

Religious Experience

Lecture 9

Rev. Dr Sahaya G. Selvam, sdb



www.sahayaselvam.org

1

Accounts of Religious Experience

I found out, by no fault of my own, that I had an STD. ... I was angry at God at the time because I didn't understand how He could let this happen to me. ... I was a good wife, good mother, I was a good Christian altogether... So, in my anguish I prayed from 10:00pm-till about 1am or so. I was crying and asking God why was He punishing me for something I didn't do. I had never even thought of cheating on my husband. ... I told the Lord that I knew this was not going to be my punishment and when I woke up the next morning it would be gone and never come back. It was completely dark in the room. My room filled up with light, no it was not car lights. I was home by myself too. I felt such peace, and love. I actually could feel Him wrap His arms around me. I knew everything was going to be alright. I woke up in the afternoon and it was completely gone. They have done blood test, etc. I am still healed and that was almost a decade ago.

<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090920070059AAGQMlx>
www.sahayaselvam.org

2

Accounts of Religious Experience

I was climbing the Himalayas.. I started feeling a strong desire to meditate. ... I have experienced the feeling before but on that day it came almost instantaneously. Then something happened that I had never experienced before. I could see a small flame which was emitting divine white light, between center of my closed eyes. I then felt that the light was being carried to each part of my body starting from soles of my feet. When the ray of light reached my body, I had sensation of happiness that I cannot capture in the words. The light continued to spread across my legs, chest, lungs, arms and then to my face.

When I opened my eyes, the snowfall was dying out. I had not spent more than ten minutes in that cave. ... My friends, told me that I was looking very happy and when anyone tried to speak with me, I would only smile and wave them away.

<http://www.spiritual-experiences.com/real-spiritual-story.php?story=468>
www.sahayaselvam.org

3

What is religious experience?

- It includes a whole range of subjective experiences in which individuals report to perceive (see, hear, feel) something out of the ordinary that is related to transcendence.
- It is often in the context of religion, but sometimes out of it; generally mediated through nature, silence and meditation.
- 'Mystical experience' is related to the generic religious experience, but is often within a particular religious tradition.

www.sahayaselvam.org

4

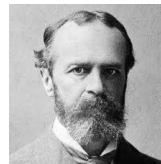
Rel. Experience in religious traditions

- Hinduism - Moksha "is to experience, concretely and personally, that everything, including our own self is Brahman" (Capra, *Tao of Physics*, p.81) and thus attaining liberation from the spell of Maya (Illusion of mistaking appearance for reality) from the burden of karma and set free from the cycle of rebirths.
- Buddhism: individual experience of enlightenment is at the core of religious practice. Realising the 'buddhahood' – liberation. Term: Nirvana!
- Zen Buddhism: Similar to Buddhism; Term: Satori.
- In Judaism, the hasidism in the mystical tradition.
- In Islam the sufi tradition has focuses on mystical experience.
- In Christianity, mysticism is the "knowledge of God arrived at through the embrace of unifying love." (Jean Gerson 1363-1429)

www.sahayaselvam.org

5

James: Religious Experience as an altered consciousness



William James
1842-1910

"Our normal waking consciousness (as we call it) is but one special kind of consciousness whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there are potential forms of consciousness entirely different." This consciousness could be triggered by religious experience.

James, W. (1960). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Glasgow: Fountain Books;

James: Characteristics of Religious Experience - 1

1. **INSIGHT INTO REALITY:** The religious experience gives a direct insight into the depths of reality, which cannot be gained by pure intellection. The knowledge gained through this is real and significant.
2. **UNITY:** In this experience of knowing there is no subject-object dichotomy, but an integral undivided consciousness. As a result, the privacy of the individual self is broken into, and invaded by an universal self, which the individual feels as his own.
3. **TRANSCENDENCE OF TIME & SPACE:** The subject passes into an realm of eternity. One experiences positive feelings like joy, peace, love, etc. One does not view death fearfully.

www.sahajaseviam.org

James: Characteristics of Religious Experience - 2

4. **SENSE OF SACRED :** The presence of sacredness in reality is recognised - what some religions call, "God". Whatever the subject experiences, they are experienced as "numinous" - clothed in glory, charged with intensity of being.
5. **TRANSCIENCY :** Just as the mystical experience is always "given", it cannot be prolonged by effort. It just passes into an afterglow and remains as a memory, though it may recur.
6. **INEFFABILITY :** The content of the experience defies all lingual expression. No adequate report of its contents can be given in words. One has to have the experience of the same, to adequately comprehend it. Like, one should have been in love to understand a lover's state of mind.

www.sahajaseviam.org

James: Outcome of Religious Experience – 'Saintliness', a set of inner conditions

1. A feeling of being in a **wider life** than that of this world's selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power – God or abstract moral ideas, civic or patriotic utopias, or inner versions of holiness or right – something larger than our life.
2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing **self-surrender** to its control.
3. An immense **elation and freedom**, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.
4. A shifting of the emotional center from the self to a loving and harmonious affection towards everything around (**compassion**).

www.sahajaseviam.org

Practical Consequences of Saintliness 1

1. **Asceticism.** The self-surrender may become so passionate as to turn into **self-immolation**. It may then so overrule the ordinary inhibitions of the flesh that the saint finds positive pleasure in sacrifice and asceticism, measuring and expressing as they do the degree of his loyalty to the higher power.
2. **Strength of Soul.** The sense of enlargement of life may be so uplifting that personal motives and inhibitions, commonly omnipotent, become too insignificant for notice, and new reaches of patience and fortitude open out. Fears and anxieties go, and blissful **equanimity** takes their place. Come heaven, come hell, it makes no difference now!

www.sahajaseviam.org

Practical Consequences of Saintliness 2

3. **Purity.** The shifting of the emotional center brings with it, first, increase of purity. The sensitiveness to spiritual discords is enhanced, and the cleansing of existence from brutal and sensual elements becomes imperative. Occasions of contact with such elements are avoided: the saintly life must deepen its spiritual consistency and keep unspotted from the world.
4. **Charity.** The shifting of the emotional center brings, secondly, increase of charity, tenderness for fellow creatures. The ordinary motives to antipathy, which usually set such close bounds to tenderness among human beings, are inhibited. The saint loves his enemies, and treats loathsome beggars as his **brothers**.

11

Ways to Attain Religious Experience

Hinduism has clearly listed three means (representative of most religious traditions):

1. Jnana Marga: Way of knowledge
2. Bhakti Marga: Way of Devotion
3. Karma Marga: Way of Action

www.sahajaseviam.org

12