

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND COMMUNICATION

SUSHABHAN DEB BARMAN

This paper is about the problem of the communication of religious experience. Religious experience is one of the many forms of human experience. The word “experience” has been used with many different meanings. For present purpose, experience includes all the data and processes of consciousness and nothing else. The word experience we use to mean only the conscious or mental, that is to say, the fact of experiencing. Religious experience is understood as the experience of God or any other divine figure. It can range from the experience of God revealing himself to man to the experience of being aware of God’s presence or even a miracle. The experience of believing nature to be a creation of God is a religious experience; so is the experience of prayer. Religious experiences are of many degrees - some are more intensely religious. However, any religious experience is a unique way of apprehending experience. As we have said already, it is a unique way of experiencing.

Let us now come to the problem of communication of religious experience. It is claimed that religious experience is essentially incommunicable. In saying this we do not mean to say that there is no communication between believers on the one hand and non-believers on the other; that *the twain shall never meet*. What we mean to say is that religious experience is basically a level of experience which is ineffable, cannot be communicated in our everyday language. The problem is not so much of its being personal. It is about the mystic aspect of the experience which makes it incapable of expression in ordinary language. It is a deep experience, too solemn and mysterious, a matter of profound feeling, faith and conviction, something that the rapture of poetry can catch, but eludes the methods usually used in philosophy. Hence words like ‘God’, ‘sacred’, ‘people of God’, ‘sin’, ‘miracle’, ‘kingdom of God’, ‘afterlife’ ‘incarnation’ or ‘*avatara*’ etc., carry meanings and messages which are not amenable to factual expression and analysis. Religious experience is inexpressible; it cannot be put into words used literally. In other words, human language cannot be used literally, while speaking of religious experience. Since all the language is derived from our finite experience, it may not apply to the infinite univocally. Let us take an example. The word ‘father’ is part of ordinary language as in “Mr. Deb

Barman is my father". We also say, "God is the father". But the word 'Father' is not used univocally. In the latter, the word is taken as foundational; it signifies God as the source and ground of our being etc. In the words of John Hick "It is by God's will that we exist . . . We are thus totally dependent upon God as the giver not only our existence but also of our highest good. To become conscious of God is to see oneself as a created, dependent creature receiving life and well-being from a higher source"¹

That is why religious language is said to be non-propositional. Religious utterances do not express propositions which can be true or false. Similar positions are religious language is non-informative or non-cognitive. Religious language fulfills a different function from that of endeavoring to describe facts. Paul Tillich, for example, conceives of religious faith, a kind of religious experience, as ultimate concern.² Religious faith as ultimate concern means a subjective attitude and also the object of this attitude - the divine object. Thus religious experience which carries the news of another world requires special linguistic devices. Hence, there are myths, symbols, and parables for its communicability.

Let us explain this with the help of the example of symbols. Religious symbols give us new sensitivities and abilities of perception because of which things, persons, events receive the quality of the 'holy' or the 'sacred'. The trident of Shiva is the symbol of Shiva because it represents the power and glory of the deity. A symbol has two aspects. It opens up the subjective dimension of religious experience and it also opens up levels of reality which are not given to us in any other way.

The point of these special linguistic devices is that they do not convey any information. What we can do is talk round and round the subject, never quite hitting it exactly, until we bring the hearer or the reader to the point of these symbols, their inexhaustible, everlasting character and meaning; until he sees for himself what the experience is. The two sides are then in communion but not communication. According to Rudolf Otto, linguistic communication of religious experience is not possible because it is essentially disengaged from language. In his, *The Idea of the Holy*³ he says that the experience of the Holy, the numinous experience, cannot be put into words. It is unsayable. That is coming to see the point of religion. Religious experience is unique in that here fissures as it were develop in our ordinary spatio-temporal world and the messages of another world seep in, call it God, Allah, the

Numinous, *Saccidananda*, Sublime, etc., the seriousness of the experience is justified in living this experience and not in communication.

Religious experience is rooted in man's subjective attitude to the divine. By the subjective attitude we mean the direct or immediate awareness of God or the ultimate reality. This does not mean that there are not external concrete manifestations of religious experiences. Religious writings, practices, rituals, pilgrimage and such like are the conventional, recurrent manifestations of particular religions through space and time. There is seemingly an unmanageable abundance of data accumulated about religions by ethnologists, anthropologists, archeologists and other historians of culture. But the accretion of knowledge alone and its communicability can never lead to an understanding of the experience of the transhistoric reality, which we feel designates the fundamental perspective that has to do with religion. It is the human response to an ultimate reality. That is then, the essence of religious phenomenon. No amount of data of manifestation of religion can appreciate the existential dimension of religious experience involving man and his God. There are studies to interpret the structures of man's religious response to symbols in his social world, and the interpretation of the symbols in relation to man's religious world which goes by the name of sociology of religion. This is praiseworthy for developing a methodology for religious practices. But it leaves room for an interpretation of transcendence as a specifically religious category, and hence, of its communicability.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

1. John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, Prentice – Hall of India, New Delhi, 1994, p. 65.
2. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, Horper and Row, New York, 1957, p. 1. Also, his *Systematic Theology*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1951, pp. 11-12.
3. Rudolf Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1959.