetic experiences are akin to religious experiences and they have been analysed and studied in India. Hence an attempt is made here to see whether an aesthetico-metaphysical method to study various experiences would be fruitful.

An attempt is made here to open up new avenues to explore, understand and evaluate the religious experiences, mainly in the Indian context. The nature of the subject is 'mystical', the method complicated and the realms of experiences not very tangible. This is a subject on which the man of real experience speaks less and the man without experience speaks more! (*Avijnātam vijānātam vijnatam avijanātam, Kena Up.*). Since the mystics themselves have tried to express their experiences in conceptual language we can try to study them. There is more of the human in religious experience than is generally believed. It tells us as much about the human beings as about Cosmic Being.<sup>1</sup> Religious experiences which ignore the claims of understanding would be doomed. The definite beliefs at which the mystics arrive are the result of reflection upon the inarticulate experience gained at the moment of insight.

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1. Cf. Weller Embler, *Metaphors of Mysticism*, 1974, p. 72.

Religion grows from simplicity to complexity on a world-man-time-space-language-God understanding. When further knowledge comes, the already existing knowledge must react and grow to greater complexity. All the religious experiences as experiences must not be contradictory but complementary and explicable and understandable through some method of study with the help of other experiences which are claimed to be sublime—such as aesthetic experiences.

Before proceeding with this method of understanding religious experiences let me give in brief, some of the religious experiences of mankind in order to analyse and grasp their general nature that at the end I may be able to say after understanding the modern and ancient experiences that they are basically the same. All the seeming contradictions merge in the one transcending ground. The metaphysical processes of experiences remain the same while different faiths make it possible to have different experiences—for example, Ramakrishna had religious experiences as being one with Kali, one with Christ Jesus, and one with Alla as the Supreme Deity. What distinguishes religious experience when compared to aesthetic experience is the aspect of faith.

## I

In the Vedic period man was concerned with a living, wonderful world, where nothing was inert, and he came across four world grounds—Bṛhaspati, Visvakarman, Hiranyagarbha, and 'That one'—which in the Upanishads became Brahman. The Vedic seers gave architectural, generative and sacrificial analogies to explain this world ground (cf. *RV.* 10 : 129, 121, 81, 72, 90). Poets, priests and philosophers explain the experience with their favourite common analogies. The quest for an infinite, indivisible Absolute which knows neither time nor space, nor change nor motion must be accepted as a distinguishing feature of religious quest and the human mind. In the west we see this feature in the thoughts and expressions of the following thinkers: Tales—water, Anaximenes—air, Heraclitus—fire, Parmenides—Being, Jews—monotheism, Plato—*Summum Bonum*, Christians—Holy Spirit, Spinoza—Deity, Hegel—mind, Shelley—white radiance of Eternity, Bergson—Élan, etc.<sup>2</sup> The cosmic vision of Indian art also bears witness to the quest for the Absolute ground. The art developed from symbolic to natural, and then to multilimbed stages. First, the

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

sacred and the mystic, then the anthropomorphic and, finally, the cosmic representation. Garuda floating in the air, Anantha floating in the cosmic ocean etc. show the cosmic vision, the *viśvarupa* in the *Gita* and Nataraja image not being exceptions. Mention may be made here of the transfiguration of Christ on the Mount Tabore.<sup>3</sup>

All these experiences go beyond the limits of space and time, mind and matter, human nature and the use of language, in short, the common sense. The progress is from the gross to the subtle, from the finite to the infinite. It seems to me that the nature of the religious experience is of a kind meant to fall into the limitless, formless, and contentless ocean as a volumeless drop. "The intelligent man should merge his speech (*i.e.*, all organs) in the mind, the mind in the intellect, the intellect in the cosmic intelligences, and that again in the placid self" (*Ka. Up.* 3 : 7-8, 13).

## II

The Indian religious experience found in the Upanisadic period and the philosophical schools has been described as fourfold : (1) Unitive experience, where the sense of distinction between the self and Brahman is the bondage. Most of the Upanisads and the school of Advaita hold this kind of experience to be the true one. (2) The Isolative experience : Unity or oneness is the cause of sorrow—the union of *puruṣa* with *prakṛti*. *Sāṃkhya* and *Yoga* systems hold this kind of experience to be the true one. (3) Copulative or Interpersonal experience of the *bhaktimarga* as we see it in the *Gita*, *Bhaktisūtras*, Madhva, Caitanya etc. (4) Nihilative experience of the Buddhists—here nothingness or non-existence is revealed. However contradictory they may appear to be it is true that all these experiences have basically the one Absolute ground.<sup>4</sup> We have our ordinary experiences and the above stated experiences are not true in the sense in which, the ordinary experiences are. When one has a transcendent experience he may say 'I am Brahman'; in the ordinary experience he will worship God. The *śūnya* of the Buddhists is in essence the same as the *purṇa* of the Upanisads and the *Nirguṇa Brahman* of Śaṅkara.

3. Heimo Rao, *Multiple Arms in Indian God-image*, ALB, 1975.

A. Kumaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*.

4. Cf. Gerald Larson, "Mystical Man in India", *JSSR*, 11, 1976, pp. 1-16.

## III

There are different contexts for experiencing God. The differences in the contexts do not affect the fact of experiencing God. I shall mention here some of the contexts : Gandhi had an experience of God under the socio-political oppression-aspect of India. Job in the Old Testament had an experience of God in the context of religious suffering. Sri Narayana Guru had an experience of God in the context of Izhava oppression and caste discrimination. Tagore experienced God in and through aesthetic beauty. The *Gita* states the experience of God in the context of political conflict. Even the followers of the *Buddha* and Mahavira claim the existence of a religious tradition before the Buddha and Mahavira. It is a phenomenon to be noted that, all the recent and ancient religious movements "always look back to the scriptures" and tradition. But each experience is unique too. The traditional *sādhanās* may predispose man for an experience but not give the experience. One may not follow any *sādhanā* and yet he may have the experience.

## IV

Experiences are said to originate from 'above', 'within' and 'without'. The *Bhaktas* may get the experience from above, the introvert from within and the extrovert from without. Most of the Christian religious men such as St. John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila and the *Bhaktas* of India claim that the experience is granted by the grace of God from 'above'. India's most concrete experience seems to be attained by reflectively turning towards the self within. Man can reflect on his own soul and he can delve deep into his self in such a way that the soul can make the soul itself the object of knowing. The highest enjoyment a man can have in himself is to enjoy his own self by his own self : (*ātmanam ātmanā paśya*). St. Augustine writes in his *confessions*: "I entered, and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw the light that never changes casting its rays over the same eye of my soul, over my mind." All the experiences of Ramaṇa Maharshi were of this kind. It is so relishable that one may say that 'I am God' himself. But he may go down deeper and may meet the hand of God sustaining him in existence and commune with Him. The third kind of experience originates from the beauty of the world without. In certain moments one may start to commune with the beauty of Nature, and then he communes with the Beauty which sustains the beauty of Nature in existence : "He

gazed into the very heart of things, the very herbs and the grass, and that actual nature harmonized with what he has seen" (Jacob Boehme) "All that a man has here externally in multiplicity, is intrinsically one. Here all blades of grass, wood and stone—all things are one" (Eckhart).

We have reason and faith, perhaps more than those persons who claim to have an experience with God. But they get it and we may not get it. Does it mean that we should postulate a third element, other than faith and reason, for the religious experience? Is it luck or chance? What is the source of this experience and how can one reach it?

## V

Different approaches had been already tried to reach the human recess of experience. They are classified and studied by Prof. F. Staal in his book *Exploring Mysticism*: They are: (1) Dogmatic approach; (2) Philological and Historical approach; (3) Phenomenological approach; and (4) Physiological and psychological approach. All these approaches have their own limitations and leave us without establishing a real link with the experiencing subject. Indians have long ago understood the relation between aesthetic and mystic experiences. Hence we will follow an aesthetico-metaphysical approach. Prof. Gnoli writes: "The examination of the relationship between aesthetic experience and religious and mystic experience, to which Indian thought always returns with special interest, is one of the aspects peculiar to the aesthetic thought of Bhaṭṭanāyaka and, with a clearer understanding, to that of Abhinavagupta. . . Aesthetic speculation which was born and grew upon the edge of metaphysical thought, did not omit, therefore, to enquire into the relations and differences existing between it and religious experience. The first to face this problem was, in all probability, Bhaṭṭanāyaka who maintained that aesthetic experience, being characterized by the immersion of the subject in the aesthetic object, to the exclusion of all else and therefore by a commentary interruption of this everyday life is akin to the beatitude of ecstasy or the experience of Brahman."<sup>5</sup> Visvanatha in his *Sahityasudhasidhi* an unpublished work says: "Poetry is that which on the moment of hearing gives the extreme happiness as that of the happiness of enjoying Brahman."

5. Quoted from Raghavan and Nagendra, *Indian Poetics*, p. 77. Also Sankaran, A., *Rasa and Dhvani*, p. 100.

Religious experience is intuitive, ineffable and it uses symbols from culture and conditions of living. It is metaphenomenal; and another experience known to be metaphenomenal is aesthetic experience. Gnoli writes : "The aesthetic experience implies the elimination of any measure of time and space (time and space belong to the discursive thought) and, by implication, of the limited knowing subject, who is conditioned by these but who, during the aesthetic experience, raises himself momentarily above time and space and causality and, therefore, above the stream of his practical life, the *samsāra*. Aesthetic experience marks a definite break with *samsāra* which is dominated by the law of cause and effect. It opens like a flower born of magic without relationship in time and space, after it, renews itself and returns to its normal course."<sup>6</sup>

The poet is a creator, poetry is creation. The mystic and the poet plunge themselves into deeper realms of the life of the spirit and create new worlds. Indians speak of three creators : Prajapati, Vyāsa and Valmiki. The latter two are equal to the first. Poetry is not a fine art in India and it does not come under the 64 arts. The mystic and the poet express the truth in its bare forms. Poetic and religious experiences are born in the transcendent realm of subjectivity—in the pre-conscious or supraconceptual centre of the soul. Poetic experience is tasting one's own beatitude. It is the contemplation of the Absolute. It creates a realm without pain and pleasure in the ordinary sense. The *sahṛdaya* — man of sensibility — can accommodate his vision to the vision of the poet; so also the man of sensibility can accommodate his vision to the vision of the mystic. Hence it is hoped that this aesthetico-metaphysical approach must open a way for all the *sahṛdaya* to approach the mystic experience.

## VI

Things being so, now we shall try an aesthetico-metaphysical analysis of the subject of experience. Indians concentrated mainly on the work produced by the poet but we, based on the object produced, dare to turn to the subject who produces it because for all the objects produced outside there must be corresponding subjective correlatives. I have already said that the process of experience is a transition from the gross to the subtle. Man has three-fold power of abstraction—sense level, imagination and memory level, and intellect and will level,

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Correspondingly, man has material objects, images and ideas and concepts. The Indian aesthetics also has these three-fold abstractions and objects. In the sense level we have nine *rasas* or feelings : love, humour, pathos, wrath, heroism, terror, disgust, wonder, and repose. These correspond to the 11 passions produced by nine faculties which are manifested in the sense level : *amor, odium, desiderium, fuga, gaudium, tristitia, spes, desperatio, timor, audacia* and *ira*. The enjoyment produced in the sense level and intellectual level is called *rasa*. But let us call the first feeling and the second sentiment.

In the second level, of imagination and memory, we have *abhyāsa* and *pratibhā*. *Abhyāsa* contains all that we know and keep in memory. *Pratibhā* is the power to observe and create new things. This is the dynamic aspect in the poet. *Pratibhā* is not inborn nor does it come from common experience. It is a flash of the divine light of self-certifying character, which dawns upon someone as a divine heritage. "In almost every definition of *pratibhā* we observe that...the conception (or intuition) and its verbal expression are both attributed to the imaginative activity."<sup>7</sup> "Works on poetics usually indulge in some discussion concerning the various requisites of the poet : *Śakti* or *Pratibhā* (imagination), *vyutpatti* (culture comprising both *bahujnata* and *ucitanucitaviveka*), and *abhyāsa* (practice). Among these, *pratibhā* is admitted to be the very seed of poetry—without it poetry cannot arise."<sup>8</sup>

In the third level of abstraction we have intellect and will. Corresponding to this in poetics we have sense and sentiment—*dhvani* and *rasa*. As for the production of *rasa* it is described as follows : Through the harmonious blending and representations of appropriate *vibhāvas*, *anubhāvas* and *vyabhicaribhāvas* there arises in the audience a certain climax of emotion invariably accompanied by a thrill, and a sense of joy and this is *rasa* or aesthetic pleasure. When these *vibhāvas* etc. are present, the deep-seated instinctive impression of love (*sthāyibhāva*) is kindled in the mind of the audience and developed, to that climax, when through imaginative sympathy with the situation the audience forgets all differences of person, time and place and this climax of emotion reveals itself in a sort of blissful consciousness. This bliss is *Rasa*."<sup>9</sup> Here is another explanation of *rasa* by Prof. Gnoli : "*Rasa* is not a thing in itself, formed previous to the act of conscious-

7. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

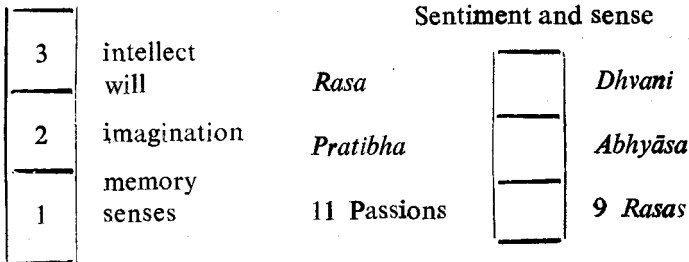
8. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

9. Sankaran, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 7-8.

ness by which it is perceived, but the consciousness itself (and therefore the perception) which becomes *rasa* or aesthetic consciousness. The subject when immersed in this state finds in it, beatitude, rest, lysis. Aesthetic consciousness has no end outside itself. It is fully self-sufficient, and is therefore pleasure, bliss, rest. Aesthetic experience postulates, of necessity, the extinction of every practical desire, and, therefore, the submersion of the subject in the aesthetic object to the exclusion of all else. The appearance on the horizon of consciousness of practical desires and needs, etc. breaks, *ipso facto*, the compactness of the aesthetic experience by intruding upon it external and dispersive elements, *i.e.*, the so-called obstacles, which are raised by the disturbing influence of the ego."<sup>10</sup>

*Dhvani* or the sense is that variety of composition wherein the expressed sense and expressive words subordinating their express senses suggest that sweet and beautiful ideas.<sup>11</sup> *Rasa* school and *dhvani* school are two rival schools in the aesthetic thought of India. But intellect and will are complementary so also *rasa* and *dhvani* are complementary.

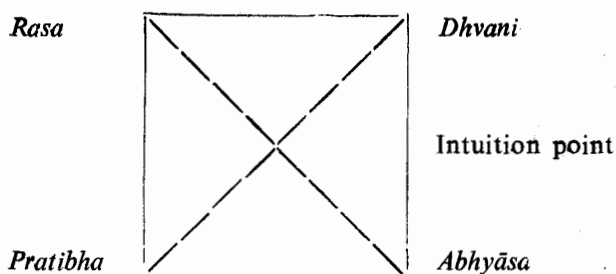
But an aesthetic experience never means the use of the senses, imagination and memory, and intellect and will as they are used in the everyday life. It is not reason alone nor is it love alone; it is neither *abhyāsa* alone nor is it *pratibhā* alone that can flow into the experience. At the root of the intellect and will and at the top of the imagination and memory we may think of a centre or screen of experience which is the point of intuition—*sthāyibhāvatala*. From this deep sea comes up the variety of experience.



10. Raghavan, *op. cit.* pp. 76-77.

11. Dhvanyālōka, 1.13.





The experience comes from the power of integration, intensification and deepening of the experience. Spatio-temporal relations are always present but we can transcend them and comprehend them. Intuition takes place not from the uncontrolled and unrestrained feelings and thought but from a habitually, unintentionally controlled self. Imagination is creative and *a priori*; intellect is analytic and discursive will is regulative and directive; memory is donative and *a posteriori* to the experience.

The *sthāyibhāvatala* is the deepest sea from where all the poetic and mystic experiences come up. Here resides the unseen creator who creates the new worlds in new words and with new meanings to the old ones. Since the experiences come from the deep sea of the subconscious the expressions are mainly in the form of symbols, analogies and mystic poems.

The *Rāmāyana* says : *nānṛṣi kavih*—a “non-seer is not a poet.” He is the one who sees the internal kernel of reality without being obstructed by the grossness of the material world. He sees everything in and through the past, present and future. Aesthetic experiences are liable to more exploration and both poetic and mystic experiences have to tread the same path almost up to the same destination. Hence I claim that an aesthetico-metaphysical study of religious experiences can yield fruits. Almost all the mystics are poets. This is the only path for all the experiences to tread and it serves as a means to study various experience.

## VII

Now something remains to be said about the poet and poetry and the transformation of language. Literary writing in India was divided into prose and poetry and a mixture of both (*campu*). But we know that poetry can be in prose or in the form of verse. The form in which a work is presented is not the criterion to decide what it is. Hence we shall turn our attention to the real criterion of poetry and intuition.

The grammar school, especially Bhartṛhari and his followers, described the process of conception and expression of the conception in words in four steps. They are *para*, *pasyanti*, *madhyama* and *vaikhari*. *Para* is the intuition's starting point with the content of a reality and the soul receives the vibration and the rhythm. *Pasyanti* is the second stage where the seer knows that he has a real conception to express.

*Madhyama* is the state where the word is on the way to expression in contact with the air. *Vaikhari* is the last expressed word which is produced by striking at the different points of articulation by the tongue with the help of the air. Through this *vaikhari* the reality in intuition is expressed in the conventional language. The problem is to express the intuited reality in conventional or a human language. Some poets may translate the harmony and rhythm of the intuition into phonemes since the conventional language is not suitable for proper communication. Here the language will be less conventional and the reality will be the maximum in such a way that the poetry is mystic. The relation between the language and the reality will be the least. In the second level of expression more conventionality will come. In this stage when the conventional stability is added to the original reality we get drama. The last stage is that of maximum convention and the least reality of intuition. Epic poetry, novel etc. come under it, where there is a logical theme which is enlivened by intuitive reality in the garb of conventional words. Therefore the essential division of poetry must be into mystic poem, drama and novel.

Language is an ordinary means to express our ordinary experience. It is a medium of the medium of experience. For expressing the higher and the lower experience there is no language. It is used to express the reality confined to space and time and causality. That is why the *Tai. Up.* says: *tato vāco nivartante aprāpya manasā saha*; thereof the word returns with the mind since the Reality is unapproachable. But the poet enlivens the words and overloads it with meaning as the fiddler enlivens the strings of the fiddle. Without the poet the language is dead. As he sees the world so it becomes. As H. D. Thoreau has said: "It is the worshippers of beauty, after all who have done the real pioneer work of the world." "Let us also spare a penny for the poet. In exchange, he, and he alone, will give us to the best of his powers, pennies from heaven. His could be the currency accepted for admission at any Golden Gates."<sup>12</sup>

12. Desmond Tarrant, *In Praise of Poetry*, ETC. VII. 31-3, 1974, pp. 401, 413.