

THEORY OF TYPES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE :
SOME CRITICAL REMARKS

It is a common practice among Western scholars in philosophy of religion to make a sharp distinction between the two main religious traditions—the Semitic and the Indian. This distinction is often treated as equivalent to another hypothetical distinction between the theistic and mystical approaches. For writers, like R. C. Zaehner, this distinction paves the way for proving the 'superiority' and 'sacredness' of Christian religion over all other forms of religious experience. With this particular aim in view Zaehner identifies the entire Hindu religious traditions with the Sāṃkhyan soul-mysticism and concludes that the Hindu or Vedantic mystical experience lacks reference to a Divine Being.¹ According to him Hindu mysticism, and by implication entire Hinduism, is not Theo-centric, but soul-centric.

There are other thinkers who make a similar distinction between Semitic religions and Indian religions, but with more honest motives. Ninian Smart distinguishes the prophetic or numinous experience from the mystical experience. He presents three grounds for this distinction:— First, the mystical experience is essentially introvert, while the prophet's religion is essentially extrovert, or directed outwards. Secondly, there may or may not be a reference to a Divine Being or Creator God in mystical experience, while it is a must for prophetic religious experience. Thirdly, while the language of the contemplative mystics is impersonal, that of the prophets is highly personal or anthropomorphic.² In this paper we shall consider only Ninian Smart's views which, being more sympathetic and unbiased than those of other similar thinkers, deserve greater attention.

Ninian Smart's criteria of distinction between the theistic and mystical experiences are nothing more than a collection of certain distinctive characteristics of different religious approaches. Treated as such, they would be useful in any unbiased study of religious phenomena, but used as criteria of some categorical classification they are misleading. Thus, he is right when he points out that prophetic (theistic) religious experience seeks its source outside the subjects of experience, while the mystic always seeks it within

himself. But even this cannot be a final criterion of distinctions. It is not only that mystical experience is very common within the theistic tradition, but even the prophets themselves are not as extravert as it would seem at first glance. Thus, Muhammad used to retire to the mountain cave of Hira for introspection and communion with his Lord. Introspection and monasticism have been no less valued in the theistic traditions than in the so called mystical ones. His second point of distinction is still more incorrect, the one regarding the absence of reference to a Creator God. Based as it is on the sole example of Theravada Buddhism, it can not be made a universal criterion of classification and study of religious phenomena. The arbitrary choice of one almost outdated branch of Buddhism as an example of a universal phenomenon like mysticism can not validate the a priori classification which is equally arbitrary.

His third point of distinction regarding the use of anthropomorphic language by the prophets and implied suggestion that theism is one that conceives its God in anthropomorphic terms is a gross misrepresentation of theism itself. If it were so, he would have to exclude not only all the mystics of medieval Christianity, from the class of prophetic theism, but even the greatest philosopher-theologian of Christianity, St. Thomas. God's supremacy, transcendence, simple nature and unknowability of His essence are some of the most basic tenets of Thomist philosophy. The Thomist concept of God is totally at variance with any anthropomorphic concept of God. What is more, no mystic of the world would ever hesitate in accepting the Thomist concept of God as a very good approximation to his own concept of the Absolute. The basic affinity between the two concepts is proved by the fact that Thomas continuously quotes Dionysius, the most distinctly contemplative mystic of Christendom, to support his transcendental philosophy.

Ninian Smart, like R. C. Zaehner, starts with a definite bias as to two distinct classes of religious experience. As a result, neither his criteria of classification, nor the religious experiences included in the two classes are true to the facts. Experiences are equated which are quite distinct and other experiences are contrasted even though they have definite basic affinities. Thus, at first he uses the term prophetic religion and points out its affinity

to the numinous experience, in which observation he is quite right. But then, he starts using another term—theistic religious experience for the same religious approach.

Though at first Ninian smart gives the sole example of Theravada Buddhism for the type of mystical experience in which there is no reference to a Creator God, later on he seems to include the entire mystical experience of Indian origin into the class of mystical experience³ and contrasts it with Semitic-prophetic tradition which he has identified a priori both with numinous experience and theistic religious experience. On another occasion, Ninian smart has specifically stated that in its original form Indian mysticism is soul-mysticism and becomes theistic only when later on a dose of devotionism is added to it from outside, as it were.⁴

Thus Ninian smart seems to arrive at much the same conclusion as that of R. C. Zaehner regarding the general absence of any Theo-centric direction in the Indian mysticism and its basic distinction from the semitic theistic approach.

The above approach is mistaken on several counts. It seems to identify an entire religious tradition with one particular idea and one single moment of religious experience. This goes against the essentially complex and bi-polar nature of all religions. It neglects to note that each religion consists of not one, but several strands of religious experience and belief, joined together in a very complex interrelationship. It seems to affirm through its categorical classification that the theistic religious experience can be exhaustively described in terms of numinous experience and that there can be no indigenous theistic experience outside the semitic prophetic religions ! Also, the identification of the two—numinous and theistic experiences—includes a contrast from mystical experience. would it mean, then that theistic religious experience excludes mystical experience ? It is indeed a very confused classification. By identifying theistic experience exclusively with numinous experience Ninian Smart has impoverished theistic experience. It is deprived of all the wealth and depth of theistic mystical experience. What is more, the theistic mystical experience does not seem to fit into any of the two major classes of numinous and (contemplative) mysticism. Confused by his own approach, sometimes he treats all mystical experience as one class and at other times includes

theistic mysticism within theism.⁵ The confusion is inherent in the criterion of classification. As the God of numinous experience is a wholly other, theistic mysticism can not be grouped together with theism, which is a priori identified with numinous experience, since for theistic mystic God is not a wholly other, but a very intimate, personal presence. Similarly, if his definition of (contemplative) mysticism, that it lacks a reference to a Creator God is correct, then obviously theistic mysticism cannot be included in the class of contemplative mysticism.

Starting from such an untenable classification, Ninian Smart is hard put as to the place of all the mystic saints of medieval Christianity, as per definition, the class of theistic experience can not include mystical experience ! He is even more baffled when confronted by the vast, impressive phenomenon of Bhakti mysticism, since again, per definition, Hinduism is not prophetic and so can not be theistic ! His suggestion, that devotionalism is imported into Hinduism from outside, goes against all known facts of history. Apart from the question of the origin of Bhakti mysticism, its occurrence itself within non-prophetic Hinduism challenges the validity of the above classification. Ninian Smart, like R. C. Zaehner, is equally wrong in assuming that the Vedantic mystical experience is soul-centric and not Theo-centric. Such writers are confused by the use of the term *Ātman* for the Divine Reality. But the unconditional identification of the *Ātman* with *Brahman* in Vedanta guarantees its transcendent, universal and even absolutistic character, as pointed out by Rudolf Otto.⁶ The *Ātman-Brahman* of Vedanta is as much a universal Divine Being as the God of Christianity and only a deliberate bias can make some one confuse this *Ātman-Brahman* with the subject self. Thus, to include Vedantic mysticism in the class of mysticism which lacks a reference to the Divine Being, is an example of gross misrepresentation of facts to suit some a priori classification.

This is not meant to deny that there are different approaches in religion, but only to point out that all these approaches are not so distinct from each other, as the above group of writers would believe. Because of their essentially bi-polar or complex, but synthetic character, there is a constant mutual interaction or overlapping of them. Pure numinous and pure mystical experiences are mere creations of philosophers' mind. Religious experience, as it exists, is a rich complex whole, comp-

rising of several different moments of experience, such as fear and hope, depression and elation, numinous awe and intimate love. On the theoretical level also, no religious tradition can be exclusively identified with one single concept or ideational presupposition; instead it includes several interrelated, but seemingly paradoxical beliefs or concepts regarding the transcendence or immanence of God, His personal Being and His supremacy and so on. All those different strands or moments of experience are often harmoniously organized under some one predominating idea or Church dogma. But the balance is almost always precarious, so that it tends to tilt towards the seemingly opposite direction on the slightest pressure either from some new sect, or from some inner need. Thus, we have most distinctly contemplative mystics like Pseudo Dionysius and Eckhart in the predominantly theistic Christian tradition, and dualistic theists like Madhava and Chaitanya within the basically monistic Vedanta. Above all, we have the miraculous phenomenon of Sufi mysticism thriving in the seemingly unfertile soil of Islamic conservatism.

True, there are different religious approaches which may loosely be termed as theistic and mystical. But they must not be exclusively identified with entire religious traditions. Rather, they coexist within each religion. Lines dividing these approaches must be imagined as horizontal, passing through every religion, rather than as vertical ones dividing different religions into separate compartments.⁷ More important, there is a constant interaction between and overlapping of the two. Thus almost all mystical experience is Theo-centric and all profound theistic souls hesitate, following the mystical approach, in concerning their God in anthropomorphic terms. The dogmatic character of theism is continuously being transformed by the more profound and more spiritual approach of mystics. On the other hand, the extreme monasticism, other-worldliness and transcendentalism of contemplative mysticism are constantly being mellowed by the softer personal approach of theism.

Theistic experience must not be unconditionally identified with numinous experience and contrasted with mystical. Such an approach fails to appreciate both the unique character of different moments of religious experience and the affinity behind the apparently distinct and even opposed religious experiences and attitudes. There are certain common moments of experience

between such extreme classes of religious experience as the numinous and the mystico-contemplative. The numen or God of numinous experience is a wholly other whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own.⁸ The numen can best be described as an impersonal reality, an 'it' to which no personal categories can ever be applied. The *mysterium* of Rudolf Otto reminds us of the Divine Darkness of Dionysius. In fact the concept of the numen is quite close to that of the Absolute of the mystics. The latter, like the former, is absolutely transcendent, unknowable and beyond all intellectual (including personal) categories. On the other hand, if as Ninian Smart says, the God of theism is anthropomorphically conceived and we know that the numen is just its opposite, theistic experience cannot be unconditionally equated to numinous experience, nor can the numinous be categorically distinguished from the mystical.

Rudolf Otto was much closer to truth when he pointed out the similarities between numinous and mystical experiences. Another meeting point between the two is the moment of experience termed as creature-consciousness by Rudolf Otto. The subject of numinous experience feels himself being overwhelmed and reduced to nothing when confronted by the supremacy and majesty of the numinous. To him this experience is traumatic, as being at a rather sub-rational level of experience, he is unable to fathom the meaning of his own experience. The mystic undergoes a similar experience in which his self (ego) is naughted or swallowed up by the all-encompassing Being of the Absolute.⁹ But for him the experience of self-naughting is highly desirable, as it provides him a glimpse or direct experience of the Divine. The two, the creature feeling and the experience of *fanā* or self-naughting, are not the same, but there is a clear affinity between the two. On the other hand there is no place for such an experience in theism at least as the term is understood in the West. A theist is always eager to preserve his distinct personal being. The culminating religious experience for a theist is fellowship with God and not merger into the Absolute. The theistic experience as such is different not only from mystical experience but also from numinous experience, of which creature-consciousness is an integral part.

The above is not meant to suggest a new class of experience—numinous-mystical, indeed the two are qualitatively distinct.

But it does challenge the validity of any sharp division of religious experience into two classes—theistic and mystical.

All the above contradictions can be avoided if we were to posit four, instead of two, classes of religious experience and remember all the time that they are mere working hypotheses and not names of some actual, distinct types of experience. Thus we can divide religious experience into — (a) numinous, (b) theistic, (c) theistic-mystical, and (d) mystical. While the numinous experience represents the pre-rational experience of man, theistic experience includes it and yet transcends it, in as much as it is rational and more comprehensive. In addition, theistic experience always tends to develop into theistic mysticism. The contemplative mystical experience may not be the highest class of experience, as claimed by the contemplatives. Theistic mysticism and contemplative mysticism might have grown side by side. There is definitely enough evidence of their mutual interaction and overlapping, so much so that Western thinkers take these to be as one class. This results in the attribution of the characteristics of contemplative mysticism to the entire class of mysticism, which is often very misleading. If we go directly from theism to contemplative mysticism, there would appear quite a marked change in the nature of approach and the quality of experience. This leads to the Western thinkers biased sharp distinction between theism and (contemplative) mysticism. But if we go from theism to contemplative mysticism via theistic mysticism, we would find no clear line of demarcation between theism and mysticism.

Theistic mysticism accepts the basic tenets of theism and reconciles them with the mystical approach. Thus the God of theistic mysticism is a Personal Being, a Thou, whom prayers can be addressed and with whom an intimate dialogue can be established, in short, a God of grace and love. Yet a theistic mystic prefers to avoid the determinate dogmatic language of theology, while describing his God. God is a personal presence for him universal and transcendental like the God of theism, but also immanent in a way the Personal God of theism can never be. When St. Bernard talks of the coming of Christ into his soul and finally concludes that may be Christ never comes from outside, but is ever present within the soul,¹⁰ he could not have explained his experience in determinate personal (anthropomorphic) terms.

I. P. Q...8

There are innumerable Christian mystics who have gone beyond the determinate language of Church theology when describing their unitive experience. The God of Eckhart is beyond being and non-being, and the unitive experience of Ruysbroeck reveals to him a Reality that is beyond the three Persons of the Trinity.¹¹ More important, the Lord-God of Christian mystics is nearer to them than their own soul.¹² God or Christ can best be realized, or the devotee be united with Him, within one's own soul, since He is eternally present therein.¹³ All this is a far cry from the concept of God 'who stands over against the subject' and who is conceived in anthropomorphic terms, that is, against the theistic approach as elucidated by Ninian Smart. And yet all these saints and mystics of Christianity would have been shocked, had they been told that their mystical experience disqualifies them from being members of the Christian Church as per definition prophetic religion cannot be mystical! Same paradox appears in the case of Hindu Bhakti mysticism which is inexplicable from the above approach. Leaving aside the mystery of its occurrence, it can prove the best example of theistic mysticism and the surest bridge between theism and mysticism. The God of Bhakti mysticism is essentially a personal God who actively participates in the drama of love. The *bhakta* (devotee) does not seek to be absorbed into Him, but rather wants His glimpse (*darśan*). He beseeches Him to come to his rescue and when God delays in responding he even quarrels with Him,¹⁴ all of which goes to prove the highly personal character of God. He is often even attributed a human form. And yet, when the saint under-goes a unitive experience, he no more talks of *darśan*, but of complete unification with the Absolute. Even while maintaining a dialogue with a personal God, the Hindu devotee was constantly conscious that God as He is in Himself is *nirguṇa*, that is, beyond all qualifications or attributes. At the same time this *nirguṇa* God was not the impersonal Absolute of the contemplatives, since He was still the supreme Beloved. Thus the *nirguṇa Brahman* or Rama of Kabir is also his Beloved with whom he seeks to be united. This Beloved of Kabir is immanent within his heart, yet transcendent and even numinous, so that when confronted by Him the soul hesitates even to touch His feet, as the Beloved is sacred and the bride (soul) is profane.¹⁵ Thus the numinous moment of theistic experience is equally strong in Hindu theistic mysticism. Of course, it is modified by

the Vedantic background, but its occurrence is indubitable and it goes as far back as the Upanisads. Any advocate of the contrast between theism and mysticism would be really hard put to explain the entire phenomenon of Bhakti mysticism.

Sufi mysticism similarly offers the classical example of a mysticism that is at once mystical and theistic. The unitive experience of a Sufi mystic brings him very near contemplative mysticism. And yet, the Beloved of a Sufi is essentially a transcendent and numinous Being. A Sufi is primarily a theist so that even during his most profound moments of unitive experience, he does not forget this basic creatureliness.¹⁶

Theistic mysticism comprehends theistic and mystical approaches in another context also. While a theist always seeks to preserve his distinct individual existence, and a contemplative mystic exalts in self-naughting, a theistic mystic seeks to acquire an attitude of complete unconditional self-surrender to his Lord, conceived as the All-in-all. This absolute self-surrender, *prapatti* as it is conceived in Bhakti mysticism brings it very near to the contemplative's ideal of self-naughting, and still it is a typically theistic approach.

Now, Ninian Smart and all such thinkers have only two alternatives—either to disown all mystical experience as foreign to theism, and it would mean a complete and unnecessary impoverishment of theistic experience; or to accept theistic mystical experience as an integral part of theistic religion. If such thinkers choose the second alternative, as Ninian Smart sometimes half-heartedly does, then they would find the wall of demarcation, erected between theism and mysticism, eluding their grasp. Theistic experience has an inner urge to develop into theistic mysticism and the latter has the closest possible affinity with the more distinct type of mysticism, e. g. contemplative mysticism. In as much as theistic mysticism comprehends within itself both theism and mystical experience, it bridges the gulf between the two. By refusing to recognize theistic mysticism as a more or less distinct kind of experience, Ninian Smart fails to understand both theism and mysticism. Other writers, as R. C. Zaehner, include theistic mysticism within the class of theism and conclude that theism exists only in the Semitic (preferably only in the Christian) tradition; and that there can not be any genuine theistic mysticism outside that tradition! Ninian Smart's talk of

Hindu mysticism being originally mere soul-mysticism etc. similarly originates from a wrong a priori identification of theism with prophetic tradition only. This approach, thus fails to understand the positive, synthetic and universal character of both theism and mysticism by its arbitrary distinction of the two.

Hyderabad

Saral Jhingran

NOTES

1. R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, (Oxford University Press, London, New York, 1973,) pp. 130, 135 ff., 146 ff. etc.
2. Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, (The Fontana Library Theology & Philosophy, Collins, 1974), pp. 366-7.
3. *Ibid* pp. 673-5, 681-2.
4. Ninian Smart, *Doctrine and Argument in Indian Philosophy*, (George Allen & Unwin, London, 1964), pp. 130 ff., 133, 138 ff.
5. Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, pp. 468 ff, 561 ff, 573 ff.
6. Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West* transl. by Bertha L. Bracey and Richenda C. Payne, (The Macmillan Co, New York, 1972), pp. 101-2.
7. See H. D. Lewis and Robert Lawson Slater, *World Religions Meeting Points, Various Issues*, (C. A. Watts and Co., London, 1966), p. 7.
8. Rudolf Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, (transl. by John W. Harvey, Penguin Books, Unwin, London, 1959), p. 42.
9. *Ibid*, pp. 23-4, 34-6.
10. Bernard, *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, 74.5, in F. C. Happold, *Mysticism A Study and an Anthology*, (Penguin Books, England, U. S. A. 1964), pp. 205-6.
11. Ruysbroeck, *Adornment of Spiritual Marriage*, III.3, in F. C. Happold, *op-cit*, pp. 260-1.
12. "God is more inward to us than we are to ourselves". *Ibid* II. 3, p. 254, cf. Eckhart, quoted in J. C. Pratt, *Religious Consciousness*, (Macmillan, New York, 1930) p. 475.
13. "The spirit in its inmost highest part .. is an eternal dwelling place of God in which God dwells as an eternal Presence .." Ruysbroeck, *op. cit.* II. 57, in F. C. Happold, *op. cit.* p. 253.
14. "How should I call myself Thy servant when my wishes remain unfulfilled. If Thou carest for me, then do not delay any more." Tukaram, *abhangas*, 1567, in S. K. Belvalkar and R. D. Ranade, *History of Indian Philosophy*, (Poona, 1933), Vol. VII., p. 298.
15. Writer's transl., the Hindi text being taken from *Kabir Granthavali* (Ashoka Prakashan, Delhi, 1972).
16. See R. A. Nicholson, *The Idea of Personality in Sufism*, (Cambridge University Press, 1923), pp. 12 ff., 14 ff.