Chapter 6

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Religious experience is a human experience. Human beings undergo various types of experience in their life. Sense experience is one verity of human experience which is commonly given to all human beings who’s sense organs function normally. Most of the time in our awake state we remain involved in various types of sense experience. The objects of sense experience constitute the world in which we inhabit. The objects of sense experience are compulsive in the sense that they are bound to be attended by us if the sense organs are open and function normally. This compulsive presence of these objects on our sense organs create the belief about the reality of these objects. Thus the general common belief about the reality of the external world is formed in our mind. This belief is enforced and strengthened by the fact that we share the experience with others also. Since others also talk about those features and qualities of the objects surrounding us which we also experience ourselves in our perception, the belief in the reality of those objects and the world constituted by them becomes strong. The belief becomes so strong that we ordinarily forget that it is a shared belief only. When some circumstance arises in which, that which is perceived commonly, turns out to be unreal, then alone we think and question about the status of the objects of the so called real world.

Despite doubts raised by the occasions of permanent illusions we do not believe that the world of objects of sense experience is unreal. The reason for believing in the reality of a world of sense experience is the fact that we share it with others: others also experience the world as we experience it so the common belief in the reality of the world of sense experience derives its reality from the common shareability of it.

There is another reason also for believing in the reality of the world of sense experience. We believe in the reality of the world of sense experience because they appear to be compulsive on our sense experience. In other words, we believe that the world is real because they appear to be existing out there
independent of our choice and irrespective of our liking or disliking. We feel that the objects are real and we don’t have reasons for believing that they are not what they appear to be, or they are nonexistent. The tree before my eyes is a real tree for me for the reason that I see it the way it appears to be and can’t see it differently as I wish it to be or imagine it to be. Since others also see that tree with those very features which I experience and I can’t perceive it differently according to my wish or imagination therefore I have to admit it as real. There is a possibility of logical doubt over the reality of this world (as Descartes did) but that is only a logical possibility. We don’t have good reasons to entertain this possibility of doubt because any thing can be doubted in that way. The logical possibility of doubt is open to any entity except for the tautologies. Every thing other than tautology is open to our logical doubt. However, we do not doubt anything of our experience just because it is logically possible to do so. Unless there are good empirical reasons for doubting on anything we do not doubt actually. This is the reason that despite the logical possibility of doubting the reality of the world of sense experience we do not doubt it. Since the objects of the world of sense experience are compulsive on us and we don’t have good empirical reason to doubt over it we accept it to be real. Thus we keep on believing the reality of the world till some occasions arise in which some instances of sense experience present empirical reason to doubt it.

We have good reasons for believing in the reality of sense experience. The reports of sense organs give us genuine information and constitute the world of valid knowledge for us. Epistemology begins with the understanding of valid knowledge given to us in sense experience. That becomes the paradigm of valid knowledge. When we think upon any type of valid knowledge the instance of sense experience based knowledge serves as an exemplar. While it is good to approach different sources of knowledge in the light of sense experience based knowledge, it also turns out to be an obstruction in the search. This needs some elaboration

Another verity of valid knowledge is bound to be different from the sense experiential verity of knowledge just because it is a different verity.
Some specific features of another verity of valid knowledge may have difference from the features of knowledge of sense experience. If every feature of the sense experience based knowledge is acknowledged as compulsory for all verities of valid knowledge then no other verity could qualify to be valid knowledge at all. If it is admitted that every verity of knowledge must be tested/testable by everyone in the sense experience then, it is clear, no other verity of knowledge could be acknowledged as valid knowledge. There is no good reason, however, to impose such criterion on every verity of knowledge. Such an imposition is irrational and unduly rigid. Validity of sense experience based knowledge depends upon its inter-subjective and inter-sensory agreement. My perception of a red flower could be admitted as a genuine piece of knowledge only if – (a) my tactual also confirms about the presence of the flower and (b) the presence of the flower and its colour is also confirmed by other persons also. Apart from that there is an element of doxastic practice also involved in it. If a flower is seen in ordinary sunlight as a red flower by me and it is also perceived as red by others in the same light then this piece of knowledge is acknowledged as a valid knowledge. However, if a flower appears to be purple in violet light and is also perceived to be purple by others, it would not be accepted as a valid knowledge about the colour of the flower. The colour of the flower would be admitted to be red because it is believed generally that red flower appears to be purple in violet light. This is a matter of common acceptance – a matter of common practice regarding the use and application of colour on an object. Thus although everybody sees the colour of the flower purple in violet light the common acceptance that the colour is red is a valid knowledge.

The elements of inter-sensory and inter-subjective agreement along with the common accepted belief regarding the applicability of words are essential criterion for admitting any piece of knowledge as valid knowledge. This is a rational criterion for the knowledge based on sense experience. This criterion can be applied on any verity of knowledge only with specific modifications and reservations. The criterion cannot be imposed on other verities of knowledge literally in the same way as it is applicable to the
knowledge based on sense experience. It is clear that such an imposition on other verity of knowledge would be irrational and unwarranted.

The criterion of valid knowledge for sense experience is not applicable only for the knowledge gained in sense experience. It is the criterion for all sorts of valid knowledge in essence but it has to be modified adequately and appropriately when applied to other verities of knowledge. This modification is to be done in view of the source of knowledge and the grounds for inter-subjective and inter-sensory verification of the claims made in that dimension. The criterion has to be maintained because not anything or everything can be called valid knowledge. Experiences like dream and cases of permanent illusion cannot be accepted as valid knowledge because the criterion does not apply there. Dream is a purely personal experience. All of us pass through this experience but know it very well that they are not true. While reflecting upon dream we come to the conclusion that it is not true and think that it is not so because it is not an experience of awake sense experience. This is not fully true. The reason for not believing the validity of dream experience is not because it is a state of sleep. The reason is that the dream state is so private that it cannot be inter-subjectively tested. It is not valid also for the reason that it cannot be reproduced either. Had the dream experience been reproducible and inter-subjectively tested, it could have the possibility of becoming a valid source of knowledge. In the light of this understanding it could be said that any form of human experience would qualify to be called valid knowledge if it fulfills the criterion of inter-subjective and inter-sensory tests. However, the criterion has to be modified if the conditions of inter-subjective and inter-sensory tests are applicable differently. It needs further elaboration.

Supposing that there is a verity of experience in which what a person experiences is not known through the sense experience then the criterion of inter-sensory tests would have to be modified, relaxed or abandoned partly. In that case only the criterion of inter-subjective test would have to be applied. Here a problem would arise if we restrict our epistemology to those verities of knowledge only which are similar to sense experience in both the respects. We
can understand the situation with the example of the world of knowledge formed by our rational intuitions.

The objects of our systematic rational thinking are the objects of imagination. The relation between such objects are the matters of direct rational intuition. There structure and functions also are known in rational intuitions only. Since these objects are not the objects of sense experience the question of their inter-sensory perception does not arise. However, inter-subjective test of the knowledge gained in such intuitions is possible and has to be applied on the respective world. The world of geometry or pure mathematics is a world that is constituted by this source of knowledge. Such pieces of knowledge are necessary truth claims because they can’t be otherwise. The fact that they can’t be otherwise is a fact that is witnessed by any and every individual who is trained to raise himself to the level of rational intuition. It is important to note at this point that knowledge gained through such rational intuitions would not be accepted as a valid knowledge claim if every individual having the capacity and training to reach this intuitive level does not confirm it. Mathematical truths give us the knowledge of a particular type of necessary truths which are confirmed and conformed by all such individuals. If it had been the case that only one individual or a couple of individuals could have known these truths and other such individuals could not confirm it then the knowledge of mathematics would not have been possible. I get the knowledge of mathematical truths and I know them as necessarily true (because they can’t be otherwise). This intuition is my personal experience but becomes mathematical knowledge because all other persons trained to rise to the level of mathematical intuition also confirm it and conform what I say.

This gives us an example to understand how the criteria of valid knowledge applied on another domain of knowledge gained through another source modify appropriately and adequately. It gives us a glimpse of how the criterion could modify in some another domain of knowledge gained through some another source. It would help us in understanding the validity of the knowledge gained in the field of religion through direct apprehension. But
before developing the understanding of that verity of knowledge certain misunderstandings have to be removed which come in the way. The discourse of religious experience as a valid source of knowledge is shrouded with various types of misunderstandings. They are to be presented, analysed and removed one by one.

First of all a very common misunderstanding about the rareness of religious experience is to be taken into consideration. It is ordinarily believed that religious experience is a very special type of experience which is available only to a few persons having very high spiritual qualities. It is not admitted as a common or commonly available human experience. The term “mystical experience” commonly used for this verity of experience discloses that it is accepted as a very strange and rare verity of experience which ordinary human being cannot achieve. This feature of uncommonness creates so much of confusion about it. In fact all sorts of personal imaginations and confusions are added to the notion of religious experience when it is called mystical experience. Since it is mystical where reason cannot operate therefore all sorts of irrationalities and bizarre features are attributed to it in as many ways as there are persons to talk about its uncommonness. In every religion there are sects which engage in esoteric practices. Magic, black art and hidden rituals which are performed surreptitiously away from the society are found in almost every religion. While these practices are done with the intention of showing special power over the masses and influence them, they are believed to be related directly or indirectly to the religious quest of the ultimate supra-psychic root of the self. These mysterious practices are not the direct meaning of mystical experience but practically they form a segment of any religion which gets attached to the extended meaning of mystical. Thus mystical experience, while in philosophical parlance means something very specific becomes a store house of all sorts of magical, miraculous and esoteric practices and processes. This common sense meaning of the term mystical experience creates lot of confusion regarding its availability to common man. People think that this is not accessible to ordinary human beings. This is the reason that theosophy, which engages itself in the spiritual endeavour to
contact to great enlightened souls of different religions, earned notoriety for itself. The presence of such occult practices form a big part of the meaning of mystical experience and becomes the source of misunderstanding religious experience.

The term mystical experience also generates misunderstanding because of the “ineffability” feature attributed to it by different exponents. This kind of experience is described to be ineffable because it is regarded to be beyond reason. Since it cannot be categorized clearly in any of the categories of sense experience it becomes difficult to describe it in familiar terms of sense perception. Most of the mystics and the authors of mysticism hold that the experience cannot be meaningfully put into words. This ineffability is mistakenly accepted as literally true. It is a point of reflection how the religious experience which is so valuable for human life becomes ineffable. The ineffability ascribed to mystical experience is not literally correct. The person who undergoes religious experience finds himself at the state of such an overwhelming state of ecstasy that he feels that all words fall short of its description. The experience is so deeply overwhelming that the person does not want to disturb it by uttering any words and while he decides to describe it he finds that the language is quite inadequate to express even the smallest part of what he feels. But this does not mean that it is ineffable literally. The person who underwent religious experience speaks so much about his overwhelming experience in various ways. Although he repeatedly says that it is beyond words what he exactly means is that whatever he states and in what way he states remains insufficient to express what he felt in that experience. This is not literal ineffability. In fact it is an emotive ineffability. As we say about a wonderful performance of dance or a marvelous performance of music that it is beyond words but does not mean literally that it cannot be described into words. The ineffability of religious experience also is similar to this ineffability. The difference between the experience of aesthetic joy and that of religious experience is of degree basically. The intensity, depth and duration of the ecstasy of religious experience is much much greater than that of aesthetic experience. It is not intended here to hold aesthetic and religious
experience on the same qualitative pedestal. The two are qualitatively different also in view of their object and content. But so far as the ineffability aspect is concerned it is not basically the qualitative difference of religious experience that makes it so called inexpressible.

Had there been a literal ineffability about the religious experience most of the mystics and authors of mysticism would not have said about it so much. While they talk about its ineffability they simultaneously keep talking about it in very many ways. That shows that there is so much to talk about religious experience but the experience is so powerful that one finds it quite insufficient to state whatever they state. Thus religious experience is not literally ineffable. The term “mystical experience” overcast the shadow of mystery on the experience in such a way that ineffability ascribed to it is admitted to be a literal ineffability. This is a misunderstanding that evolves out of the use of the term mystical experience.

Another very hazardous misunderstanding about religious experience lies in the common belief that it is a very special kind of experience which is not accessible to common man unless they pass through some special kind of religious training or disciplining. While it is true that there are various ways and meditational methods prescribed in different religions and different sects, it does not imply that it is not a common human experience. In fact religious experience is the simplest and the most general experience that is available to any common man and in a sense, already given to him. Meditational techniques are not the ways of generating a new kind of experience in the practitioner. These methods and techniques are essentially the ways of dropping out or shedding all those learned habits and lifestyle in which this experience (which is already given) is suffused and lost. All the ways, methods and paths of attaining religious experience are, in fact, the ways, paths and methods of unlearning so that, that which was given before any learning could be retained. The so called ways of attaining religious experience are the ways to unlearn that is artificially acquired and to reach that state of pure consciousness which was given prior to all that. This simplest experience is not something, a matter of attaining something new or adding
more to the list of articles of our consciousness. When the term mystical experience is applied to this simplest human experience its simplicity and essential givenness is forgotten and lost. This is the most hazardous misunderstanding in all respects because it gives the person an impression that the person has to attain something very strange and peculiar which he had never attained earlier. In course of actual practice of meditation the practitioner is cautioned by his preceptor against this misgiving. If this experience is special and strange that was not earlier available to the person in any form then one has to desire for attaining it. But the very desire comes in the way of its accessibility since it is not to be attained in future but only to realize in present that it is there. “Mystical experience”, therefore, is a very misleading term and creates more confusion than describing it correctly.

Another misgiving regarding the term “mystical experience” lies in the belief that it is beyond reason. It is assumed, ordinarily, that mystical experience is beyond the reach of rationality. In other words this is a kind of experience which is not distinguishable into clear rational categories, nor can it be judged rationally in clear terms. While this is true in a particular sense, it is not acceptable if it is accepted literally or generally. Religious experience is a specific human experience and it is very specific because of its unique features of transcendence. This decision is clearly ingrained, cognized and implicitly acknowledged by all those who undergo this experience. Given this feature it would be wrong and confusing to accept that this experience is something about which no rational decision or identification can be made. Religious experience is said to be beyond reason in two senses which are to be specifically underlined. The first sense is the emotional sense and, as it is explained in the above paragraph, it is ineffable and beyond reason because language and reason fall short of presenting it. Second, it is acknowledged to be beyond reason because it is prior to reason or rational deliberation. This experience is not an experience of any object or phenomenon out there in space and time. Religious experience is the simplest experience of the very core of one’s subjectivity. It is the experience of one’s own self. It is an experience which is achieved in the inward journey after the layers of thought
and imagination, emotions and then instinctual drives are surpassed. Here the term inward journey is not metaphorically used. In a way it is used in a literal sense. When a person withdraws his attention from the objects of the world and concentrates on the ideas, thoughts, imaginations etc. hovering in his mind then it is really a going inward. One actually feels that from outward to inward he has entered. Further when he focuses his attention on the involuntary psychic phenomenon of emotions he actually penetrates deeper and enters more inwardly. Again when he concentrates on the pure instinctual drives of thirst, hunger etc. he enters still deeper into his being. Thus the term inward journey in this context has almost a literal sort of meaning and does not give any metaphorical meaning. However, it is not a literal journey in the sense of any journey done in the physical world. Beyond the level of instinct and drive begins the world of supra psychic and that is the beginning of the world of religion also. When someone reaches the state of consciousness in which the concentration is not on any physical or psychic object but on the very state of awareness itself then one experiences the domain of religion.

Awareness of one’s own state of being or in other words the awareness of one’s subjectivity is an actual state of awareness for the person but it is beyond time and space. Since this awareness is not of any particular object or psychic event that takes place in time therefore it is atemporal or timeless and non-spatial. This is a state of awareness which is beyond reason. It is beyond reason because it is not an inferred state achieved by rational computation. It is a state of pure awareness of one’s being only. Every rational decision or process of computation by any conscious human being presupposes his existence or being as an active centre of consciousness. It is to be noted clearly that this awareness is the presupposition of every minutest rational deliberation. This is not the conclusion or the result of any rational deliberation. In that sense this awareness exists prior to reason. It is also to be noted that even in our ordinary cognitive activities this pure subjectivity is presupposed as Kant explained it very correctly. However, in ordinary cognitive activity the awareness remains focused on the object of cognition therefore it only remains underlying as a presupposition and does not become
a state of self-awareness. When a person in search of the roots of subjectivity, fathoms his inwardness he reaches that state (after passing through the state of instinctual drives) that state of awareness which is the pure awareness of one's being. Thus for the first time one becomes self aware and passes beyond the realm of reason. That which was underlying and functioning merely as a presupposition in every cognitive activity now becomes an actual state of awareness. This is the state of awareness of myself and not that of any object or thing. The self or the pure subjectivity is prior to reason in the clear sense that it is prior to or presupposition of cognition, and that is why it is called prior to or beyond reason when it is attained as actual state of awareness. The only difference between the two ways of the self being non-rational lies in the fact that in the ordinary cognitive state this feature of non-rationality remains as a presupposition whereas in the state of pure self-awareness it is an actual state of awareness centered in the subjectivity itself.

Non-rationality of religious experience begins with the state of pure self-awareness and ends finally in realization of the connectivity of this self-awareness to the all pervasive pure consciousness. It is clear now that religious experience is non rational in the sense of its being prior to reason. It is not non-rational in the sense that reason is lost there or anything or everything could be experienced there. In a sense reason functions in this state also at its minimal as a way of realizing that “I am” or “that it is”. The person who undergoes religious experience (beginning from the first to the last) feels clearly an internal state of presence of awareness which is so fulfilling or ecstatic in its content. This feeling of absolute self contentment is actually felt in that state and as the realization of a state of self fulfillment it is recognized or individuated by reason only. In the awareness of ecstasy the individuation of the content as “ecstasy” reason is functioning. Had reason not functioned in that state at its minimal as the individuating function this state could not have been recognized and recalled later on as a state of ecstasy. That proves that reason works even in that experience as an individuating factor.

Given the above understanding it is to be taken note of that religious experience is not completely beyond sense experience. It is beyond sense
experience in a specific sense that it is prior to reason. It should not be taken as an experience where reason is completely absent. Religious experience is not a result of rational deliberations: it is prior to them.

Above clarification regarding the term “mystical experience” help in removing most of the misgivings about it especially in the context of its use as an experience beyond reason and beyond language. Although above clarification remove many of the misgivings this itself may create another misgiving about it. Although it is never stated in the above discussion that religious experience is attained by some techniques or planned process but it appears to be so. The description in the above paragraph that in the inward journey of subjectivity one has to fathom the layers of thought and imagination, emotions and then instincts and drives, gives an impression that there is a gradual process of attaining religious experience. This is not necessarily true. It is not necessarily true means that it may be achieved by some sort of gradual process but can be achieved all of a sudden just like a plunge without any gradual process. The most important feature about religious experience from the point of view of achievement of religious experience is that it can never be a result of any sort of efforts. No systematic efforts can cause or produce it as a result. The efforts made in this direction, at the most, help in creating an environment but can not generate religious experience at all. This point needs full clarification.

Religious experience, as explained in above paragraphs, is an experience of the connectivity of one’s subjectivity to an all pervasive timeless consciousness. As such efforts made in the direction of attaining it can not be that sort of effort which we do in our daily life to achieve a goal. The goals of our daily life are, ordinarily, out there placed at a temporal and spatial distance from us. When we make effort the goal is not present. It is availed in some time in future. Religious experience is not and can not be such a goal. The experience of connectivity of one’s subjectivity to an all pervasive timeless consciousness is something that is already a state of being of every individual. It is not away from the subjectivity. The subjectivity of every individual rather, is based on or dependent on that all pervasive consciousness. It is
inseparable. Therefore, there is no way to achieve or attain it in future. Thus attainment of religious experience is almost like an event of remembering what was forgotten for a long time. It cannot be compared even with any event of finding something what was lost for a long time because that was never lost in fact. Only the recognition of the truth of this connectivity is availed as a new event. There is a newness in the event of achieving this recognition since in the biography of the individual’s life this never happened earlier. In that sense it could be called a new psychic event for the individual and the term “achievement” or “attainment” also gains a kind of empirical meaning as well. The process of unlearning to shed or drop off whatever is acquired in course of social upbringing may be a gradual process and a planned procedure can be prescribed for that also. However, that is not the procedure for attaining religious experience. That is only preparing oneself to take a leap into the timeless supra-psychic realm of pure subjectivity. The recognition or remembering the connectivity of the supra-psychic subject to the all pervasive timeless consciousness can not be a matter of passing through any intermediary process. It is essentially direct, immediate and sudden. That is why it could be called a leap or plunge. One can make constant efforts to shed all that is learned but when it is done then the recognition of connectivity with the timeless consciousness emerges by itself. It is not the consequence of the efforts of dropping of all that is learned. If we look at this situation from the other side it would appear to be a situation in which the timeless supra-psychic consciousness grants recognition of the subjects connectivity to itself. This would turn out to be a situation that is called revelation. The supreme timeless all-pervasive consciousness reveals itself to the individual. It is solely on the will of that consciousness that it would or would not reveal itself. It means again that achieving the recognition of that connectivity is not at all dependent on the efforts of the individual. Religious experience, therefore, is deemed in most theistic religions as a boon granted by the grace of God himself: it is not a matter of achieving the result of some effort.

Above analysis gives us a clear understanding of what is the relation of human effort to the attainment of religious experience. An individual attains
religious experience but that attainment is not the result of his efforts. It is so because what is achieved is already achieved and the memory of this experience is not a result of any effort since it is the very feature of the process of remembering. If we forget something we also forget what we have forgotten. Forgotten thing presents itself in our awareness merely as our feeling of absence. When one tries restlessly to remember what is forgotten he tries to bring that into awareness which could fill the absence. But as we all know the efforts only put our consciousness at the state of alert to receive that and cannot actually pull in that is forgotten. Suddenly the flash of memory comes and it is recognized that this was forgotten. But the efforts of remembering cannot be called as the cause as the result of which the forgotten item is recalled. Similarly religious experience also is an experience of bringing back to one’s recognition of one’s connectivity to the timeless consciousness. As such it is not the result of the efforts made to recall or recognize it. It is important to note in this connection that normally a forgotten thing cannot be recalled if no direct or indirect effort is made to recall it. However, it happens very often that despite our best efforts to recall we fail to remember a forgotten thing and it suddenly flashes in our consciousness when we are not actively making efforts to recall it. Religious experience also happens to us mostly when active efforts are dropped. That is not achieved by any effort since it is not the result of that and comes up when the efforts are dropped. On the whole the situation can be presented as follows:

Religious experience can not be attained if no efforts are made at all, but it is not achieved as a result of any effort at all.

In the above statement the typical relation between human effort and the occurrence of religious experience is presented very clearly. Human efforts to attain the religious experience can not yield it because the very effort absorbs the awareness of the person which is required for focusing on one’s self. Thus efforts can not help in this endeavour, rather it becomes an obstruction. So long as the efforts go on the awareness gets absorbed in it and the subjectivity or the self remains only in the background. When the awareness of the person is focused fully on his subjectivity he attains religious
experience but then all efforts are ceased. However if the person has no aspiration for entering into the deeper core of his subjectivity then he is lost always in the world of externality or objectivity. Thus he passes through various types of sense experience in very many ways but never gets religious experience. Efforts, which are the manifestation of the deep aspiration to enter one’s subjectivity, are needed as an effort of withdrawing the awareness from the entire world of externality. When one succeeds in doing this one does not immediately get religious experience and may fall back to the earlier habit of engagement with the external world. Withdrawing from the world of externality is an activity with a negative intention. By this effort a person is placed in a state of self-awareness but it is so fragile that it cannot last longer and the possibility of falling back remains very high. Here comes the traditional religious instructions of concentrating on any particular religious symbol like (aum, crescent, cross etc) or a particular image of God. It gives a support to the awareness and keeps it engaged for a longer duration so that the relation of this subjective awareness to its core of all pervasive timeless consciousness could surface clearly and become the content of this subjective experience. So it is clear that religious experience is not a result of any efforts but the effort of withdrawal and the efforts of psychic concentration become necessary to attain it.

Above description and clarification about religious experience help in understanding that there is a need to present its epistemology. Religious experience is an experience of that all pervasive timeless consciousness to which every individual consciousness is deeply and inextricably connected. This is not a cognition in the sense of knowing an object separated from the subject. Yet it is very much a state of cognition in the sense that it directly and indubitably emerges in the individual’s awareness and his ignorance based identity is dispelled. This is also a cognition in the sense that historically the person avails this awareness at a particular point of time before which he was not aware of it. But apart from the two important senses of cognition this is a valid cognition since it contains a cognitive train which fulfill the essential condition of inter-subjective test. Since religious experience is very much a
human experience (although very unique) many persons attain it in every age and in every territory. Like the experiences of pain and pleasure, and heat and cold, religious experience also is a simple (in fact simplest) experience which is accessible to any normal human individual. Fulfilling the above conditions any one can attain it. Thus at any particular period of time no individual, who has attained religious experience, is in so much isolation that no one else can understand what he experienced. Most people may doubt and ridicule him because they have not attained it or they have not even interest to understand it. However, there are many people far or near who have undergone similar experience and can understand any persons religious experience as a genuine cognitive experience. Even those people who have not undergone such experience but reflect upon human subjectivity deeply also can understand that it is a valid cognitive experience. The validity of the cognitive claim regarding religious experience is not to be decided by the number of people who attained it. The validity lies in the fact that whosoever fulfills the above stated conditions of entering into the core of subjectivity, can and do attain it. They can approve about this kind of experience as a genuine cognitive experience and explain that it essentially manifests in the changed attitude of the person towards the whole life. Knowing themselves about it they can also verify (not in the strict sense) that some other person also has passed through that experience. Even a common man can notice the drastic change in the life of the person and can decide that he has passed through an actual experience which got forth that change. Doubts can never be stopped and many a doubts would be very rational too. However, as it is explained elaborately in chapter 5 these doubts do not ultimately reject the genuine cognitive nature of religious experience.

Religious experience despite being highly emotional in nature is very much a cognitive experience. It is the cognitive content and claim that separates religious experience from ordinary aesthetic experience which contain only the emotive ecstatic content in it. The ecstatic content of aesthetic experience is attached to the art object which is created by the artist that is not a reality in the strict sense but a product of imagination. The ecstatic content
of the religious experience is much deeper and intense than any aesthetic experience but it is the essence of the very core of subjectivity which is not an imaginative creation at all. The ecstasy oozing out in the religious experience is the ecstasy of being completely placed in one’s own self. In other words it is a state of perfect self fulfillment that one attains only when one is placed in the core of subjectivity. Neither the experience that “I am” is or can be imaginary at any point of time, nor can the experience that “I am connected directly to an all pervasive timeless consciousness” can be doubted. Thus being similar to aesthetic experience with respect to ecstatic content, it is dissimilar to it with respect to its cognitive content which is not and can not be an imaginative creation. The joy of aesthetic experience is gained by the experience assuming the art object as real. The ecstasy of religious experience is gained because the subject itself is the object of religious experience which can never be unreal. Despite the highly overwhelming ecstatic nature, religious experience is essentially cognitive because it is after all the experience of one’s subjectivity that has no possibility of being imaginative or unreal. In religious experience the person knows about his actual identity and it is a new knowledge for him in the sense that before attaining it he remains in the darkness of ignorance regarding himself and regarding the world as well. Given this understanding there is no reason for not accepting religious experience as cognitive experience.

The same question can be looked at in a different way. Let us suppose that there are only three categories of experience – sense experience, aesthetic experience and other sorts of experiences. The third category includes very many types of experiences which need to be classified in the specific features of cognitive or non-cognitive experiences. Sense experience, which are not illusory, can be unproblematically called cognitive experience. Aesthetic experience, on the other hand, is not a cognitive experience. The reason for putting sense experience in the cognitive category is that it gives us the knowledge of truth and is regarded as the source of knowledge. Aesthetic experience is not a cognitive experience. It is not cognitive because it does not primarily give knowledge and essentially delivers aesthetic joy. People enter
into aesthetic experience of various sorts such as poetry, music, dance etc. because it gives an inner joy. Aesthetic experience is gained not for the sake of knowing the truth. The object of a poetry or music or dance is not an object of real world extended in outer space and time. Even if the characters and events depicted in the poetry, in a song or presented in a dance form are taken from real physical world they are not the objects of that world when they become the objects of an art form. They become only an instrument of attaining an aesthetic joy which is subtle and refined and not physical at all. Religious experience has the qualities of aesthetic experience because it is overwhelmingly joyful. It fills the heart of the person with so much of joy and self contentment that no desires or passions are left in his heart at all. Yet the object that delivers this endless joy is the subjectivity itself. Therefore it is not unreal or imaginary in any sense. Self is not (and can not be) an object of the physical world. It is not extended in space out there. It is not subject to changes of time. Yet any living and conscious human being can never deny the reality of his subjectivity. It is not only a presupposition of any piece of knowledge but an actual feeling of myself that I am (or simply being). Thus the very awareness of one’s subjectivity is the proof of its existence or reality. The joy that oozes out of this experience puts the person in the highest state of ecstasy and makes it eternal because it is real or the very source of reality. Since the object from where this overwhelming joy comes out is indubitably real therefore this experience needs to be put in the cognitive category of experience. It is also to be noticed that the experience of the connectivity of my subjectivity to the all pervasive timeless consciousness is the experience of overwhelming ecstasy and there is no other way to know this deepest state of subjectivity without having the experience of this ecstasy. So it is in any case a knowledge – a cognitive experience although very different from any other form of cognitive experience.

Religious experience is to be acknowledged as cognitive experience also because it begins with a pure cognitive intention of knowing one’s self. It is not primarily an intention of getting some kind of enjoyment. It begins with
a restless search and ends only when the object of search that is one’s own self is found ultimately.

In view of the above stated reasons religious experience has to be acknowledged as a form of cognitive experience from a philosophical point of view. For a religious person who has undergone this experience its cognitivity may not be very important but from a philosophical perspective it is very important. Once it is acknowledged that religious experience is a cognitive experience (although it has ethical and aesthetic dimensions also), the epistemology of this form of experience becomes philosophically very important. In chapter 4 and 5 an outline of the epistemology of religious experience is presented so that the valid issues and problems related to it could be discussed and sorted out in detail.

Religious experience occur in the persons’ life in various forms depending upon the religious tradition he belongs to. Variations in the description of various persons religious experience may vary in forms. But the content and the essential feature of it remains one and the same, i.e. the experience of the connectivity of the subject to a timeless all pervasive consciousness. This again is a philosophical (epistemological) understanding of religious experience that enables us to see the oneness and uniqueness of this human experience. A traditional religious understanding is given to a religious person through his tradition and it may differ in description with the description of other religious persons experience belonging to a different religious tradition. Religious people who have undergone religious experience may have the wisdom to understand that what the other person of the other religion has experienced is the same or what they themselves have experienced. However this understanding is not necessarily a part of religious experience itself. Religious experience can promote the wisdom to have this kind of understanding but that is not the necessary function of religious experience. It is the philosophical (epistemological) reflection on the conditions and the content of religious experience that gives this understanding. This understanding is purely a philosophical understanding. This can not be any thing other than philosophical understanding. On the one
hand we have religious experience which is attained by a person belonging to an atheistic religious tradition like Buddhism and on the other we have the religious experience of a bhakta belonging to a religious tradition of a personal God. Both can not be seen as essentially the same kind of human experience unless looked at epistemologically. Behavioural manifestations of the two persons’ religious experience are entirely different from each other. One sits silently almost motionless and the other sings and dances almost madly. It is only the philosophical (epistemological) reflection that enables us to understand that both have reached the deepest core of the subjectivity where they find themselves connected to timeless all pervasive consciousness. The epistemological quest of religious experience is, therefore, of highest importance.