Chapter 1

A PARADIGM FOR

COMPARATIVE STUDY OF RELIGIONS
Man is always fascinated by the mysteries of life. At all times he is engaged in unravelling the mysteries of life like the destiny of an individual, life after death, the significance of all human sufferings and misery, etc. The more the zeal to understand the enigma, the more it becomes elusive and complicated because of the flourishing constellation of psycho-socio-religious ideas. The ardourous pursuit of mysteries is focussed on what determines the dynamics of all human encounters and functions and which can be expressed the best in a single word the 'reality.' To know and to experience the 'reality' has always been man's hope. The experience of this reality differs from the standpoints of philosophy, religion, socio-psychical perception, and the like.

Experience is derived from the Latin root _experior_ meaning to prove or to put to test. One needs to consider the wide range of the use of the term from the all inclusive sense to the narrowest sense. At the one extreme nothing is beyond the circle of experience, for even an explanation of experience itself is a part of life-experience as the mere raw material which 'reason' shapes into knowledge.
1.1 Science and Experience

The ordinary human experience which involves sense organs, mind and the object outside, when specialised and trained according to the natural inclination of the individuals, becomes a special kind of experience such as scientific experience, as aesthetic experience etc. Scientific experience is based on observation, experiment and measurement, and quantification, in general. It is concerned with the repeatable events. The scientists are interested in reaching out to some definite conclusions. The conception of experience by the physical science is purely objective. They study nature as a system apart from the minds that study it. In science, to say, 'this is' is means that this is capable of being a part of the experience of all who view the matter under similar conditions. Scientific definition of experience may be called the narrowest definition, for in the world of science certain aspects of whole have to be excluded to attain clarity and definiteness and this makes the world of science smaller than the world of experience.

When psychology, anthropology, and the like came into the “scientific” domain, they widened the meaning of
experience to a considerable level. These humanistic sciences signify the normal continuum of the mind, either those of one's own, when one speaks of personal or what belongs to the mind generally when one speaks of common experience. Here the subjective experiences are considered in an objective manner as experiences are treated in physical sciences. Science, whether physical or humanistic, by its very nature deals with the parts. So, what is true for the part can not be applied to the whole.

1.2 Philosophy and Experience

In analysing experience philosophy looks at it from three different perspectives, from the stand point of objects, from the angle of the subject (the experiencer) or the one going beyond the subject and object dichotomy by the conditions which makes the experience of an object by the subject possible. The empiricist tradition conceives experience as the reports of the world through the senses. The human mind was envisaged as a wax-tablet on which the sensible world imprints itself; and the one who experiences is the passive recipient of what is given. It is possible to distinguish, compare, and in other words, relate these sensible items by means of un-
derstanding, but the data themselves are available only through experiences. Here the experiences pass from the given sensation to belief in the existence of finite object that are subject to the laws of nature.

Immanuel Kant distinguishes between two fundamental aspects of experience - one perceptual and the other conceptual. The former is based on experience and the latter on intellect. With empiricists, Kant admits that no knowledge is possible without experience. But against empiricism, he emphasises the fact that mere sensation does not constitute our knowledge. Kant declared that experience is not identical with passively received sensible material but it must be construed as the joint product of such material and its being grasped by an understanding that things in accordance with certain necessary categories not derived from senses. Experience is characterised as the many-sided reflection of man's multiple encounter with the world, other man and himself.

Philosophy, like science, is concerned with systematizing experience. Though philosophy begins with 'common sense' experience, it endeavours to transcend the actual conditions under which experience is possessed. Philos-
ophy, while explaining, refining, remoulding, reinterpreting continues to deal with experience in the aggregate of its subjective expression.

1.3 Religious Experience

Religious experience pertains to the whole of life. It is broader in its embrace and more complex in composition and implication than any other aspect of human existence and relationship. It constitutes the content, purpose, motivation, and substructure of the much of the consciousness of mankind. At the outset, it can be said that religious experience, for a Christian, is concerned with the awe one feels when kneeling before the cross, the sense of mystery which is often aroused by elaborate ceremonial, the feeling of abasement which can accompany public or private confession, the feeling of relief experienced when absolution of one’s sins are pronounced, the sense of significance which sometimes accompanies the re-reading of a Bible passage and the peace which one sometimes feels in the course of prayer.

In Rudolf Otto’s classic, *The Idea of Holy*, religious ex-
perience is described as a person’s encounter with the *mysterium tremendum et fascienans*. Here *Mysterium* points to the otherness of the Holy, *tremendum* to its overwhelmingness in relation to the human finitude; and *fascinans* to the lure that draws individuals out and beyond themselves. There are great varieties in the form and intensity of religious experiences. After studying many experiences, Glock and Stark grouped them under four headings as follows: confirming, responding, ecstatic, and revelational.

In the confirming religious experience the individual becomes aware of the presence of the sacred. It may not be anything spectacular, overwhelming or particularly dramatic. It is, however, of deep personal meaning and significance to the individual, since the individual may have distinct awareness of the closeness of the divine.

In the responsive religious experience the individual feels that divine is responding to him or her as well. A responsive experience may occur when the individual believes that the divine has helped him/her out in a time of personal crisis, such as during an illness, or after mirac-
ulous escapes from accident or rescues from immanent danger, etc. This type of experience also may be interpreted as an effort by the divine to purify or to sanctify the individual.

An ecstatic religious experience involves not only awareness of the presence of and response from the divine but also a feeling of an intense and intimate emotional relationship with the sacred. So powerful is the intensity of the ecstatic religious experience that one of the most prominent features reported by mystics is the imagery of light or the physical sensation of being electrified. It is or may be so intense that it resembles intoxication or seizures.

In the revelational religious experience the individual feels that he or she has received message from the divine. The distinctive character of the revelational religious experience is that the individual receives confidential information about the future, divine nature, or divine plan. Such revelations may be orthodox in the sense that they are supportive of the existing religious and social order or heterodox in the sense that they are critical and potentially disruptive of the status quo.
Joachim Wach enumerates four criteria to identify a genuine religious experience and goes on to differentiate it from pseudo-religious or less-profound experiences. The four criteria are:

i) response to the Ultimate Reality,

ii) involvement of total personality,

iii) intensity, and

iv) leads to action.\(^3\)

On the preponderance of one or the other criterion, it will be possible to indicate two main types of religious experience. When the religious experience is creative, original, direct, and inspired, it is characterised as active and as passive that which is transmitted and acquired by tradition, imitation, and suggestion. The distinction is neither exhaustive nor exclusive and the two classes shade off into each other by imperceptible degrees.

Whether it is a passive or active religious experience, it involves the interplay of intellect, volition, and emotion. Thus three-dimensional interaction creates some kind of dialectical tension. The cognitive dimension which involves perceiving and knowing shapes acts and frames
feelings. The volitional dimension which involves choosing and interacting confirms belief and expresses feelings. The emotional dimension which involves trusting and loving influence belief and trigger action. This matrix gives strength to the individual to rise above the sphere of sensuous and material and have fostered qualities essential alike to the development of the society to be specific a fuller personality.

1.4 Quo vadis?

No wonder mankind at present must draw inspiration from the stimulating records of religious history of the past. The present study is a small and humble enterprise in the direction of viewing the whole of life in the light of religious experience. As for our present purpose of dealing with religious experience in its common aspect is concerned, it does not allow any consideration of the characteristic of any particular period of any particular religion. Though broad and general the treatment may be, there is, however, enough in common in all ages and creeds to allow a description of the religious experiences in these features which belong to them as a whole. Keeping the above points in mind, the present work strives
to study comparatively two chosen religious philosophers: the Viśiṣṭādvaitin, Śrī Rāmānujaḥārya (ca. 1017 to 1137 A.D.) of India and the Christian mystic, St. Bonaventure (1221 to 1274 A.D.) of Italy. This study is all about how Rāmānuja and Bonaventure respond to similar problems and situations in life and thought, without any fixed bias in favour of similarities or differences.

When these two religious philosophers are considered in their historical context and cultural milieu, it is clear that their philosophies have blossomed from their respective traditions. They have been responsible for the emergence of new outlook on life and also provide a sound philosophical justification to their new insights. Though Rāmānuja established a methodology and metaphysical framework within the Vedāntic tradition and argues on relentless logic at premises, his system gets flesh and blood by his devotional ideologies of the passionate devotees of the Lord Viṣṇu, known as Ālvārs. Ālvārs literally means the one who dive deep into and gets immersed in the divine. These Tamil mystics who enjoyed unlimited joy of having fellowship with God speak on their authentic experience in the vernacular. There are about 4,000 hymns in the works of the Ālvārs and they are best
known as \textit{Nalayira-divya-prabandham}. In addition to the \textit{Prasthānatraya, Vishnu Purāṇa,} and \textit{Pāncarātra Āgamas}, Rāmānuja equally relies on this work also, which is also known as Tamil Veda. On the other side, Bonaventure’s vision of reality was shaped by three factors: the sacred scriptures, the Bible, the theologico-philosophical tradition and the mystical experience of his mentor, St. Francis of Assisi. He worked out a harmony among the experiential factor, the sacred scriptures and the Augustinian-cum-Neo-platonic philosophical traditions. And, as the follower of St. Francis of Assisi, he formulated a metaphysics and a logic that supports the Franciscan mode of religious experience.

Though both of them represented the pinnacle of their respective systems, they were overshadowed by the popularity of the rival systems. The fate of Rāmānuja suffered due to Śrī Śankara, whereas Bonaventure suffered because of St. Thomas Aquinas. Another cause for their obscurcation might be due to relegating them to the rows of critics and mystics. Rāmānuja is at his best when he examines and criticises the view of his opponent. Moreover, he as the systematizer of the \textit{Vaiṣṇava} tradition, is meticulous in his philosophical debate. Instead of ex-
plaining away the differences between him and Sankara, Rāmānuja, to borrow the words of R. Balasubramanian, mounted a full-scale philosophical debate using all the weapons in his armoury in his relentless and uncompromising manner. That is why he launched a multi-pronged attack in his mahā-siddhānta to demolish the edifice built by Advaitins. In the turbulent mid-13th century, Bonaventure, as he was a gifted stylist, employed all his oratorical skills in both preaching gospel as well as defending the mendicant orders and theological traditions from various attacks. The composed works of Bonaventure surpasses all the most influential treatise of mystical theology in the Christian world. His writings have been a primary source of Franciscan spirituality throughout the centuries.

In spite of their revelling in their respective traditions, their outlook is not obsolescent. They exhibit the rare talent of synchronising their traditions with their philosophical acumen and experience to give a new synthetic outlook. It is no doubt that Rāmānuja’s philosophy is a blend of various strands. He accepts the equal validity of all the three pramāṇas, namely, perception, inference, and verbal testimony. The evidences are not contradicto-
ry, but coherent. On the metaphysical side, he reconciles the claims of monism and pluralism. The acceptance of the reality of the physical universe as well as the plurality of jīvas is not, according to Rāmānuja, inconsistent with the oness of Brahman. The ultimate reality is Brahman qualified by cit and acit (cit-acit-viśiṣṭam Brahma) both in cause and effect states. In understanding the philosophy of Bonaventure, one has to contend with its integral nature. The Trinity, Christ, and the reflection of God in the universe are the three basic themes on which his philosophy is constructed. Creation flows out of Trinity through the Son, Christ. The Father produced in the son the rationes aeternae of all that He can create. The exemplaristic universe is seen as a multiple, diffused reflection and expression of the divine plan. When man contemplates on God's reflection in the hierarchy of beings in the light of divine illumination, he is lead back to God.

So much for the similarities between Rāmānuja and Bonaventure at the outset. But there are contrasts too due to their different religious backgrounds, and cultural milieu, and the like. They held different views on the progress of time, the theory of previous lives, or rebirths
and very many others. This study, however, is an attempt not only to trace out the similarities and contrasts, but also an effort to go beyond them to discover whether their philosophies enrich and deepen an understanding of one another.

In order to set forth a critical overview of the various steps taken within the movement of mankind towards religious experience, an attempt is directed towards examining the self and its destiny. In short, it is proposed to study, the highly suggestive description of the journey of man as given in the *Katha Upanisad*. Man to justify his being should definitely know the ultimate goal of his life, the way to reach it and the necessary means and equipments to enable him to go by that way.

Though this is a comparative study, the attitude is analytic as well as descriptive. While examining the philosophical concepts, to ensure clarity, analytical method is used. Descriptive method is employed while studying the religious experience so as to remain loyal to the truth and to bring out the significance of actual religious experience. Due attention, therefore, has been paid to specific passage in the works of Rāmānuja and Bonaventure
mainly from English translations, since good translations are available.

The introductory chapter presents a general criterion from which the study will follow. After a comprehensive survey of the fundamental ideas of Rāmānuja and Bonaventure, the thesis is developed in the following lines. First of all, the beginning of the finite self's journey is considered. The origin from the perspective of the place - whether it is from God, and if it is from God, why it started from God, and time, when does the self embark upon the journey from this birth or earlier birth? Secondly the question of relationship between the finite self and the Infinite Self is taken up for consideration. It is, in fact, baffling to think of a relationship between the finite self and the Infinite Self. A careful analysis will be carried out to understand the relationship from various perspectives. Depending upon the nature of the self and its relationship with the Infinite Self, every religious system prescribes to its followers a course of regular disciplines which is to lead them to the ultimate goal. The third point of enquiry is about how the finite self, following the prescribed way, is able to experience the ultimate. Lastly, the consummation of religious ex-
perience is examined from their respective stand points whether it is considered as salvation or liberation or just union with God.

Keeping in mind all these perspectives, the thesis is divided into three broad sections. The first section comprises four chapters which provide answers from the stand point of Rāmānuja to the questions of creation, relationship, the way, and the consummation. In the second unit answers are worked out in four chapters in the light of Bonventure’s reflections. The third section constitutes the critical appraisal and the concluding portion of this thesis. In the chapter on critical appraisal a resumé of the comparative study has been presented for reassessment of the entire situation. In the concluding chapter special attention is given to show, how, inspite of the difference in traditions, their systematic approach makes their teachings applicable mutatis mutandis to the followers of any religious faith.