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The Concept of Religious Experience: A Qur'anic Perspective

الملخص

لقد سبب سوء الفهم لفكرة التجربة الدينية بين أتباع ديانات العالم عامة وأتباع ديانة الإسلام خاصة مشاكل كثيرة فيما يتعلق بالاعتقاد الديني لبعضهم البعض. وجاء الأسلوب الإلهي للقرآن الكريم كتحدٍ للناس عامةً والعرب خاصةً. وهكذا فإن التجربة الدينية الموجودة في الآيات القرآنية تظهر الحكمة الإلهية نحو تبليغ العقيدة الإسلامية وقيمها التي تساعد الناس على هدايتهم إلى الطريق المستقيم. ويُعتبر فعل إرسال القرآن الكريم كوحى إلهي إلى النبي محمد ﷺ أحسن نموذج للتجربة الدينية التي عاشها وجارها الرسول. والهدف الأساسي من دراسة هذا الموضوع هو أن يحاول الباحث أن يُدرّس بعض الآيات المختارة التي تظهر فيها فكرة التجربة الدينية. وإضافة إلى ذلك، سيناقش هذا البحث أصالة فكرة التجربة الدينية وعالميتها؛ والعوامل الأساسية التي تساعد على فهم فكرة التجربة الدينية — إيمان ولغة دينية؛ التجربة الدينية حسب مضمون الآيات القرآنية، نحو التجربة الدينية لمحمد وموسى عليهما السلام. ووصل هذا البحث إلى نتيجة مهمة أن الفهم الصحيح والدقيق لفكرة التجربة الدينية سيساعد المسلم على تعزيز وتحسين طريقة فهم عقيدته خاصةً، وكما سيساعد غير المسلم على فهمه لظاهرة التجربة الدينية.

Introduction

In the contemporary world, it is difficult to differentiate between the systems of belief found among world religions, which have gone through a continuous evolution since the time of their

establishment. In fact, behind all these systems of belief, stands someone, who in different ways has managed to establish them, and, therefore, every system of belief got its historical background in order to profess its validity. However, the great religions call themselves revealed religions and each of them tends to rest its validity, its function, and its right to exist on the codification and the communication of the religious experience experienced by the prophets. In other words, the religious experience acquired from revelation through the prophet or messenger will contribute in the development of a particular nation (in case of all prophets before Muhammad) or to humanity at large (in case of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.)).

Genesis of the Concept of Religious Experience

The concept of “religious experience” has its genesis at the time when human sciences started to interfere and study the system of religious beliefs, i.e., after the development of Darwin’s theory on the evolution of species. On the premises of Darwin’s theory, many other theories were developed, many of which are against religion. Many prominent figures have also contributed to the development of human disciplines in relation to religion, like Marx, Engels, Durkheim, Weber, Freud, etc. Indeed, the conceptualization of “religious experience” as something clearly separated from the rest of life began to be tenable when religious interpretation of reality started to decline in power. It, thus, became possible to imagine a range of human experience that was not religious.¹ However, “religious experience” is a clear-cut and well defined notion, which is not without undesirable connections.²

Furthermore, the concept of religious experience is rooted in broader concepts of experience as such and in theories of what

¹ Hay, David, *Religious Experience Today*, (London: Mowbray, 1990), p. 10.

² Wall, George, *Religious Experience and Religious Belief*, (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 1995), p. 1.

is distinctively religious in experience. The definition of the term experience is given as: "the actual living through an event or events; actual enjoyment or suffering; hence, the effect upon the judgment or feeling produced by personal or direct impressions; the sum total of the conscious events which compose an individual's life."³ The origin of the term experience in the Greek *empeiria* signals the emphasis on the experience in those philosophical schools which are considered to be empirical.⁴

In order to clarify the concept of religious experience, James asserts that "in the distinctively religious sphere of experience, many persons ... possess the objects of their belief, not in the form of mere conceptions, which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended."⁵ The phrase "quasi-sensible realities" is less than felicitous for the religious object, but what James wants to emphasize is the direct apprehension of physical objects in perception.

It is understood that James' concept of religious experience is spelled out more specifically in his description of what he calls "salvation," something, which he sees as the "common nucleus" among the various religions. His description of salvation is as experienced by "those more developed minds," exemplified by the various cases in his book. For instance, salvation, for the more developed minds, is an experience in which the individual becomes conscious that this higher part (of him, that is, the part seeking salvation) is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him. He can keep working in touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck.⁶ This is to say that one quiets oneself, getting rid of the "lowest" and moving to the "higher," that is, one quiets first the

³ The Encyclopedia of Religion, Editor in Chief: Mercia Eliade, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, vol. 12 "Religious Experience," 1986), p. 323.

⁴ Ibid. vol. 12, p. 323.

⁵ James, William, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (USA: The University Press, Cambridge, 1902), p. 64.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 509-510.

body, then the images of the mind, then the words and thoughts of the mind, opening up the possibility of the unmediated encounter with the *ONE*, or *MORE*, as Plotinus called it "the flight from the alone to the alone."⁷

Since James is considering a selected form of religious experience, his description excludes a whole range of religious experience. As we see, the description focuses on union with a *MORE*, a higher consciousness. Union is one form of religious experience but hardly exhausts the range of religious experience. However, the Prophet Musa's (p.b.u.h.) experience at the burning bush was certainly a religious experience, yet Musa (p.b.u.h.) did not seem to experience union with the Creator. He was only aware of Allah's presence. It seems that James' description captures what is seen as an essential aspect of religious experience – individual consciousness meeting "a *MORE*"; a Higher Consciousness.

It is observed that many modern psychologists, in their studies regarding the concept of religious experience, have related this concept to the individual experience experienced by drug addicts or the drunken people who enjoy themselves in clubs, dancing, etc. Aldous Huxley equates these experiences with those of Christian, Muslim, Taoist, and Hindu mystics⁸. However, there is a big difference between the experience of drug addicts and religious people, because the ways and the aims of gaining this experience are different.

The unconsciousness found among the drug addicts does not fit the one found among the religious people, even though the former experiences have power to affect the whole life. It should be acknowledged that religious experience is religious precisely because it occurs in a religious context of thought, discipline, and value. Thus, the concept of religious experience should be defined according to the premises of religious system of belief and practice, and not by looking at the unconsciousness that occurs among different people.

⁷ See: Stiver, Dan R., *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol, and Story*, (U.S.A.: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1st Ed., 1996), p. 16.

⁸ The Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 12 "Religion," p. 286.

Religious Experience as a Universal Phenomenon

The issue of religious experience as a universal phenomenon means that among the world religions and cultures common and different elements exist. The common elements show that religious experience is a universal phenomenon, which has been discussed and studied by many prominent figures of religious anthropology.

Many contemporary scholars proposed that religious experience and belief are permanent elements in the life of the human species, because they appear to be present in all cultures studied by nineteenth century anthropologists. On the other hand, one of these scholars, David Hay says that this issue is not straight forward, because there is no universally agreed definition for religion. Perhaps the most that can be said is that "religious people" who come from Western cultures seem to recognize and to be recognized by "religious people" from other cultures.⁹ Although there is no universally agreed definition for religion, still there exist common shared elements, especially among the revealed religions, like the belief in a Transcendent God, or in other words, a monotheistic system of belief.

Looking deeply at the meaning that stands behind the religious experience, one is able to draw a distinction between the similarities as well as differences found in every religion, or mystical way of belief. It is true that there are common shared elements by all systems of belief. For instance, when someone observes a Buddhist while meditating, he thinks that this kind of experience is practiced by all religious or mystical groups of the world. This can be accepted, but as mentioned earlier, there are common shared elements on one hand, and different elements, on the other. Also, the steps followed by religious people through their religious experience in order to reach the peak of their aim, are quite different. Even the aim itself differs from one system of belief to another.

⁹ Hay, *Religious Experience Today*, p. 7.

It is observed that religious adepts, at the level of practicing religious experience, when they undertake their most characteristic discipline, that of meditation or contemplation, has the following requirements:

- 1- The requirement to be silent.
- 2- The requirement to be still.
- 3- The requirement to be aware or receptive.
- 4- The requirement to lead a celibate life, at least for a time.
- 5- The requirement to follow the rule of a spiritual director.
- 6- The requirement to abide by the ethical norms of one's culture.

It is surely amazing that overlaps of this kind are found in cultures that have grown up over thousands of years, completely independent of one another.¹⁰ However, the similarities become a little extraordinary when taking into account the common biological heritage of human beings of different races, beliefs, cultures, etc.

In both Christian and Muslim forms of religious experience, there have been persons and movements whose devotion has been focused on a warmer and more intimate and fulfilling sense of communication with the Divine Reality, God. There are some important elements followed by the religious and mystical people during their religious experience such as: command, response, obedience, and personal-divine encounter. In Islam, some of these elements are displayed in the devotional practices of the Sufis, who seek to celebrate the glory of Allah (s.w.t.) in vivid fervor. Therefore, at the core of the Islamic religious experience stands Allah (s.w.t.), Who is unique and Whose will is the imperative and guide for all men's lives.¹¹

According to the above information, the concept of religious experience, which has been practiced by many religious adherents

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

¹¹ See Al-Faruqi, Ismail Raji, "The Essence of Religious Experience in Islam," *Numen*, Vol. XX, No. 3 (1973), p. 195 (pp. 186-201).

¹¹ Dilthey, Wilhelm, "The Hermeneutics of the Human Sciences," In *The Hermeneutics Reader* edited by Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, (New York: Continuum, n.d.), p. 162.

of the revealed and unrevealed world religions, can be considered as a universal phenomenon on the premises of shared common elements only.

Understanding Religious Experience through Faith and Religious Language

The understanding of religious experience depends on the lived experience, which is raised to conscious attention in elementary acts of thought, and the merely revealed relations, which are contained in the experience itself. Therefore, the understanding rests primarily on the relationship contained in any experience, which can be characterized as an act of understanding of the expressed expression. This relation can be experienced in its uniqueness.¹² However, there are many factors which help us to understand religious experience, but in our discussion we will mention only two of them; faith and religious language.

a) Faith:

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen.¹³ This definition of faith as one's religious conviction has been derived from faith - as - experience. The mystics and prophets and, following their lead, historians and philosophers of religion, have often spoken of faith-as-experience. It is understood that faith-as-experience has often been described in highly individualistic terms. For instance, a prophet has come to know the holy in personal religious experience, and this has dominated how he described that experience for others, so that they in turn, one at a time, might also come to share in such an experience and duplicate it for themselves¹⁴.

There is a difference between the faith-as-experience and all other experiences of life, because of the aim of both these experiences. The former experience leads to the belief and faith in the Holy Being or the Transcendent Being, or the Unseen World,

¹² The Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 5 "Faith," p. 250.

¹³ Ibid., vol. 5 "Faith," pp. 252-253.

¹⁴ Ibid., vol. 5 "Faith," p. 250.

where the faith-as-experience of the holy has come to include the recognition of its inherent ineffability. The latter leads to the belief and faith in the materialistic world, where faith is based on the material things that can be touched and seen. If there is truth in the connection that faith is the abstract term with which to describe that attitude of the human mind and the spirit of which prayer is the concrete expression, then one or more of these concepts may probably be said to play some part in every religious tradition, and in that sense at least, "faith" may likewise be said to appear there,¹⁵ or during the lived religious experience.

As far as Islamic understanding of faith-as-experience is concerned, it is a volitional and dynamic reaction to believe in the One Almighty Creator, Allah (s.w.t.), Who stands for a great moral ideal of the highest perfection, and the Hereafter, a belief which fully assimilates both intellectual and emotional responses. It is at once an affirmation of a truth and surrender to the truth affirmed. Faith or conviction is intelligent apprehension of and an emotional response to the ideal moral values.¹⁶ But faith in the sense of the Qur'anic verses is an act of an individual in which his head, heart and limbs all cooperate. It involves intellectual and emotional assent as well as an appropriate action, which expresses the vitality and the depth of faith. Therefore, in several verses of the Qur'an, the appeal to human reason in arriving at true belief is shown :

﴿وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَعَالَوْا إِلَىٰ مَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ وَإِلَىٰ الرَّسُولِ قَالُوا حَسْبُنَا مَا وَجَدْنَا عَلَيْهِ

ءِآبَاءَنَا أُولَوْكَانَ ءَابَاؤُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ﴾ [المائدة: 104]

When it is said to them: "Come to what Allah has revealed; come to the Messenger": They say: "Enough for us are the ways we found our fathers following." What! Even though their fathers were void of knowledge and guidance?¹⁷

¹⁵ See: Dar, Bashir Ahmad, Qur'anic Ethics, (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 2nd Ed., 1976), pp. 90-91.

¹⁶ Ali, Abdullah Yusuf, The Holy Qur'an, Text, Translation and Commentary, (Brentwood, Maryland, U.S.A.: Amana Corporation, New Rev. Edition, 1409 A.H./ 1989 A.C.), Surah al-Ma'idah: 104.

¹⁷ See: Dar, Qur'anic Ethics, p. 92.

The denial of faith by non-believers, as preached by the Messenger of Allah, leads to the denial of religious experience lived by the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), while receiving revelation by Allah (s.w.t.), the Almighty.

In Christianity this faith was totally shorn of both intellectual and volitional ingredients and all the emphasis was laid on mere subjective response. These have been shown through the preaching of the Gospel and the foundation of Christian doctrines, such as the doctrine of salvation, where the faith in God's grace and Christ's divinity was a sufficient guarantee of ultimate salvation.¹⁸

It is understood by the above mentioned information that faith is a prior factor which leads to the establishment of a religious experience lived by religious people, such as prophets, saints, mystics, etc. Without having faith in the existence of the One Being, there would not be any possibility of the notion of religious experience, because this concept is related to faith.

b) Religious Language:

Language, in general, as an essential means of communication used by human beings, relates to humanity in two ways:¹⁹ Firstly, the universality of speech-act that is necessary for human existence regardless of space, time and diversity of languages. Secondly, man has natural ability to use language by its biological and neurological structure. Therefore, language cannot be considered as a mere means of racial interaction. Rather, it is a medium of relating ones identity and affiliation to society, and a medium of interacting with other members of human races in order to create material, cultural, intellectual and spiritual relationships. However, language is seen by Ibn Jinni as "a system of sounds that are used by certain group [of people] to express their aims."²⁰

¹⁸ Abdussalam, Ahmad Shehu, *Islam and Language*, (Kuala Lumpur: Al-Hilal Publishing, 1999), p. v.

¹⁹ See: Ibn Jinni, *Abdu al-Fatah, Al-Khasa'is*, (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Mirriyyah, vol. 1, 1952), p. 33.

²⁰ Religious Language is related to the expression of religious terms and the evaluation of the truth of religious claims. This kind of language can be called sacred language because it has been a medium for the revelation, and therefore it leads to the belief that religious language is particularly suited for revelation – that what makes it (religious language) superior to other languages.

It is understood that Ibn Jinni's definition of language points to the primary function of language among the members of a society, which is to express their material and spiritual needs. However, it is a well-known fact that the structure of language defers from a group to another. It can be seen from this perspective that ordinary language is not able to give a clear expression or information about the facts related to religious experience. This is for the simple reason of not being rich with religious terminology, and therefore, there is a great need for religious language.

Religious language, ²¹ as a fundamental form of human expression, plays an important role for the understanding of religious experience. This is for the simple reason that there is a close relationship between language and religious experience, because the command of language conditions our grasp of concepts during the living or practicing religious experience. The epistemic functions of knowing what is happening while one lives a religious experience cannot occur until we employ a language. Prior to the advent of conceptual apparatus of language that can help to perceive facts, ²² all awareness of abstract entities, or all awareness, even of particulars, is, thus, related to language affairs.

The awareness of language conferred is sapient awareness, an awareness which enables us to entertain beliefs and make inferences involving them. The very act of identifying a fact in the flux of experience requires that it gains an emphasis from the concepts and knowledge people already possessed. Any perceptual knowledge logically and crucially relies on a person's previous knowledge, which in turn presupposes language. Therefore, the ability to identify aspects of a person's religious experience crucially depends on the concepts of a shared language. This language should be a learned one whose terms maintain their inter-subjective uses, while explaining the notion of religious experience. ²³

²¹ See: Sellars, Wilfried, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," Science, Perception and Reality, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 127.

²² See: Bagger, Matthew C., Religious Experience: Justification and History, (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 31.

²³ Lanigan, Richard L., Speaking and Semiology, (Berlin / New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2nd Ed., 1991), pp. 163-164.

Moreover, it is stated that language in speech constitutes the lived-reality that is created in the relation of man to man. But, the strange power of speaking manifested when a person recalls that there are situations which cannot be communicated and which can only be understood by living them.²⁴

This phenomenon can be distinguished in the religious experience lived, or gained through practice by religious people. Therefore, it is said by Imam al-Ghazali, when he was asked to reveal or express the religious experience of the Muslim mystics - Taste in order to know it, which means that a mystic reaches a level of religious experience that language fails to express it. To feel the religious experience a person has to live with it or as al-Ghazali said taste it to know it.²⁵ In this sense, the religious language used by the mystics while experiencing religious experience is very weak, or unable to express itself. This means that mystics cannot express themselves while they reach the peak of their experience throughout their spiritual stations. However, the expressive language is replaced by symbolic language that helps them to understand what they feel in their religious experience, because they are not able to inform what they experience in such experience. In the case of Prophets, they were able with Allah's (s.w.t.) command to inform and reveal what they experience in their religious experience.

In order to make things easy to understand, an attempt to discuss the fact that language helps in the conceptualization and understanding of the religious experience by those who experience it, is needed. Also, a necessary condition for the occurrence of religious experience is religious teaching about the desirability and value of having a religious experience of the general sort one has, or say, of Allah (Muslims) or Jesus Christ (Christians).

The religious teachings play an important role towards the understanding of the concept of faith and belief in a Transcendent and Absolute Being. These religious teachings have been transmitted to religious people or those who intend to join a

²⁴ See: The Encyclopedia of Religion, vol. 8 "Language," p. 443.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 440.

system of belief, by the help of religious language, which consists of special religious terminology. A language to be considered as a religious one should contain religious terms used by the followers of a particular religion who express their religious experience in their religious rites and rituals, i.e., prayers, supplications, fasting, etc. The religious terms found in the religious language are not found in ordinary language.²⁶

The context of religious language is very rich regarding the religious vocabulary compared to the context of ordinary language. For instance, the ritual language is, for the most part, the repetition of a fixed text, it precedes and, in effect, creates its context rather than reflecting and re-presenting in speech a context regarded as prior and already defined. Also, the rich symbolism of both object and action that marks off ritual behavior from ordinary behavior will add yet another distinctive trait to religious language.

A hallmark of the modern understanding of language is the realization that meaning rests on a conventional relationship between the signified and the signifier. The latter, which is a word comprised of both forms: phonological and grammatical rules of proper formation, and substance; its sounds, if a spoken word.²⁷ However, the meaning of a word is not inherent in either its form or substance.

We observe that both “faith” and “religious language” play a significant role towards the perception and the interpretation of the deep understanding of the facts related to religious experience lived by many religious people, such as prophets, saints, mystics, etc.

Religious Experience through the Context of Qur’anic Verses

According to the Qur’an, religious experience appears in the context of several verses related to the communication or conversation occurring between Allah (s.w.t.) and His Prophets through the revealed messages sent to human beings in order to guide

²⁶ See Al-Faruqi, Ismail Raji, *Al-Tawhid: Its Implications for Muslim Thought and Life* (Virginia USA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2nd Edition, 1992), pp. 1-2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-9.

them to the straight path and remind them of their responsibilities towards their Creator. These messages or revelations have been revealed to the chosen people or Prophets of Allah (s.w.t.), in a form of individual religious experience lived by them. For instance Allah (s.w.t.) says:

﴿إِذْ قَالَ لَهُ رَبُّهُ أَسْلِمَ ۖ قَالَ أَسْلَمْتُ لِرَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ﴾ [البقرة: 131]

Behold! his Lord said to him: "Bow (thy will to Me):" He said: "I bow (my will) to the Lord and Cherisher of the Universe." (al-Baqarah: 131)

﴿وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ رَبِّ أَرِنِي كَيْفَ تُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ ۖ قَالَ أُولَٰمُ تُؤْمِنُ ۖ قَالَ بَلَىٰ وَلَٰكِن لِّيَطْمَئِنَّ قَلْبِي ۖ قَالَ فَخُذْ أَرْبَعَةً مِّنَ الطَّيْرِ فَصُرْهُنَّ إِلَيْكَ ثُمَّ أَجْعَلْ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ جَبَلٍ مِّنْهُنَّ جُزْءًا ثُمَّ ادْعُهُنَّ يَأْتِينَكَ سَعْيًا ۚ وَاعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ﴾ [البقرة: 260]

When Abraham said: "Show me, Lord, how You will raise the dead," He replied: "Have you no faith?" He said "Yes, but just to reassure my heart." Allah said, "Take four birds, draw them to you, and cut their bodies to pieces. Scatter them over the mountain-tops, then call them back. They will come swiftly to you. Know that Allah is Mighty, Wise." (al-Baqarah: 260)

﴿قَالَ رَبِّ إِنِّي كُنُودٌ ۖ وَقَدْ بَلَغَنِيَ الْكِبَرُ وَامْرَأَتِي عَاقِرٌ ۖ قَالَ كَذَلِكِ اللَّهُ يَفْعَلُ مَا يَشَاءُ ﴿٤١﴾ قَالَ رَبِّ اجْعَلْ لِّي ءَايَةً ۖ قَالَ ءَايَتُكَ أَلَّا تُكَلِّمَ النَّاسَ ثَلَاثَةَ أَيَّامٍ إِلَّا رَمْزًا ۖ وَادْكُرْ رَبَّكَ كَثِيرًا وَسَبِّحْ بِالْعَشِيِّ وَالْإِبْكَرِ ﴿٤٠﴾﴾ [آل عمران: 40-41]

He said: "O my Lord! How shall I have son, seeing I am very old, and my wife is barren?" "Thus," was the answer, "Doth Allah accomplish what He willeth." He said: "O my Lord! Give me a Sign!" "Thy Sign," was the answer, "Shall be that thou shalt speak to no man for three days but with signals. Then celebrate the praises of thy Lord again and again, and glorify Him in the evening and in the morning." (Ali-Imran: 40-41)

In Islam, at the core of the religious experience stands Allah (s.w.t.). This is very clear in the *Shahadah* "Confession of Islamic Conviction or faith": (the witnessing that there is no god but Allah

and Muhammad is His Messenger). The name of Allah (s.w.t.), which simply means "the Creator," occupies the central position in every Muslim's consciousness at all time and space.²⁸

In the history of Muslim thought, there has been a fierce battle between Muslim philosophers and theologians, where the Muslim theologians carried a sweeping victory over the philosophers. Behind the theologians' position stands the Muslims' religious experience, where Allah (s.w.t.) is not merely an Absolute, Ultimate First Cause or principle but a Core of Normativeness.²⁹

It is this aspect of the Creator that suffers most in any theory where He becomes a *deus otiosus*; and it is the Muslim's responsiveness to this core of normativeness that the philosophers' theory throws out of joint. The Creator as normativeness means that He is the Being Who commands, He is the final end, i.e., the end at which all finalistic nexuses aim and come to rest. Therefore, the Creator, Who is the Ultimate Being, is followed by finalistic terminus and axiological ground that He must be Unique, too. It is the very nature of a finalistic end to be unique, just as it is the nature of the Ultimate cause of chain to be unique. It is this uniqueness which the Muslim affirms in his confession of faith, "There is no god but Allah (s.w.t.)."³⁰

It is understood that at the core of Islamic religious experience stands Allah (s.w.t.), Who is Unique and Whose Will is the imperative and guide for all men's lives. Also, the essence of religious experience in Islam, as it is shown in the Qur'an, is the realization that life is not in vain, but it must serve a purpose, where the nature of which cannot be identical with the natural flow of appetite to satisfaction to new appetite and new satisfaction. In Islam, hence, finality consists of two utterly separate orders, the natural and the transcendent, and it is the latter that looks for the values by which to govern the flow of the former. Identifying the Transcendent Realm as the Creator, Allah (s.w.t.), He rules out

²⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁹ See: Watt, W. Montgomery, *Muhammad Prophet and Statesman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 22, 34.

³⁰ See: Ibid., p. 15.

any guidance of action, which does not proceed there from. His rigorous al-Tawhid is, in final analysis, a refusal to subject human life to any guidance other than the ethical.³¹

In order to have a clear perception of the concept of religious experience as mentioned in the context of the Qur'anic verses, an attempt to discuss some selected verses related to this phenomena is showed in (1) the religious experience of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.); and (2) the religious experience of Prophet Musa (p.b.u.h.).

1) The Religious Experience of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.):

The religious experience lived by Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), is shown in the following Qur'anic verse from the chapter *al-Alaq*, which says:

﴿أَقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ ۝ خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلَقٍ ۝ اقْرَأْ وَرَبُّكَ الْأَكْرَمُ ۝ الَّذِي عَلَّمَ بِالْقَلَمِ ۝ عَلَّمَ الْإِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ﴾ [العلق: 1-5]

Proclaim! (or Read!) In the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created, Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood: Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful, He Who taught (the use of) the Pen, Taught man that which he knew not. (Al-Alaq: 1-5)

These are the first revealed verses from the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), at the age of forty, while meditating in a cave at Mount Hira (a mountain located a few miles north of Mecca). There, he saw a vision of heavenly being and heard the command, "Recite!" He was frightened by this sudden incident and by the voice of the heavenly being and did not know what to recite.

It is very obvious that Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) did not know what was happening with him after his individual religious

³¹ See: Wall, Religious Experience and Religious Belief, p. 278.

experience took place while meditating. He departed from the cave, thinking that he was either possessed or mad. It was his wife Khadija (may Allah be pleased with her) who assured him that he was neither possessed nor mad but was a recipient of a divine message. Thus, she was the first one to comfort and support him when he began to have his religious experiences, and therefore, she, indeed, was the first one to accept his call.³²

In this religious experience, Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) exhibited no signs of madness elsewhere in his life, and thus he may not be judged as mad on the basis of his cave experience alone. It is said that the first religious experience of Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) was apparently taken by him as an experience of Allah, although later on he identified it as the Arch Angel, Jibril (a.s.), a heavenly messenger.³³ However, the main point in his first religious experience is that nothing in the original experiences of Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) indicates anything other than a man of sound mind.³⁴

Furthermore, the message addressed to Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) in his first individual religious experience shows that the object understood to be Allah's Message, or in other words the Divine Commission to preach and proclaim Allah's Message came to the Prophet. Here, Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) has discovered the truth about the world, the cosmos, ethics, Allah, and his own identity within, from his own personal experiences, or from what he would consider to be a revelation. This what makes him to be designated as a Prophet.³⁵

Even though he was unversed, his mind and soul were filled with spiritual knowledge, and now had come the time when he must stand forth to the world and declare his mission. Allah (s.w.t.) is mentioned by His title of 'thy Lord and Cherisher,' in order to establish a direct nexus between the Message and the

³² See: Maslow, Abraham H., *Religion Values, and Peak-Experiences*, (England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1976), p. 21.

³³ Ali, *The Holy Qur'an, Text, Translation and Commentary*, Surah al-'Alaq: 96, p. 1672.

³⁴ See: *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 8 "Language," p. 443.

³⁵ See: Al-Zamkhashari, Abu al-Qasim Mahmud bin Umar, *al-Kashaf*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-Arabi, 1st Ed., vol. 3, 1417 A.H./1997 A.C.), pp. 254-255.

one addressed.³⁶ The Message revealed to Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) was not merely an abstract proposition of philosophy, but the direct concrete message of a personal Creator, called Allah (s.w.t.), to the creatures that He loves and cherishes.

As far as the means of communication are concerned in this religious experience lived by Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), there is a real and true communication taking place with the help of religious language; in this case Arabic language.

This issue can be elaborated as follows:

THE SPEAKER: In this case Allah (s.w.t.), the Almighty Creator, is the Speaker, Who delivers His Message through the Arch Angel Jibril (a.s.) to Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), who lived a spontaneous individual religious experience.

THE HEARER: In this case Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) is the hearer as well as the audience representing the whole of humanity. Also, he was in direct contact with the Divine Messenger (Jibril).

LANGUAGE: The religious language that expresses this religious experience is Arabic, which is used as means of communication between the Speaker [Allah (s.w.t.)] and the hearer [Muhammad (p.b.u.h.)]. Therefore, it is considered as sacred language when it helped Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) through the religious terminology to grasp the content of the Divine Message. In fact the sacred language can be applied only to the untutored audience [here the untutored audience is unlettered Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), who did not know reading and writing].

THE FAITH : The most important feature that helped Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), throughout his religious experience is Faith or religious conviction, which is expressed by his belief in the One, Absolute and Unique Creator, Allah (s.w.t.). Thus, having faith in Allah (s.w.t.), Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) was able to reach his aim, which was the beginning of his religious experience and revelation.

³⁶ Ali, The Holy Qur'an, Text, translation and Commentary, Surah al-Naml, p. 939.

However, the religious experience lived by Prophets differs from that of mystics and saints.

THE MEDIUM : The medium of this religious experience is the sound for the transmission of the spoken Divine Message. Indeed, the medium of sound has a number of flexible qualities that can be manipulated to express nuances of power and sacrality in ways that go beyond the meaning of words.³⁷

THE CONTEXT : To have a full understanding of any speech act, in this case the texts of the Qur'an, it is required to have knowledge about the contexts in which it occurs. Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) at the beginning did not know how to reply to the context of the Revealed Message, because he was unlettered. But later on he was comforted by the Arch Angel, Jibril (a.s.), who was bearing to him the Message of Allah (s.w.t.). Thus, it is obvious that Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) was able to understand and grasp the meaning of the Divine Message revealed to him during his first religious experience.

In conclusion, the religious experience that is understood in the light of the context of these Qur'anic verses, and which was experienced by Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), signifies an important role in the life of Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) as well as in the life of the whole humanity in general, and that of Muslims in particular. Also, this religious experience denoted a significant paradigm and a starting point of a new system of belief or way of life, called Din al-Islam, sent by Allah (s.w.t.) to the whole of humanity.

2) The Religious Experience of Musa (p.b.u.h):

The religious experience of Musa (p.b.u.h.) is different from the religious experience of Muhammad (p.b.u.h.), but with the same aim, which is the Divine Absolute, Allah (s.w.t.). The Qur'an says:

³⁷ See: Ibid., Surah Al-Qasas, p. 970.

﴿إِذْ قَالَ مُوسَىٰ لِأَهْلِهِ إِنِّي آنستُ نَارًا سَآئِغَةً مِّنْهَا خَبْرٌ أَوْ آتِيكُمْ بِشِهَابٍ قَبَسٍ لَّعَلَّكُمْ تَصْطَلُونَ ﴿٧﴾ فَلَمَّا جَاءَهَا نُودِيَ أَنْ بُورِكَ مَنْ فِي النَّارِ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَسُبْحَنَ اللَّهُ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿٨﴾ يَمْوَسَّىٰ إِنَّهُ أَنَا اللَّهُ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿٩﴾ وَأَلْقَىٰ عَصَاكَ فَلَمَّا رَآهَا هَآئِرًا مَّزْحَرًا قَالَ جَاءَنِي وَلِيٌّ مَّدْبِرًا وَلَمْ يُعَقِّبْ يَمْوَسَّىٰ لَا تَخَفْ إِنِّي لَا اتَّخَفُ لَدَى الْمُرْسَلُونَ ﴿١٠﴾﴾ (النمل: 7-10)

Behold! Musa said to his family: "I perceive a fire; soon will I bring you from there some information, or I will bring you a burning brand to light our fuel, that ye may warm yourselves." But when he came to the (Fire), a voice was heard: "Blessed are those in the Fire and those around: and Glory to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds." O Musa! Verily, I am Allah, the Exalted in Might, the Wise!... "Now do thou throw thy rod!" But when he saw it moving (Of its own accord) as if it had been a snake, he turned back in retreat, and retraced not his steps: "O Musa!" (it was said): "Fear not: truly, in My presence, those called as messengers have no fear." (Al-Naml: 7-10)

In these verses, the emphasis is on the wonderful nature of the Fire and the wonderful way in which Musa (p.b.u.h.) was transformed at the touch of spiritual Light. This event took place in the Sinai desert, when Musa (p.b.u.h.) was traveling with his family. Seeking ordinary light, he came upon a Light, which took him to the highest mysteries of Allah (s.w.t.). There is no doubt that all his inner history had prepared him for his great destiny. It is the inner history that matters, and not the place or the position of a man in the eyes of his ordinary fellows. The commentators usually construct it to mean that this Fire was not a physical fire, but it was the glory of the Angels, a reflection of the Glory of Allah.

Here it is very clear that Musa (p.b.u.h.) was now transported into an entirely new world. What he had taken to be an ordinary fire was a dream of the spiritual world, rays from the angels of light. The desert in which he had been was the lower life stripped of its ornaments, leading to the Divine Light of Sinai. Through that Light he heard the voice of the Source of Wisdom and Power. His own rod or staff was no longer the dead piece of wood that had hitherto supported him. It became instinct with life, a life that moved, and had the power of offence and defense in it, as all living good must have in its fight with evil.

In this great new wonderful world that was opened out to Musa (p.b.u.h.), he had to get his vision adjusted to his new surrounding, as an ordinary man has to adjust his sight before he can see into any strong light that is new to him. The staff which had become alive as a snake frightened him; yet it was to be his own instrument of work in his new mission, but there is other deeper meaning. Musa had been called to a higher and spiritual mission. All fear was to be cast out of his mind, as a man chosen by Allah (s.w.t.).

Furthermore, it is very clear from these Qur'anic verses that Musa (p.b.u.h.) was experiencing an individual religious experience, where the core and center point of his experience was Allah (s.w.t.). Here, with Musa (p.b.u.h.), can be found a different kind of communication compared to that of Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.). In the former, it is seen that during the transmission of the Divine Message, it involved the Arch Angel, Jibril (a.s.), whereas in the latter the communication is direct from Allah (s.w.t.): "... وَكَلَّمَ اللَّهُ مُوسَى تَكْلِيمًا [النساء : 164]".

In the occurrence of Musa's religious experience, there were many factors contributed as means of communication between the Almighty Allah (s.w.t.), and His Messenger, Musa (p.b.u.h.). Even though this incident was not inspected by Musa (p.b.u.h.), but due to the circumstances and the conditions of his peoples' life he was forced to leave his country and search for the Truth. Thus, he was prepared for such incident to take place. In order to make it easy to understand, we have to elaborate these factors as follows:

THE SPEAKER : In this case Allah (s.w.t.), the Almighty, is the Speaker, Who Himself is calling upon Musa (p.b.u.h.) in the valley of Mount Sinai.

THE HEARER : Musa (p.b.u.h.), is the hearer and those around him, who were living around that valley. That was a blessing of

Allah (s.w.t.) towards Musa (p.b.u.h.), and his followers. In this incident Musa (p.b.u.h.) is seen to have a direct contact with Allah (s.w.t.). That is the Mercy of Allah (s.w.t.), Who showers with it whom He wills and wishes.

LANGUAGE : The religious language, in this experience is a language spoken by the people at the time of Musa (p.b.u.h.), perhaps most probably the Aramaic language, which was used as a means of communication between the Speaker [Allah (s.w.t.)] and the hearer [Musa (p.b.u.h.)]. In this case Musa (p.b.u.h.) is just listening to the orders and commandments of Allah (s.w.t.).

THE FAITH : Faith in Allah (s.w.t.), the Almighty, made Musa (p.b.u.h.) search for the Truth, while later on by the command of Allah, he was successful and triumphant over the Pharaoh of Egypt. This is the Wisdom of Allah (s.w.t.).

THE MEDIUM : The medium of this religious experience is the sound for the transmission of the spoken Divine Message. This factor helped Musa (p.b.u.h.) to understand what was going on with him and the Fire, or the Light. It was the voice of Allah (s.w.t.) that made him to understand that he was not in a dream but in front of his Creator. This Divine Mission trusted to Musa (p.b.u.h.) through his religious experience noted a new turn in his life as well as that of his people.

THE CONTEXT : In fact to have a full understanding of any speech act, in this case the word of Allah (s.w.t.) directed to Musa (p.b.u.h.), it is required to have knowledge about the contexts in which it occurs. In this incident Musa (p.b.u.h.) was feeling the Divine Words and was living in a different world. However, he was able to pay attention and grasp the meaning behind the two miracles given to him by Allah (s.w.t.) as signs for Pharaoh and his chiefs. In the light of the explanation and elaboration of the Qur'anic verses, it is shown the significance of the religious experience lived and experienced by Musa (p.b.u.h.) at the valley of Mount Sinai, while he was searching for an ordinary light, or

fire. Instead of the ordinary light, he found the Light which was the reflection of Allah's glory. In other words, Musa (p.b.u.h.) was living a spiritual world full of Divine Mysteries, which pointed the beginning of his journey to the Mission of Allah (s.w.t.).

Conclusion

The concept of religious experience should be defined according to the premises of religious system of belief and practice, and not by looking at the unconsciousness that occurs among different people. Also, it can be considered as a universal phenomenon on the premises of shared common elements. Moreover, both "faith" and "religious language" play a significant role towards the perception and interpretation of the deep understanding of the facts related to religious experience lived by many religious people, such as prophets, saints, mystics, etc. Indeed, at the core of religious experience of a Muslim stands Allah (s.w.t.), Who is unique and Whose Will is the imperative and guide for all men's lives. The essence of religious experience in Islam, as it is shown in the Qur'anic verses, is the realization that life is not in vain, but it must serve a purpose. Such religious experience, which is elaborated and understood in the light of the Qur'anic verses regarding the religious experience experienced by Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) and Prophet Musa (p.b.u.h.), will serve as guideline for those who understand and follow the Truth.

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