Chapter 1

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Statement of the problem regarding the cognitive nature of religious belief and its elaboration in its different aspects is the theme of this chapter. But before that some clarification about the specific use of some words in this thesis is necessary.

Clarification about use of words – The term ‘religious experience’ needs some clarification. What is being referred to in this thesis as ‘religious experience’ is what Rudolf Otto calls ‘Numinous’ or what is commonly called ‘mystical experience’. This term mystical experience is not used in this thesis because it creates so many misgivings – misgivings like it is ineffable, it is beyond rational understanding. ‘Numinous’ word wears the aura of mystery. The experience of ‘Numinous’ is a mystical experience and undue liberty is taken to make it beyond a sensible rational discussion due to its nature the use of the word ‘religious experience’ instead of ‘mystical experience’ is to stop this sort of undue advantage that is actually prone to disadvantageous for a clear understanding of this kind of experience. The ineffability of this kind of experience comes in a very specific category, but giving it the name of mystical the specific nature of that ineffability is left out of consideration. To use the term religious experience is to bring that in consideration.

Religious assertions made by a believer are the assertions of his religious belief. A belief may be both – enlightened or non-enlightened, as religious believers are of both sorts – enlightened and non-enlightened. Some people form religious belief because of their religious experience. Their belief could be called ‘enlightened belief’. On the other hand, most people borrow a belief from the religious tradition they are brought up in. Their belief could be called unenlightened belief.

Unenlightened belief is indirectly dependent on the enlightened religious belief which is formed as a result of the person’s religious experience. Thus in this thesis while the term ‘religious belief’ signifies both sorts of belief, it essentially means enlightened belief. The term ‘religious
assertions’ are, therefore, taken to mean the expressions of the enlightened believer’s belief (or simply stated ‘enlightened belief’) except for the cases where it is used especially for the ‘unenlightened belief’.

Problem Stated – Some thinkers consider religious assertions to be cognitive whereas some others interpret them as non-cognitive. Atheists, like Logical Positivists, also consider that religious assertions can’t be accepted to be cognitive since they can’t be shown to be referring to any facts of sense experience. Logical Positivists declare religious assertions as sheer nonsense on the ground that they can’t be proved to be cognitive. They, who try to prove that religious assertions are non-cognitive, with the view to show that they are meaningless, want to show the worthless-ness of these assertions. They just don’t want to give any important place to these assertions in human life. Because of this agenda (to show the worthless-ness of these assertions) they knowingly misinterpret these assertions. They don’t want to look at the cognitive import of these assertions which is implicitly present in them.

Those thinkers, who don’t dismiss religious assertions as meaningless but present their importance on some non-factual grounds such as emotional or moral, fail to notice the importance of implicit cognitive import of these assertions.

Authors who describe about the features of religious experience may not clearly state about its cognitive nature as this is not the purpose of their description. However, readers of such descriptions and subsequent authors interpret it either as a cognitive experience or as non-cognitive. Mostly the non-cognitive interpretations of religious experience are based on the acceptance that it can’t be categorized as cognitive the way publicly verifiable sense experiences are. So the precise formulation of the non-cognitive view of religious experience could be presented as follows:

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Religious experience is to be accepted (if it is to be accepted at all) as a strange non-cognitive experience because it can’t be adequately categorized with the publicly verifiably sense experience which is accepted as the paradigm of cognitive experience.

It is clear that the acceptance of publicly verifiable sense experience is the basis of putting religious experience into the category of non-cognitive experience but, ordinarily, it is not clearly noticed that this acceptance itself is based on the reason that people, generally, have no other experience to accept as cognitive experience. Beliefs formed on the basis of such sense experience helps people to predict the future course of event and to act on them safely and effectively. People don’t know (ordinarily) any other sort of experience which could give them such results. Thus verifiable sense experience is habitually accepted as the only kind of cognitive experience and beliefs formed on this basis alone are accepted as knowledge. But there is no good reason to accept that no other kind of experience is possible for human beings which could qualify to be called cognitive experience.

Thus, the part of the problem of religious experience lies in the non-acceptance of the possibility of any other experience (apart from the publicly verifiable sense experience) as a cognitive experience.

It is to be noted that the beliefs formed as a result of verifiable sense experience is as accepted to be the pieces of knowledge since accepting them and acting on them helps in predicting successfully and act safely on the future course of events which are accepted to be real in sense experience. On the same criterion a possible experience should be accepted to be knowledge (i.e. a cognitive experience) if the belief formed as its result is helpful in predicting and acting successfully and safely on the future course of those events which are accepted to be real in that experience. Very largely such a criterion could be accepted to test the

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3 Or ordinarily we live our life in the light of sense experience and all our activities in our life are governed by this experience only. However, human beings pass through other sorts of experiences also such as aesthetic experience, etc. People who pass through aesthetic experience can understand that overemphasis on sense experience with the view that it alone gives us truth, is a falsity.
cognitive feature of any experience. But it is not noticed, ordinarily, that instead of accepting this criterion it is demanded that any candidate of cognitive experience should result in the formation of those beliefs accepting which enable one to predict and act on safely and successfully on the events accepted to be real in the sense experience (not on the events accepted to be real on that experience). This is an unjust demand. A part of the problem of cognitive nature of religious experience crops up because of the failure to notice that the demand to show the ‘cognitivity’ of any experience always in sense experience is an unjust demand.

Finally a part of the problem of cognitivity of religious experience arises from the failure to notice that the practical significance of religious beliefs would be lost completely if this feature (i.e. cognitivity) is not acknowledged as its essential feature. This part of the problem is dominantly noticeable in the attempts of those authors who defend the meaningfulness of religious assertions on non-cognitive grounds.

In the postulation of the bllock theory of R. M. Hare religious beliefs get denatured, in a way. Religious beliefs are rendered as abnormal psychic state of the religious person. Then it is not a serious important matter either to be accepted to be true or to be acted on.

While Braithwaite does not think it necessary to answer the question – why does the religious person believes what he believes? Even in the cases where a believer believes in something only because he is brought up in tradition to believe that, he believes that there is some reality behind which is beyond sense experience. Braithwaite fails to see that cutting the religious belief from their ground, which is acknowledged as real, is to render them unworthy of consideration for shaping life on them.

Thus the supporters of non-cognitivist view of religious assertions don’t do justice with religious belief. Religious assertions without relating them to religious experience and acknowledging its cognitivity leaves them

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5 There is no word as “cognitivity” in English. For our present purpose to denote the cognitive nature the word cognitivity is coined.
as a matter of non-serious choice for a particular life style. No religious believer ever accepts such a position.

Religious believers, especially the enlightened ones, don’t explicitly make a claim that what they say as a matter of their belief is true also. It is trivial. Believing in anything is to believe it to be true. Although instances of belief could be sighted where this acceptance is not necessarily involved. But in religious beliefs the believer necessarily believes in the truth of his beliefs, although he may not explicitly state so. Most enlightened believers don’t want to enter into intellectual debate and prefer to avoid giving any categorical reply regarding the cognitivity of religious experience.

The fact that religious person does not take interest in making sharp distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive aspects of religious experience further aggravates the problem as religious persons do not even attempt to defend explicitly the truth content present in his experience. They do not do so (attempt to defend truths) because under the influence of ecstasy of the experience they do not find any relevance of it.

However, when one hears religious persons’ speeches and observes their lives then one does get a clear indication that what they say and do, are responses of some sort of cognition. Their consistent pursuing of a particular way of life implicitly show some adherence to a truth of a different order that these people have experienced. However, at the level of confinement of sense experience based knowledge one doesn’t have adequate ground to substantiate that. As it is already stated, this is an unjust demand.

There is an important corollary of this problem that needs to be elaborated at this juncture.

Novels and fictions give us valuable messages and also inspire us to follow them in our lives. But what they state are obviously not true. Events and character of a fiction are not true just because they are the parts of the fiction. The messages encoded in them, however, don’t lose either their importance or their possibility to be put in real life. The success of any fiction

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or literary work lies in its power of clearly conveying the desired message to its readers and to influence them actively despite their being not true in the actual history. However, attempt to maintain the importance of religious assertions as the prescription and instructions of a particular way of life through mythology are not in tune with their internal realistic import. A fiction writer knows that the characters and events of his fiction are not historically true. But the religious believer knows well that the moral code recommended in his religion is recommended only because that is in accordance with the truth that is known in the deeper awareness of reality obtained in religious experience. This is the big difference between mythology used in fiction and the mythology presented in religion. In fact this refers to the subtle but clear distinction between poetic or aesthetic experience and religious experience.

There is some similarity between Aesthetic Experience and religious experience. The person who pass through aesthetic experience gets a bliss that is typically expressed in aesthetic way only (and not by its comparison to any sensuous pleasure). So is the case with religious experience. One who passes through this experience enjoys the bliss that is expressed in religious ways only (and not by its comparison to any sensuous pleasure).

The two experiences are connected also. The aesthetic experience is seen as a limited variety of the religious experience. At times the bliss of former type is said to be the sister of that of the latter type. Yet the two experiences are not the same. The presence of a truth-content in the religious experience that implicitly operates in the assertion of religious belief separates it from the Aesthetic Experience in which the content of the experience does not form a truth-claim but operates to arouse only the aesthetic joy.

Most enlightened religious persons express their beliefs (which form in them as a result of their religious experience) in poetry. However, they don’t compose poems for the sake of literary joy. In their poems truth of a deeper level manifests. Good poetry (not written by religious person) also perform the similar function. They also reveal truths of life looked at from some deeper level of experience. But the difference between religious experience and the

7 Brahmānanda sahodarā
deeper level of experience mainly lies in the fact that the latter keeps the poet (or the writer) tied to the human concerns within their historicity whereas the former takes the persons beyond that. Poetry becomes hymns (or Mantras) when it becomes the revelation of that experience in which historicity is transcended. There is no clear demarcation between the two types of poetries in this sense but they are clearly different in the sense that the main concern in the literary poetry is historical and transcendence may either not figure at all or figures only with secondary significance, whereas in the poetry that manifests the truths of religious experience transcendence from historicity figures as the main concern.

In view of the above discussion it could be said that religious experience has a truth-content of a-historical kind whereas the poetic experience (or Aesthetic experience in general) either has no truth-contents or has a truth-content that is relevant only within the historicity of human life.

In the light of above discussion it is clear that a part of the problem of cognitivity of religious experience crops up due to the failure of recognizing it as different from Aesthetic experience. Religious experience is acknowledged to be cognitive since it contains the truth-content of the reality looked at from transcendence. Aesthetic experience may have a truth-content of a deeper vision of reality but not so deep to transcend historicity of human life completely.

A different aspect of the problem :-

As it is stated in the beginning, in this thesis religious experience refers to what is generally called Numinous Experience. Ordinarily ‘Numinous’ is understood as an experience of the presence of the divine. Thus this term bears a theistic association with it. In this thesis, however, the use of the term religious experience is not confined to theistic religious experiences only. The use of ‘religious experience’ covers in general those experiences which occur to the enlightened religious believers of non-theistic religions like Buddhism and Jainism. The experience of ‘Nirvāṇa’ as described in the Buddhist tradition or that of ‘Kaivalya’ as described in the Jain tradition also fall under religious experience. The problem of cognitivity arises with the experience of
Nirvāṇa and Kaivalya also in the same manner as it arises with religious experience of theistic variety.

The problem of cognitivity of religious experience is primarily not related to the question of the nature of its object. The problem is connected to the issues of the validity of its truth-claim, which arises due to the fact that it is a very uncommon or rare sort of experience that evades all tests in sense-experience.

**A precise formulation of the problem:**

Above discussion presents the problem of cognitivity of religious experience in all its aspects. Taking it into consideration the problem now can be reformulated in precise manner as follows:

(i) Religious experience is a genuine variety of human experience and there is no good reason to deny it.

(ii) Religious experience is to be admitted to be a cognitive experience (asserting some truth-claims, at least implicitly,) because all its practical significance would be lost if it is not admitted to be cognitive.

(ii)-a If the practical significance of religious experience is lost then all religious assertions would be reduced to mere adherence to some specific way of living without any serious reason to prefer it to the common non-religious way of life.

(ii)-b No religious believers – enlightened or unenlightened, ever admit that the preference of religious way of life to the non-religious way of life is just a matter of personal or communal choice having no serious reason behind it.

(ii)-c There is no good reason to dismiss (ii)-b without making serious effort to find its truth.

(iii) To admit the cognitivity of religious experience is to acknowledge some serious reason for preferring religious way of life to non-religious way of life.

(iv) The ‘serious reason’ has to be a cognitive reason of some sort (reason relating to valid truth-claims) and not merely pragmatic or other sorts.
The cognitive (sort of) reason for religious experience is not available at the level of sense experience. It is to be explored in some experience other than sense experience or in religious experience itself.

In a nutshell –

The problem of cognitivity is the problem of proving religious experience as a self-validating experience and also proving that it enables the person to prefer to adhere to the religious way of life (in accordance with this experience) to the non-religious way of life.

Proving that religious experience is self-validating alone is not the problem. To show that it is the serious reason to prefer the religious way of life to the non-religious way of life also is an inextricable part of the problem.