Chapter IV

Van der Leeuw and The Experience Of Power Through Merleau-Ponty

We have in the last chapter seen how the meaning of religious experience according to Kristensen could be viewed from Merleau-Ponty’s perspective of the lived-through-world and the bodily intentionality. In that attempt we examined, first of all, the structure of the life-world or the lived-through-world which served as a means to delineate the implicit structures of the religious experience as described by Kristensen. Our religious experience has its structure which ‘begins’ with man’s experience of the natural or perceptual world. This perceptual world has, besides its materiality, an invisible or deeper dimension which, for Kristensen, is the religious. And this experience of the religious dimension of the visible phenomena transcends itself into sedimented form of words and gestures giving rise to habits in man. These habits then are exercised periodically with a view to recapture the contents of the originary experience as well as to find new significance. Following the same structure of the lived-through-world which we have applied to Kristensen’s description of religious experience, we shall now go on to examine Gerardus Van der Leeuw’s view of religious experience. What we are doing here is imposing the structure Merleau-Ponty’s notion of lived-through world upon Van der Leeuw’s writings on phenomenology of religious experience.
4.1. Positioning of Phenomenology of Religion

Before we actually start our exploration into the structure of Van der Leeuw's description of religious experience from Merleau-Ponty’s perspective, we need, however, to highlight his unique understanding of phenomenology of religion, and its placement within the study of religion. It may be said that Van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion is influenced by Husserlian phenomenology, especially in his expressed intention to arrive at the essence of religion by employing the notions of phenomenological reduction.

However, he does not use the phenomenological concepts exactly in the same way as Husserl did. For, Husserl attempted to reach the essence of reality by performing the phenomenological reduction which does not, in the process, take the ontological status of the 'object' into consideration. Husserl's main concern was not ontological but epistemological. Van der Leeuw differs from this approach since his purpose is to study “religion as-experience,” that is, as lived experience, and therefore its ontological status is central to it. This is because Van der Leeuw considers phenomenology primarily as a method of philosophization and not as a philosophy. He draws much of his material from the history of religions and endeavors to understand their meaning by reconstructing the experience of believers. And again, by epoché he does not mean suspension of our affirmative or negative judgment regarding existence or bracketing of the ontological status of an object, but rather it is the suspension of judgments over the value of a particular religious
experience as understood by believers. Van der Leeuw, therefore, proceeds to study religion from man’s lived-through experience of it, and he does not pass any value judgment. His sole intention, in short, is to understand the essence of religion.

This manifest intention of understanding the essence of religion has its own purpose within Van der Leeuw’s whole scheme of religious studies. He is, before all else, a theologian, and all his works related to the study of religion are geared towards furthering the modern Christian incarnational theology. And, in his theological development, we can delineate three distinctive phases: the first may be called ethical theology, second, phenomenological theology, and third, the sacramental theology combined with a theological anthropology. It is important that we briefly dwell on these three phases of Van der Leeuw’s theological development, because “from his theological thought it is also possible to throw light on the place and function which are assigned to history of religions and phenomenology of religion.”

4.2. Three Phases of Theological Development

4.2.1. The Ethical Theology-phase

This phase of Van der Leeuw’s thought seems to have begun with the publication of Historical Christendom and Ethical: Modern or Orthodox? Here he shares with the Dutch ‘ethical’ theology of the mid-nineteenth century which speaks of the Christian faith experienced and reflected upon in a personalistic-‘ethical’ way. Accordingly, Van der Leeuw describes
theology as "a form of 'faithful scholarship' whereby God is understood as a person and the relationship between God and man occupies a central place as a religious-ethical relationship between one person and another." In order that God, the absolute, may be experienced as a person, He has to enter into temporality, and this is realized in the givenness of the incarnation of God in Christ. Man, out of his own experience of God reaches out towards Christ who is the link between the metaphysico-ethical and the ethico-personal within history. And all events in human history then have to be understood against this central Christian datum of the incarnation which is the harmonious coming together of God and man. This is the greatest miracle. It is only through the miracle of incarnation that creation and salvation can be understood. Christ, the mediator of salvation, is also the mediator of creation. Man experiences a tension between the creation and salvation (new creation) and that is resolved only in incarnation. However, it is to be noted here that Van der Leeuw understands the Christ-event not as a historical one but rather as 'supra-historical' phenomenon which forms the basis of the Christian faith. Faith in this supra-historical Christ is to bring man into a new realm of existence, i.e. salvation (new creation) which is already present but not yet fulfilled. Van der Leeuw here is aware of the eschatological dimension of life which, according to him, is the limit and tension of historical reality. At the same time the 'higher' reality, i.e. Christ manifests itself in historical reality. We find here again Van der Leeuw's emphasis on incarnation.
Van der Leeuw interposes incarnation between creation and *eschaton* or the new creation. The connection between creation and incarnation is reflected in the doctrine of mediator of creation, and that between incarnation and *eschaton* is described in many ways, such as the salvation-historical, the supra-historical, human life and culture, etc. Through this unique understanding of incarnation, Van der Leeuw has shown how man, from out of his own personal experience of faith, reaches out to Christ in whom the harmonious coming together of God and man is manifested. Such an understanding of ethical theology has made possible on the one hand, historical-critical research, and on the other, see the faith of the believers as evolved in the salvation history of the Christians.

4.2.2. The Phenomenological Theology-phase

The second phase of his theological reflection begins with his article, "Structural Psychology and Theology" and with his book, *Theology of the Sacrament*, Van der Leeuw here attempts to obviate the subject-object dichotomy in the Christian faith by appealing to the datum of incarnation which is a harmonious coming together of God and man. However, there is a difference here between the first and the second publications mentioned above where Van der Leeuw has turned away, as Ten Ham says, from an ‘ethical’ theologian to a *verstehend* phenomenologist. In *verstehen* it is the meaning structure along with the author’s faith experience that counts. We can at once notice the emphasis here on subjectivity, especially in regard to the revelation experience of the theologian.
The method of *verstehen* is applicable, according to Van der Leeuw, not only to theological discipline but also to all areas of human inquiry, including that of science and scholarship. Verstehen, in other words, is an important link between facts and their meaning or *eschaton*. In other words, there is a triadic structure present in all domains of human knowledge where *verstehen* has this transitional role. As for instance, in the contents of faith, there is creation, incarnation and *eschaton*; in theology, there is the historical theology, phenomenological theology and eschatological theology; in other sciences, there is the factual objectivity, understanding by subjective interpretation and the boundary of Science and Scholarship which is that of faith and revelation. Even in epistemology, Van der Leeuw constructs this triad: there is facts ascertaining and explaining (*erfassende*), fact understanding (*verstehende*) and search for an ‘ultimate sense or meaning.’ And phenomenology according to Van der Leeuw is to do with this *verstehen*. That means it is a scholarship that is focusing on the experience with a view to understanding them (*erlebniswissenschaft*).

Here in the phenomenological phase, he seeks to transform the personal experience of the ethical phase to that of the ‘intelligible structure.’ The experience of faith becomes the experience of *verstehen*. That is to say now the phenomenological theology connects historical-exegetical theology with dogmatic or systematical theology. The chief concern of the phenomenological theology is to examine meaning of the Christian datum, *viz.* faith according to the experience of the Christian community. In the phenomenological theology *verstehen* has the most important role to play. It
deals with the meaning structure existing not only in itself but also directed towards the last and ultimate meaning. The ultimate meaning is that meaning whereby man is understood by God Himself. And this is to be explained from the fact of incarnation. This *eschaton* is seen fulfilled on a phenomenological level, and hence it is seen as a point of departure which turns the borderline psychological experience into theological category of the revelation experience.¹⁰

4.2.3. The Dogmatic Theology-phase

In this third phase Van der Leeuw moves from ‘ethical’ and phenomenological theology to systematic theology. Here we find him concentrating on the question of liturgy, sacrament along with the philosophical and theological anthropology.

Van der Leeuw’s thoughts on liturgy are elaborated in his handbook, *Liturgiek*. Through these works he aspired to reform the existing liturgy by, first of all, opposing the denigration of form on the one hand, and liturgical conservatism on the other. He held that preaching and liturgy are two kinds of proclamation of faith that are complementary to each other, and they are sacramental.

Liturgy is a privileged mode of communication between man and God. In any public worship, therefore, a liturgical communication occurs between human community and God. The human community of believers, the Church, is, at the same time, the body of Christ, and hence, of God. As the visible body of God the Church becomes a sacramental phenomenon.
The primitive man, holds Van der Leeuw, had a deep sense of sacramental meaning attached to every activity which the modern man has lost sight of. The modern man's approach to sacrament has become too idealistic; he has, in the process, lost the depth meaning (of a 'thing'). In other words, the modern man does not any more believe that a 'thing' can possibly be a carrier of divine self-communication. In a sacrament there is a combining of a diadic movement: the human movement which springs forth as power of nature, and the other the divine movement which descends upon man and the world as God's power of creation. These two movements meet in the Church.

In this phase of Van der Leeuw's phenomenological development we find his earnest effort to join the subject and object in religion, man and God, the subjective experience of faith and the objective revelation. This unification is made possible through the Christian datum of incarnation - God's harmonious union with man. Anthropology, therefore, remains central to Van der Leeuw's theological scheme. He elaborates his views on anthropology in his work, *Der Mensch und die Religion: Anthropologische Versuche*. The relation between man and God is here central; there is a correlation between the two. One can never be spoken of meaningfully at the exclusion of the other. Man's relationship with God is examined (theologically) on the basis of faith, while his relation to the world is explored (phenomenologically) on the basis of *verstehen*. Both theology and philosophy therefore refer to anthropology.
Van der Leeuw's anthropology, however, is not just a descriptive one but rather theological, and therefore it is normative. All human experiences - birth, death, salvation, etc. are then interpreted from this normative (theological) anthropology. All human experiences for Van der Leeuw are ultimately religious in character.\(^\text{11}\)

4.3. Scope of Phenomenology of Religion

We have been so far examining Van der Leeuw's theological development with a view that his understanding of phenomenology of religion is better illustrated within the total unfolding of his thought which undoubtedly is theological. He interposes phenomenology between history of religions and systematic theology. And the singular purpose of phenomenology, according to Van der Leeuw, is *verstehen* or understanding of the meaning of the given phenomena. The meaning referred to here is the ideal types found in the meaning structure of the phenomena.

The placement and the task of phenomenology presuppose an antecedent as well as an attendant stage of inquiry. For, phenomenology of religion does not stand on its own. It is dependent on history of religions for its resource material, and its findings serve as foundation for constructing a systematic theology.\(^\text{12}\) In other words, it can be said that the history of religions is the antecedent and systematic theology is the attendant stage of inquiry for phenomenology of religion. Phenomenology in this sense may be called a transition discipline.
Given the status and role of phenomenology in the study of religion Van der Leeuw accepts it's rather limited, albeit important, scope in regard to its range of possibilities. He admits that all aspects of religion are not encompassed by the phenomenological method since it has an in-built limitation of surveying only that which passes for phenomenon. Any object or entity that falls outside the range of phenomenon, therefore, will not be the subject matter for phenomenology. The object of religion - the wholly other, the transcendent - does not qualify as phenomenon, and therefore it cannot come under the purview of phenomenology. Van der Leeuw says that phenomenology is "at home on the earth." That means the phenomenological investigations point to those aspects of religion that are specifically related to man's response to the transcendent. The sciences that deal with religion "concern themselves only with the activity of man in his relation to God; the acts of God Himself they can give no account whatever."

4.4. The Structure of Religious Experience

Having thus briefly seen Van der Leeuw's theological development, and the specific scope he ascribes to phenomenology within the study of religion, we shall now concentrate on how his phenomenology of religion can be viewed from Merleau-Ponty's perspective of the lived-through-world and the bodily intentionality. In the last chapter we have already noted that there is an implicit structure present in the lived-through-world as Merleau-Ponty understands it. And this implicit structure is constituted of (a)
perceptual level that is pre-reflective, (b) rational level that is reflective, and (c) communicative level where this reflection transcends itself into sedimented forms of words and gestures which in turn "flow back" to the world through man's bodily habits. This structure of the lived-through-world, as we have found, is also operative within the phenomenology of religion as elucidated by Kristensen. There we deciphered a pre-reflective level or primitive mode of religious experience in man's encounter with the visible phenomena, then gradually reflective level arises where the depth dimension of the visible phenomena comes to the fore, and it is followed by a sedimentation of the reflection into words and gestures, giving rise to myths and rituals respectively. These words and gestures, reflected in myths and rituals, are then brought into being through man's habitual exercise of them with a view to recapture the sedimented signification as well as to develop new signification.

The structure that we have elicited in Merleau-Ponty's lived-through-world can also be applied to Van der Leeuw's phenomenology of religion. If for Otto the unique and a priori category of religious experience is the numinous which is the 'wholly other,' and for Kristensen it is the experience of the religious meaning of the visible phenomena, then for Van der Leeuw it is the human experience of "Power." It is this Power that is manifested everywhere, and it is this that man seeks to appropriate for himself whereby he can enhance his life. In other words, "Man does not accept life as given to him: he seeks power in life, something that is superior, and he tries to find meaning in life and to arrange this into a
significant whole.” In Van der Leeuw’s elucidation of man’s experience of Power, in phenomenology of religion, we can trace three distinct but inseparable, phases of development that corroborates with the structure implied in Merleau-Ponty’s lived-through-world. They comprise of: (a) the pre-reflective phase of religious experience of the primitive man which is verified at the empirical level, (b) the reflective phase of religious experience where man is able to reach the depth dimension of his empirical experience by delineating its structural elements, and (c) these reflections transcend into sedimented forms of words, language, myths, religious formulae and rituals which when reenacted become what Van der Leeuw calls “testimony” or “witnessing.”

4.4.1. Pre-reflective Phase of Religious Experience

The basis of man’s religious experience according to Van der Leeuw lies in his encounter with a mysterious and vague “something Other” that is highly exceptional and extremely impressive. This exceptional and impressive Other need not be God as we understand it, but at the primordial level, man is content with “the purely practical recognition that this Object is a departure from all that is usual and familiar.” Man recognizes this exceptional Other as having consequence in his life since it generates Power. He begins to pay reverence to this Other with an intention either to placate or to control it for his own benefit. The most primitive religious experience, concludes Van der Leeuw, is then absolutely empirical; there is little of reflection or of theorization taking place here.
Van der Leeuw draws similar understanding of Power as the basis of primordial religious experience from a wide range of religious and otherwise literature from around the world. He equates Power with concepts, such as, *mana* (Melanesian name for the Infinite), *orenda* (name for power in Iroquois tradition) and *wakanda* (word for the originator according to The Sioux Indians), *manitu* (word for power in Algonquins of North-West America), *petara* (word for power among the Dyaks of Borneo) found in diverse religious traditions. All these concepts point to one thing: the experience of Power that is manifested in anything exceptional and impressive. And it is to be noted that the experience of this "Power is authenticated (or verified) empirically." There is therefore no theoretical or reflective interest shown here at this level. All that is there is the interest in the practical experience of Power.

An important characteristic that distinguishes the primitive man from that of modern man is the former's comprehension of and approach to the world. He does not objectify the world as the modern man does. He does not view himself as subject opposed to an objective world, rather there is a correlation existing between himself and the world. Consequently, there is no separation between the natural and supernatural; they both coalesce upon each other. The primitive mentality that Van der Leeuw mentions is not be taken as a characteristic of specific period of time in history, or a definite stage in the development of religious consciousness, but rather it is primarily a "structure" of mind. In this structure of mind there is,
A sort of horror of an abstract, individual mind moving cut off from the world; and also an outlook which recognizes both a deeper unity of subject and object, and something deeper in man which has little chance to develop in modern industrial society.21

The primitive man viewed the world as an organic unity wherein Power exists and operates in all. In other words, for him, the world is dominated by one structural idea, *viz.* *undifferentiatedness*.22 Man "interrogates" this unitary world in order to experience the Power and to obtain it for bettering his life. There is a perceptual encounter with the objects in the environment that are believed to be carriers of the Power. The primitive man believes that Power does not distinguish between objects; any object can serve as its medium provided it appears exceptional and impressive. For him a "thing is the bearer of Power; it can effect something, it has its own life which reveals itself, and once again wholly practically."23 What is central here is that there is no reflective process at work; it is preeminently pre-reflective or pre-conceptual in nature, for the concern here is the empirical verification of Power.

The primitive man from out of his own empirical experience of Power in the environment develops a typical cosmology. His cosmological views are not the result of reflection, but from his everyday experience of different repositories of Power affecting his life. The celestial bodies are revealers of Power, and as such, they affect man's course of life. Man notices a regularity in the movement of the heavenly bodies and this has led to the
understanding that there is kinship existing between the celestial world and human world. The development of calendar, arrangement of days, months and years, etc. is, therefore, done according to the movement of celestial bodies especially the sun and moon. 24 Because of the primitive man’s undifferentiated outlook of his environment, he views it as sacred and powerful. Nothing in the environment is unrelated to each other and to man. Man knows that Power manifests itself in all of them and so he considers them worthy of worship. Thus there are sacred stones, mountains, water, fire, trees, etc. that man encounters as carriers of Power. All these objects in the environment are related to man in his daily life: water is essential for his sustenance, so also fire, and from these empirical experiences he infers their ultimate potency for bestowing eternal life. Thus it is believed that fire has the potency to protect man from all evil influences and water to guarantee eternal life.25 Van der Leeuw’s description of the primitive man’s experience of Power in animate beings is quite original. Worship of animal form has been present in almost all religions of antiquity. As for instance, in ancient Egypt, Maspero writes that, “The interval separating humanity from animals was almost non-existent.” 26 Animals, especially the domesticated ones are close to man. They are on the one hand non-human, different and sinister or sublime, on the other, they are intimately attached and familiar. 27 That animal is different from man makes it the ‘other’ and whose world is totally unknown to him. It has therefore a sublime value, and this is evident from the use of animal form as guardians of towns, temples and even of nations.
It is this worship of animal forms that lie at the core of animal totemism, opines Van der Leeuw. The Power that is present in the objects of environment and animal forms is impersonal. It has no definite form. However, it is capable of assuming the form of objects in which it manifests itself. But in all these forms this Power lacks a Will. Van der Leeuw now goes on to show how the primitive man ascribes will and form to this impersonal Power. If the potency in the environment is understood as dynamism, then potency within a will and form is known as animism. In animism it is an encounter of two wills or spirits - the spirit of man and of his surroundings. While ascribing form and will to the objects in environment, the primitive man does not, however, engage in the process of abstraction. Rather, from his own experience, he moves into the world and concludes that not only he but also every moving object in the world has a soul or a spirit. And this belief is reinforced when he encounters the capriciousness of nature, and his total dependence on its benevolence or malevolence. Man, faced with the capriciousness of nature, needs to ensure his safety and well-being. This can be attained only by appealing to the Power with a will and form that are constitutive of personality. Thus there are, among others, the forms of mother, the savior, the king, the father that are prominent in religious traditions. That the mother form is quite strongly present in many primitive religions is evident from the varied ways in which woman is equated with nature and its characteristics. The wild nature is mother, so also the tilled and cultivated earth. As a woman conceives and gives birth so also the earth
generates and sustains life. The earth mother bestows all gifts from her
treasure, and she is the one who brings life to all. For the primitive,
therefore, mother form is not a theoretical invention, but she is experienced
as ubiquitous. Similarly the savior form arises out of man’s experience of
‘salvation’ which initially is obtained by possessing a powerful object
and/or of the potent of animal. In other words, salvation for the primitive
man is “Power experienced as Good.” Anything powerful that brings man
good therefore is savior for him. All that is within nature are potential
harbingers of salvation. This savior form, however, assumes a will and form
in the savior son who is both a carrier of his father’s legacy and bringer of
salvation. The son is the preserver of the family and the tribe, he is an agent
of the continuation of the race, and consequently of life itself. The son as
savior brings not just life on the earth but he guarantees life eternal. That is
why mythical accounts of savior son, says Van der Leeuw, though
constitutive of elements that characterize the stream of man’s life, have
always assumed miraculous proportions. His birth, epiphany, deed of
salvation, death and resurrection, are therefore not events of everyday life,
but are extremely impressive and exceptional. Even then it is interesting to
note that for the primitive man salvation is always in the present, that the
time is fulfilled now.

Another important type of Power that is invested with will and form is the
king. The Power here, however, is not immediately associated with the
personality of the king, but rather with his ‘office,’ as seen clearly from
such expression as, “His Majesty.” As an office holder, then the king in the
primitive world remained as "power bearer" and "savior." As such all "conceivable salvation is expected of it." He is one who disburses gifts, rules justly, merciful and leads a noble life before his subjects. He is also looked upon as dispenser of life, as reflected in the expression, "he who gives life." This can however have two associated meanings: on one hand, in relation to people, the king is the power bearer and on the other, in relation to power itself, he stands in need of it (power) himself. In this dual capacity of receptor as well as bearer of Power, the king is to ensure the well-being of the world. The king’s power then is no ordinary human power, but "the power the potency of the world." 32

Another instance where the Power is given the form and will is in the concept of father. This concept, like the other concepts used to personify the Power, is an anthropomorphical one, that is, it describes god in terms of human qualities. 33 The primitives, however, understand the term "father" not in the same way as the moderns do, for to the former it represents an authority figure, usually vested in the elders of a community. The wisdom and sacred rites of a community, according to the primitive custom, are preserved by the elders. So the understanding of the father-form here is not so much in the generative sense, but rather in an authoritative-ruling sense. This is well reflected in the Roman idea of pater familias, meaning an elder with the power of pater even if he has no son. 34 And when this term father is used in relation to God it encompasses both the meanings: the generative-creative and authoritative-ruling.
Van der Leeuw also makes reference to instances where man encounters Power in peculiar situations. He meets it (power) in the dead, for the primitive man does not treat the dead as totally annihilated, but as still potent. This cult of the dead, says Van der Leeuw, arose not out of any primitive psychology; it is the result of the actual experience of the dead.\textsuperscript{35} Man also experiences the awful form and evil will in demons. The belief in demons arises from the experience of “horror of some power which concerns itself neither with my reason nor my morals.” It is a vague terror that strikes man.\textsuperscript{36} Van der Leeuw opines that the origin of these demonic forms is largely from the experience of nature (fearfulness of specific places such as wildness, uncultivated land, lonely mountain regions, etc.) and the experience of dreams. This demon-form represents behavior that is arbitrary, purposeless, clumsy and even ridiculous. If man encounters with the malevolent form and will in demons, he can also meet with the benevolent form of power in angels. They are said to be “not independent Power forms, but potencies which emanate from some other Power and appear as forms.”\textsuperscript{37} These angel-forms are not confined within themselves, they are related to the external environment. As such it is the power present in man, well expressed in terms, such as ka in Egyptian tradition, \textit{fravashi} in Iran, \textit{Fylgja} in Germanic folklore. These angelic forms then take up different roles as the angels of god, messengers of god, intermediate beings, etc. in different religious traditions.

From our examination into Van der Leeuw’s phenomenology of religion we have noticed an implicit structure which corroborates with Merleau-Ponty’s
structure of the experience of lived-through-world. For Merleau-Ponty the perceptual experience is foundational for any knowledge to arise. In the perceptual experience, man "interrogates the world" by engaging himself in the world through his body. And this primary interrogation of the world by the "embodied man" takes place in the pre-conceptual or pre-reflective mode. Similarly, we have noted that in Van der Leeuw's description of religious experience there is a pre-reflective phase which he calls the empirical level. At that level of religious experience, there is an emphasis on the empirical verification of it. Van der Leeuw says that even when the primitive man assigns name and form to Power, he does not get involved in the process of abstraction, for he understands the forms are living power(s). There is always a necessity, therefore, to empirically verify his experience of Power. This empirical experience of religion does not remain within the boundaries of prereflective level; it has the tendency to advance to the next phase of religious experience, that is, the reflective phase.

4.4.2. Reflective Phase of Religious Experience

In our analysis of the structure of religious experience as described by Van der Leeuw in his phenomenology of religion, we have already seen that the first phase of it is the empirical level, wherein man confronts Power manifesting itself discretely in various phenomena in the environment. And from this encounter man develops an attitude of reverence and respect toward all phenomena as they are repositories of Power. The Power that man encounters at the empirical phase is an impersonal one, and thus it is
vague and indeterminate. There is a quest within man to understand this
vague and indeterminate Power in an organized and intelligible manner.
And this happens at the level of reflection.

As with Merleau-Ponty, who argues that the visible reality has always the
dimension of depth, we can say that in Van der Leeuw's empirical
experience of phenomena in environment as carrier of Power, there is also
the dimension of depth. For Merleau-Ponty the visible "thing" is not a
'closed thing' but it exhibits the dimensionality of depth. So also Van der
Leeuw's potent objects in environment exhibits a depth which is expressed
in what he calls the "structure of reality." This structure is present in visible
reality in a latent manner, and, if fact, our very encountering of the visible
objects orients us to this latent "structure." We do not "see" these
structures as we see objects but, as in the case of light through which we
see colors, we see the visible through these latent or invisible
structures.\(^{38}\)

Van der Leeuw attempts to delineate this underlying structure of the
empirical level of religious experience. By "structure" he means that there
is a "unity of meaning" present in the stream of consciousness of the
perceiver which is neither intellectually constructed nor received passively
from objects, but which is understood. To put it in another way, it is an
"experienced construction"\(^{39}\) geared towards arriving at a meaningful
whole. That is to say, understanding applies not only to consciousness but
also to the whole of existence of the subject. Van der Leeuw holds that: "It
is an organic whole which cannot be analyzed into its own constituents, but
which can from these be comprehended..."\(^{40}\) Structure is certainly
experienced but not directly, it is constructed but not logically and causally. It is with the help of this structure we organize reality significantly.\textsuperscript{41} The structure can be viewed as a net that man casts on discrete and chaotic reality in order to make it meaningful.\textsuperscript{42} J. Waardenburg has well-expressed Van der Leeuw’s understanding of structure in the following way: it is a third term between the objective facticity and subjective evaluation.\textsuperscript{43} To put it in Merleau-Ponty’s language, the structure is the “flesh” of the subject as well as of the object engaged in a chiasmatic relation with each other. In other words there is an intertwining relation between the two from which meaning arises or the reality gets significantly organized. This structure of reality or “unified living meaningfulness” (\textit{eine einheitliche lebendige Sinnbezogenheit}) can only be understood. The technical term that Van der Leeuw uses to connote this understanding is \textit{verstehen}.

\textbf{4.4.3. The Concept of \textit{Verstehen}}

Van der Leeuw uses the term \textit{verstehen} \textsuperscript{44} in a particular way not only in his study of religion but also in the “general attitude of understanding of reality.”\textsuperscript{45} It is a specific methodology that Van der Leeuw employs in studying religion by “reconstructing” a religious experience. This reconstruction of religious experience demands a peculiar attitude in the one who wants to practice it. And this attitude is empathy (\textit{Einfühlung}) whereby he “lets his object be “object” as little as possible and to let it pass into the subject.”\textsuperscript{46} That is to say the scholar has to transpose himself (“\textit{verstehen}”) into his object and re-experience it. The goal of such transposing is
to reach the reality "which is not a spatio-temporal one but which is rather a psychological reality," that is "the stream of consciousness which is to be understood from within." Here the concern of the scholar is not with the factual existence of phenomena as they present themselves, but rather with their essence. In order to achieve this task of arriving at the essence of phenomena, Van der Leeuw insists that the scholar has to have a spontaneous, warm and self-denying devotion to the object and also an "intuitive abstraction" or epoché. What is more, Van der Leeuw even goes on to demand from anyone who wants to enter into the field of religion that he be religious himself.

The purpose of a sympathetic re-experiencing of religious phenomena is to reach the reality which is none other than the "structural relations"(verständliche enhänge) implicit in them. These structural relations, as we have noted before, remain latent in the visible phenomena; they subtend the visible reality. And by bringing them to the fore only can we understand their meaning. The chief purpose of phenomenology, according to Van der Leeuw, is to bring these structures to light or to explicate them. Concretely then, bringing the meaning of religious phenomena, that is, their structural relation to the fore, means exploring the relevant connections among units of experience. Every unit of experience always already possesses "backgrounds and associated planes; it is "related" to other entities that appear, either by similarity, by contrast, or by a hundred nuances that can arise here: conditions, peripheral or central position, competition, distance, etc." Van der Leeuw claims that these
relationships or connections are “perceptible” as “structural connections.”
They do not, however, point to “factual relationships” or “causal connections” between units of experience. Their validity is only within the structural relations. Such relationships, according to Van der Leeuw, are called “type” or an “ideal type.”
These ideal types, argues Van der Leeuw, have a normative value. That is to say these ideal types as structural relations combined into an experience serve as normative against “reality” and that makes this reality “understandable.” This process enjoins on a phenomenologist to move beyond the normal human empirical experience to another realm which is the “constructing” experience. This is what exactly Van der Leeuw does in his attempt to delineate the underlying structures of such phenomena as persons and institutions.

4.4.3.1 Individual Experience of the Sacred Power
Van der Leeuw, in his phenomenology of religion, seeks to highlight the structures present in the object of religious experience. These structures, however, exist only in relation to a subject who is capable of such an abstractive process. That is why it does not make any sense to speak of religion in relation to animals and plants. Man alone, of all creatures, is capable of understanding. And a phenomenon becomes phenomenon only in relation to man in whose consciousness it appears. The consciousness here, however, is to be understood not in the sense of an abstract aspect of man, but it is more in common with what Merleau-Ponty speaks of an “embodied
Van der Leeuw, in fact, pointedly claims that understanding applies not just to man's consciousness alone, but to the entire person. "Someone's understanding is identical with someone's being within the world," and a structure is a "explicated meaning of such being within the world." In his attempt to articulate the essence of religious phenomena, i.e. their structure, Van der Leeuw begins with man himself since it is only in relation to man all other phenomena derive their significance.

Van der Leeuw claims that there is a depth dimension of man than what appears. What appears is his exterior body, which is only one aspect of him, there is another aspect in him which is not so conspicuous and that is his 'interior.' And this 'interior' dimension reveals the presence of Power as sacred in him. In the common parlance this sacred dimension in man is known as soul. The soul has always been considered as the numinous element in man, and it is the means of indicating the sacred in him. It is true that the primitive man did not understand the notion of soul as we do, however, he did possess a vague understanding of the potency operating in different parts of body. As such, for the primitive man soul was not just a part of him but the potency present and operating in the whole man. Later, this experience of power came to be understood as soul which is the invisible power existing in man without which man is not complete or full. In other words, soul is the mark of man distinguishing him from other entities.

The soul is said to be having no form of its own, it assumes the form of its bearer. And in man it is a specific "stuff" which permeates the whole of his
being. Nevertheless, there are some parts of body that are considered as better “soul bearers” or special locus of the soul than others. As for instance, blood stands for life because soul is present in it in a unique way. And, therefore, sharing of blood means sharing of the soul-force. Similarly, man’s breath possesses soul. This understanding of soul seems to be most influential among many people. Several terms for soul such as atman, anima, spiritus, Seele, the origin of which may be traced etymologically back to this understanding of soul as breath in man. In all these, however, what is significant is that the aspect of the sacred is present in man’s soul. Van der Leeuw makes an extensive study of the progressive understanding of soul in man from the primitive times to the present day religious traditions. He refers to several imageries that are used in different religious traditions which represent soul. As for example, the image of man is believed to represent his soul, that is the sacred element in him. “The image ... is the essence; but the essence again is more than mere individuality: it is power” Shadow is another important form of soul. Likewise, soul is also known as the “little man” (homunculus) reminiscent of the certain body-souls such as the pupil with its “little man inside the eye” and the phallus, etc. The soul which is the depth dimension of man is the experience of Power as sacred. This experience of the sacred as the soul has later developed into beliefs in external soul. The external soul is in a “semi-detached” relation to the body, because of which it is capable of existing independently after a man’s death. Van der Leeuw makes a bold inference from the phenomenological perspective that man’s experience of external
soul may have given rise to the belief in the divine soul. Whether or not is his inference correct, it may be argued, quite plausibly, that man’s experience of power as sacred has prompted his belief in soul, a depth dimension of himself.

4.4.3.2. 'Institutional' Experience of the Sacred Power

Van der Leeuw shows in his phenomenology of religion that the presence and action of Power are not confined to man’s soul alone but it also extends to human institutions as well which have both visible and invisible aspects. The visible aspect of an institution revealing power is its office-bearers while the invisible aspect or dimension is the underlying Power manifested as authority. By institution here we mean an office that a man is authorized to hold by virtue of his election, appointment or succession. Thus there is the office of king, priest, medical personnel, preacher, teacher, consecrated man, and so on. Here in the case of an office, as opposed to an individual man, the office-bearer is not the holder of Power, but he is only an instrument of exercising power. It is the official status that sustains the Power. He can validly exercise his authority only within the official capacity. It can be said that because of the presence and operation of Power in their respective offices, the king offers valid sacrifices, the medical personnel cures, the priest’s actions assume a supernatural value, the prophet speaks effectively and the preacher is efficacious. In all these instances, however, what is to be noted is that the office-bearer does not act on his own but always acts as an instrument of exercising Power. The best
example to illustrate the instrumental role of an office-bearer is that of a prophet. He does not speak for himself but the "Other" speaks in and through him. The prophet is then a mere tool of Power, "filled with the god" and emptied of himself - literally an "enthusiast." The prophet’s speech is totally depersonalized and objective. And this objective word is a power-word that is efficacious. The struggle that the prophet undergoes between the objective utterances and the subjective striving is a clear indication of his inability to be his own master, he is obviously subjected to Power. It is the sacred Power that is operative in and through his office as a prophet. It is also seen from various tabus built around such office-bearers. The prophets, priests, kings, consecrated persons and medical personnel are all persons who are circumscribed by tabu constraints, since they are carriers of the sacred Power.

4.4.3.3. Inter-subjective Experience of the Sacred Power.

Besides the individual experience of the sacred Power in the soul and the ‘institutional’ experience in authority associated with an office, Van der Leeuw also deals with the intersubjective experience of the sacred Power. If the individual man has his soul as the depth dimension, and institution its authority, then the intersubjective (communal) existence of man has its depth dimension in its experience of the sacred Power as feeling of belonging to a community and a covenant.

The primitive man does not make a distinction between the sacred and secular community; life for him is essentially a single whole and the
communality of society is essentially powerful. Everyone belongs to the community, and all activities, including the religious ones, are always viewed in relation to the powerful community. In other words, the primitive man has an inclusive understanding of man's life wherein he shares in the power of the community.

To this sense of fellowship was added another dimension, that is, of the covenant. In a covenant community the organization of people is different compared to the organization of people in an ordinary community. While the ordinary community is already, the covenant community remains as possibility. This possibility of a covenant community is seen as vocation in which the sacredness of the given ordinary community is intersected by the divine power. In other words, the ordinariness of the community is transcended, and a new covenant community is established with the divine power infused into it. Such is the dynamic that we find in the establishment of mystery communities, monastic orders and even of religious sects.

The Church is a unique example where both the ordinary communality and the covenantal communality are present. The word Church comes from the Greek word *ecclesia*. It is a covenantal community of disciples chosen by Jesus. And the chief characteristic of this *ecclesia* is that though it is a visible phenomenon, it is sustained by the power of the invisible spirit - *pneuma*. It is both a continuation of ordinary community here and the covenantal community to be fully realized. “The Church is, therefore, visible-invisible, at once humanly organized and mystically animated, spiritual and cosmic.” Van der Leeuw obviously points to the
hermeneutical relation at work between what is present and what is promised - the *eschaton.* And the tension between the two realms - the actual and the promised - is maintained by the Power of the *pneuma.*

4.5. Witnessing to the Experience of Power

Having seen that the purpose of phenomenology is *verstehen* or understanding of the structures of reality which, for Van der Leeuw are the ideal types, we now move on to explicating their unique tendency towards transcendence. These ideal types, as we have already seen above, are the depth dimensions of individuals, institutions and communities. As such they are internal and invisible, however they have an inherent tendency for transcending their immanent status through other dimensions of experience which are more external and expressive. This tendency of moving from one dimension of experience to another in man is what is called by Merleau-Ponty as transcendence.

As Merleau-Ponty applies the concept of transcendence in the realm of knowledge of the world, self and others, he posits an identity-in-difference between the transcendent and that which it transcends. It is so because of the symbiotic relationship that exists between them, says Merleau-Ponty. In other words, there is a continuum between what is immanent and what is transcendent; they are two modes of being. This is the unique claim all phenomenologists, especially Merleau-Ponty, makes with regard to man's experience of the world. Relating this phenomenological claim to Van der Leeuw's view of religious experience we can at once notice in it that there
exists a continuum between the inward experience and its outward expression.

The inward experience that Van der Leeuw refers to is the various movements of the soul which, as we have seen above, is the sacred dimension of man. Here in these inward movements, the soul is amenable to a variety of experiences. It may have, on the one hand, such positive experiences as friendship with God, knowledge of God, being filled with God, love of God, etc., while on the other, not-so-positive experiences as sense of guilt, remorse and even “enmity to God” arising not primarily from moral failure or omission but rather, as Heidegger puts it, from man’s basic condition of being guilty. When man confronts the “Wholly Other,” he becomes aware of his inerasable nullity and impotence, and consequently his guilt. Along with the experience of guilt there is also an element of fear of God which is not an ordinary emotional response to a particular situation, but which is very primary and fundamental. This primary fear “is not based on any rational set of conditions, for it exists prior to every experience: such fear is a mode of the very state in which one subsists.”

Such experiences of guilt and fear might lead man into an attitude of total dependence on God, or as Van der Leeuw says, “servitude to Him.”

Such inward experiences do not limit their scope to man’s personal domain alone but stretches themselves to encompass his institutional and social experience as well. Man recognizes the authority of the “Wholly Other” and submits himself to Him as a servant does to his master. Such is the attitude of Abraham in the *Old Testament* who says to Yahweh: “Here am I
venturing to speak to the Lord, I who am mere dust and dross.” (Gen.xviii.27) So also in the New Testament, such a designation occurs in relation to Christ: “the slave of Christ Jesus.”\textsuperscript{69} Besides this experience of subordination before an authority, man also has the inward experience of belonging to a community or covenant relationship in which he shares its power. As we have already seen that for primitive man belonging to a community is the most natural thing, he shares in its power and life. In addition to this natural belonging to a community is the element of covenant which is a new possibility for man to achieve. Man, in other words, is not satisfied with the given reality, he constantly endeavors to amend it so as to achieve his ultimate possibilities - the \textit{eschaton}.

4.6. Transcendence of Inward Experience

The inward experiences that we have seem above do not always remain within the immanent state, but seek transcendence towards other domains of man’s experience that are more external and expressive. Their inherent nature is to ‘move on’ to external modes of being. This is exactly what Merleau-Ponty also claims when he uses the term transcendence in relation to man’s experience of himself, world and others. It can be said that there is always an irresistible need for what is inner and invisible to manifest itself in outer and visible forms. These manifest forms, however, are neither totally identical with nor separate from that which manifests itself; there is a continuum or an “identity-in-difference” between the two. In the light of
this we can better understand Van der Leeuw's emphasis on the “outward action” in religious experience.

The outward action that Van der Leeuw describes is the externalization of the inward experience of man. His experience of the sacred present in him in the form of soul with its attendant possibilities, of authority in the feeling of servitude, of community in the feeling of belonging, etc. seek ways and means to endow themselves with forms that are external expressive and enduring. This externalization takes place primarily through rites, rituals and customs.\(^7\) And, it is through these rituals and rites and customs, the meanings of the inward experiences are fixed or “sedimented.” These sedimented meanings of the inward experiences are then retrieved periodically through reenactment of the rites and rituals in the context of worship. In other words, in worship, man endeavors to give form to his self-comprehension in relation to Power. In addition to this self-comprehension of himself, worship is also an occasion for man to seize upon the activities of Power itself. Van der Leeuw remarks in this context: “In worship, therefore, man seeks to give form not only to individual and to collective experience, not only to the conduct of himself and his community, but also to the activities of Power, indeed to its very existence.”\(^7\)

Man's conduct during the enactment of rites and rituals assumes the form of custom. Thus he observes customs and traditions of tabus, purification rites, obligations of worship and the other demands of Power upon life.\(^7\) A custom or tradition enjoins upon man to observe it meticulously, and any violation of which entails a breakdown of relationship with Power. Anyone
transgressing a custom, therefore, goes astray and this must be made good again. Here the transgression of custom is regarded not as a moral failure as such, but it goes deeper encompassing the entire life. Here the basic understanding is that what happens at the microcosmic level has its ramifications at the macrocosmic level as well.

While performing any ritual custom, the purpose of which is to maintain correct relationship with Power, it is important that man performs it during sacred time and at sacred place. Time, as Merleau-Ponty understands it, is not the chronometric/clock time but the lived time, and it is all the more relevant in the case of religious worship, as it is regarded sacred and significant. Here the sacred time is not homogeneous with the mundane time; the real time in religion is *kairos* in which every minute has its unique value. And man can and must engage in religious worship only during this sacred time. Time goes on relentlessly. Man, however, upon encountering Power must halt, and taking hold of a section of *kairos*, must celebrate it. Any religious worship performed outside this sacred time turns out to be irrelevant in regard to the establishment of correct relationship with Power. What is more, it might even bring in a spell of disaster. The performance of ritualistic custom during the sacred time cannot be done arbitrarily at any place, it has to be specifically at the sacred place. As sacred time which has a special significance, so also sacred place has a specific meaning. It is not homogeneous units of space, but each one having its own meaning. In fact they become "positions" by being selected from the vast extensity of the world. And these selected places or "positions" become powerful because
Power resides in them. A selected place is sacred as it deeply impresses man, and it is at such place man observes his ritual customs. As for example, temple, church, mosque and other places of worship are sacred because Power resides in them. A place of worship, therefore, is not just an assemblage of buildings, but has its own structure where the religious essence is realized. And within the temple itself some specific areas, such as the sanctuary, sanctum sanctorum, etc. become more sacred than others because of the presence of Power in the form of deity.  

In all religious rituals there is one element that is essential, viz. gestures. These gestures according, to Merleau-Ponty, consist not only of somatic variation but word as well. The spoken word is a gesture in the sense that the whole body is involved in articulating it. While it is the case that man follows several body postures during a religious worship, he also takes recourse to specially chosen words that purport to communicate his inward experience of awe at the presence of the divine. The word is also potent in the sense that it can effect the presence of Power at the time of worship. It has therefore a creative efficacy; it turns the time into *kairos*, the appropriate time.

It is believed that repetition of a word increases its potency. And we find this repetition of word being mostly done in myths containing as they do the sacred actions of the divine. "It is a spoken word, possessing decisive Power in its repetition; just as the essential nature of sacred action consists in its being repeated, so the essence of myth lies in its being told, in being repeatedly spoken anew."  

The living myth is an exact parallel of
celebration. The essence of myth can be understood only in its relation to rites and rituals, because every rite and ritual is founded on a living myth. Every myth refers to the primeval time when the sacred action was first executed, and each time similar action is done the myth comes alive. Therefore myth is not a contemplation but an actuality. There lies in every myth a sedimented meaning and each time a rite is performed this latent meaning is brought to the fore.

We have so far examined Van der Leeuw’s understanding of religious experience from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty. Religious experience is primarily not an abstraction or a doctrine but a lived or a living reality. And this lived or living reality can best be understood from a phenomenological perspective, and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological explication of bodily intentionality served as a backdrop against which we have viewed Van der Leeuw’s contribution. Phenomenologically speaking, religious experience, according to Van der Leeuw, has its ‘origin’ in man’s encounter with Power manifested in what is highly exceptional and extremely impressive. And this experience could be verified empirically. However, man does not remain at that level alone, he moves on to decipher the depth dimensions of his empirical experience of himself, world and others wherein he confronts his relation to Power as “Wholly Other.” Man from his inherent tendency to transcend seeks ways and means to express this discovery of depth dimensions through ‘sedimented’ forms of rites, rituals and customs. By habitually re-enacting these rites and customs man is capable of recapturing the latent meanings as well as to develop new significance. Religious
experience as described by Van der Leeuw is better understood from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty who seeks the essence of life from its lived form.

END NOTES - Chapter IV


Ibid. p.193.

6 Ibid. p. 194. For a more detailed understanding of Van der Leeuw’s views on person in reference to God, vide. pp. 43-51, 83-90.

7 Ibid. pp.194 - 97.

8 Ibid. P. 200.

9 It is of importance to note that most of the writings of William Dilthey in the context of Geisteswissenschaften did with verstehen.

10 Ibid. pp.197-208.


13 Ibid. pp. 683, 688. Van der Leeuw argues here that it is theology that speaks about God. Phenomenology cannot and does not speak of God as He is neither a subject nor an object, and only being either of the two can He be a phenomenon. Since God is a not a phenomenon, phenomenology cannot speak of Him. See also Frederick R. Struckmeyer, “Phenomenology and Religion: Some Comments,” op.cit. p. 255.

14 Ibid. p.23.


19 *Ibid.* Here Van der Leeuw refers to a discussion between Lehmann and Codrington in regard to the primitive mind's view of what is natural and supernatural. Lehmann rejects any reference to the primitive mentality of the supernatural as meaningless, but Codrington sees such a possibility. Van der Leeuw agrees with the latter, in the sense that the natural contains within it the dimension of the supernatural. It is an understanding that is qualitatively different from that of the moderns who view the natural and the supernatural as mutually incompatible.


The term totemism is a subject of endless dispute in the modern research and scholarship. Irrespective of the manner in which it is employed by different thinkers, one thing seems to be clear, according to Van der Leeuw, that totem represents the potency of the clan or tribe. The totem is not a god, but it certainly has a protective role for the tribe.

Van der Leeuw here gives an elaborate account of the mother form as found in different cultures and religions from around the world. And he contents that the primitive man out of his own empirical experience of woman and her reproductive role has drawn many parallels with the earth, particularly in its productive function.

Van der Leeuw defends the use of anthropomorphic forms for, he says, “all speech is human and creates human forms.” And if we refrain from all speech then we will not be able to assert anything about God. We can understand God only from our perspective; this is a reaffirmation of Van der Leeuw’s basic presupposition regarding the scope of the phenomenology of religion as that which deals with man’s response to God’s revelation.


Cf. p.31. From the thesis. This is to be understood phenomenologically as another interpretation of the notion of horizon, so often seen in the works of both Husserl and Heidegger.

This "experienced construction" that Van der Leeuw speaks of here is not a rational category but autonomous one resembling Merleau-Ponty's bodily intentionality which according to him is also autonomous and constitutes itself a meaningful whole.


Ibid.

Here it appears that Van der Leeuw is indebted to the Kantian notion of form.


It seems clear that Van der Leeuw's use of the concept *verstehen* has been influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey. Please see for details J.Waardenburg, "Religion between Reality and Idea," *op.cit.* p.168, footnote. no.105.

Ibid. p.163.
47 Ibid.


50 Ibid.


54 G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, *op.cit.* p.282. The primitives thought that the body parts are partly body or soul-organs, and partly designations like speech and spirit. There are several terms such as *ba*, *ka*, *akh*, etc. used by the primitives indicating the power present in man. But it is doubtful whether they point to soul or not. It seems then that here is no clear understanding regarding soul in the primitive man.


56 Ibid. pp.286-87.

57 Ibid. p. 288.

58 Ibid. p.292.
Van der Leeuw here quotes William Wundt who opines that “in genuine prophesy God and the prophet are one, while in the retrogressive and more reflective types God sends the prophet. The first is the dream, the second reflection upon the dream. But we find compulsory utterance, the almost spasmodic power of prophetic speech,, in almost all the Israelitish prophets.”


The sacred dimension of man is analogous to his depth dimension, and therefore these two words are used interchangeably.

G. Van der Leeuw, Religion in Essence and Manifestation, op.cit. p.518.

There are conflicting views among scholars regarding the sequence of this process of externalization, that is, whether the inner religious experiences are
endowed first with verbal or ritual form, for every ritual is subtended by a myth and conversely every myth is orientated to a ritual. The Myth and Ritual School claim that ritual precedes myth, and that myth is a narrative interpretation of ritual. For more details in this regard, vide James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred*, 2 ed. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993, pp.105-07.


72 Ibid. p.454.

73 Ibid. p.384.

74 Ibid. p.393 ff.

75 Ibid. p.413.