

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

As we have indicated, the word *religion* is used in a variety of ways; the expression *religious experience* is also difficult to define. There are varieties of experiences that persons call religious, and they differ in interpretation and content. We will consider three contrasting types.

MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE

Mystical experience has been defined as “the condition of being overwhelmingly aware of the presence of the ultimately real.”³ It would be convenient if all interpretations of mysticism were identical, but they are not.

Union. A form of mystical experience found among some Hindus and others is the shedding of one’s ego and self-awareness so that the true spiritual self is united with the sacred, nonpersonal Ultimate Unity. Through contemplation and self-surrender, a person’s true self, the impersonal soul, is absorbed in a Void. Like a nonconscious “dreamless sleep,” the experience is inaccessible to reason and beyond words or thoughts.⁴ Indirect communication such as poetry, paradoxes, or riddles are often used by this type of mystic in an attempt to “describe” or point to the ineffable (that which cannot be spoken or written). However, mystical experiences of this type logically should conclude in silence. Mystics are said to be enlightened by their world-denying moments, which unite them with the “wholly other.” They also believe that in what is called “death” their souls will eventually fuse with the Sacred Ultimate, somewhat the way a drop of water merges with the sea.

Communion. Another form of mystical experience found among some Jews, Christians, and Muslims, is characterized by a sense of the immediate, loving presence of God. God is self-disclosing or revelatory to the individual, and the individual is self-disclosing and receptive to God. Primarily an encounter of divine love between God and a mortal, in which the distinction between Creator and creature is retained, the experience enhances one’s conscious awareness of the Divine. These mystics are said to be nurtured or empowered by their communal moments with God. Although some mystics of the West have been world-denying, others have been world-affirming, emphasizing strengthened human activity.

Their silence or inability to express their experiences may be an indication of the poverty of any language to describe true love. Those who believe in mystical union and mystical communion share the conviction that the experiencer is in touch with ultimate reality, but their interpretations of the relationship with the sacred, of enlightenment, of loving self-disclosure between Creator and creature, and of the consequences for daily living are quite different.⁵

Tranquility. The inner quiet and tranquility resulting from systematic relaxation, or from an experience such as sitting in solitude by the seashore, are regarded as religious, or mystical, by some people. The exhilaration produced by beautiful music and its quieting after-effects can also be viewed in this manner. Gazing into a clear sky at night may produce a feeling of being at one with the Universe. Such oceanic feelings (a phrase often used by Freud) need not be regarded as religious or mystical. Feelings of conscious at-oneness with the cosmos are different from the experiences of mystical union and communion. However, many persons identify these emotions as religious experiences.

Human Love. For some individuals, love among human beings is the Sacred Ultimate. For these people, there is no “wholly other” of mystical union, no personal God of mystical communion, and no ultimate sacredness ascribed to the cosmos. If the term “god” is used at all, it refers to human affections; in this sense, each person has within her- or himself love, the only Sacred Ultimate.

In a form of religious humanism (see Chapter 12, p. 260), the experiences of love can be understood as a religion. Beliefs, feelings, organization, life, and ritual are frequent components of this outlook. Such religious humanists gather periodically to provide resources of love among themselves and to reflect on ethical issues; they may also include inspirational readings at these meetings. Some religious humanists are found within traditional religions and interpret creeds and rituals as poetry designed to promote human love.

PRAYER

Another form of religious experience is prayer to a personal God. A theologian views prayer in this manner:

Prayer is the intentional opening of human lives to, the alignment of human wills with, and the direction of human desiring toward, the cosmic Love that is deepest and highest in the world. . . . Public prayer or church worship is the way in which we unite with others in expressing dependence on this Love, opening ourselves to it, and willing cooperation with it as “fellow-workers with God.” Private prayer is the way we do this in our own particular ways.⁶

This form of religious experience includes a “communion,” a sense of the immediate presence of the Divine; it is marked by a personal I–Thou relationship between God and persons, privately and in groups.

A COMMON CHARACTERISTIC

Although there is diversity among religious experiences, there appears to be one common element. Each person interprets the experience as a feeling or conviction of a momentous disclosure; a disclosure that true reality, the Sacred Ultimate, has been revealed as it “really” is.