

# An Approach to The Understanding of “Religious Experiences”

**Muhammad Bagir**

Lecturer of *Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*,  
*The Islamic College Jakarta*

In the old days, theology was almost a purely internal religious matter. *Ilmu Kalam* or Islamic Theology – although this term does not fully signify the meaning of *Ilmu Kalam*, has been focusing mainly on “internal religious issues” namely; on God and His attributes, on prophethood and the characteristics of prophecy and the resurrection and other issues related to beliefs. But as time goes by and the different parts of the world come into contact with each other; not only merchandises were imported and exported but ideologies and religious beliefs were in no way excluded. With the advent of the modern era since the renaissance, it seems that all things that are religious are considered as an obstacle for the rise of humanism in the whole realm of existence. Since then, religions had been the subject of speculations and even denial.

Theology, from then on, has a bigger responsibility to prove itself worthy as a defender of religion. In doing so, it had to respond to many new issues; issues not only in relation to God or “the internal religious matters”, but issues pertaining religion itself and those in relation to the theological-epistemological foundations and its very basis; that is revelation. This has not been an easy task for the theologians because religion itself has lost its very essential foundation which is metaphysical in nature. In a sense, during the long period of respond, religion itself has been reduced to merely rituals and dry beliefs mainly situated in the psychological level of the human existence. Religion has almost lost its power to confront the persistent attacks of the

modern mind. But the spiritual or esoteric element of religion was always there to keep religion alive. Theology has been transformed by all this new issues into what is now called as “new-theology”.

One of the issues that have been the interest of the modern mind is what they have called “religious experience”. This issue has been dealt with epistemologically and also as a phenomenological matter. William James who wrote his phenomenal work entitled “the Varieties of Religious Experiences” has also given this issue much consideration from its psychological dimension.

As a phenomenon, the nature of “religious experiences” has been subjected to many discourses. There has been a lot of effort to define what it means and thus there were many definitions and even categorizations explained by many. Basically, the phenomenological aspect of “religious experiences” is to determine the relationship between “the religious experiences” with “the substance of religion”. Nevertheless, all these discourses seem to lead us to nowhere. Various theories have been presented but the discourses still continue.

In relation to this phenomenology of “religious experiences”, writers such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, William Alston, Wayne Proudfoot, Rudolph Otto, White Stace and William James, have presented quite a detail and elaborate discussion on the nature of those experiences.

On the other hand, the epistemological aspect of “religious experiences” is to consider it as the basis to affirm and justify religious beliefs. In other words, how far can “religious experiences” play the role to explain and justify religious beliefs? For example, can these religious experiences be the proofs for God’s existence.

### **What is a Religious Experience?**

The question of “religious experiences” may be approached in this way; by first realizing in a very simple manner that it is both related to man and religion. The word “religious experience” definitely explains that there is such an experience related to man and that the experience is then qualified as being religious. These questions then arise, “what kind of experience? And by what “organ” or “faculty” that man will have these experiences? And what is the object of experience that can be described as being “religious”?

The word “experience” simply means a kind of reaction which is passive in nature. When a hot water falls on a person’s hand, he will immediately react to the heat that he had experienced. In this simple example, the subject of

experience is the person, while the object of experience is the hot water, and that the person experienced heat by his sense organ of touch. This example is presented here to give us an idea of what we are going to discuss about.

## **Religious Experience and Knowledge of the Self**

The discourse on the nature of "religious experiences" should be understood after we have understood the nature of man's experience. In a way, we may say that this discourse will not be understood properly when we do not understand man. In the Islamic term, the discourses on *ma'rifat al-nafs* or "knowledge of the self" are prior to the understanding of "religious experiences". As it is known that the traditional sciences dealing with the nature and reality of man have shown us that the existence of man is multi-dimensional and that it appears with many faculties. Basically, man's existence consists of the corporeal body, the soul and the spirit. Each of these "elements" are not at the same level but represents a hierarchical existential structure. The three elements are in a way integrated in each other. And each of these elements possesses a faculty or even various faculties which through them, man may have a kind of existential connection with objects or entities outside his "microcosmic existence".

Man's corporeal body is equipped with senses by which he can have sensorial experiences. Seeing with the eye, listening with the ears, touching with the skin, smelling with the nose and tasting by the tongue gives man all these sensorial experiences. Of course, it is logical to say that the object of such sensorial experiences is the physical world itself which contains sights, sounds, scents and others. In other words, man will have sensorial experiences through their sense organs and in the phenomenal realm.

At a deeper level, man has a soul, which is more subtle than the body. The soul possesses many faculties, such as the mind (in its very wide sense includes the imagination, memory, reason, and even intuition), emotions and desires. The experiences of the soul bear something deeper than what we see in the sensorial experiences. A person may just simply see an object, and he may experience happiness. For example when a person sees someone whom he recognizes as his mother, he may feel happy or the experience of joy when he understands a difficult mathematical problem.

The soul is actually a vast dimension of the inner side of the human existence. It is not only deeper than the physical dimension, but also more

subtle and vast. This means that it has a wider range of experiences compared to the physical sensorial experiences. Thus, the soul is subjected to these experiences through various faculties of the soul in the realm of the soul.

Finally, there is the spirit, which is the deepest level of the human existence. We will deal with this later, for now we propose to deal with the soul, for we believe that the religious experiences begin from and occur within the soul. In a sense, we can say that the human soul is the realm of religious experiences.

### **Religious Realities; to Be or Not to Be**

The question for now is that what makes an experience religious? But the question becomes more complicated if it was asked is there really an object which is qualified as religious? Or is it the human subject that considers the object he perceives to be religious? In other words, is the human subject experiencing something that is substantially religious? Or is he experiencing something that he considers to be religious? The former implies that a religious experience is an objective reality while the latter implies that a religious experience is only a relative experience without having a reality which is substantially religious. It is religious only because the human subject considers it to be religious. So, is there such a reality or realities that are religious?

To deal with this question, we propose that we contemplate on the word “*religio*”. The word “*religio*” in Latin simply means “to bind”, but of course it means that religion binds man to God or the Reality of a higher order. The Reality or these transcendent realities are in fact the content of religion. Thus they can be correctly known as religious realities. Without God, there will be no religion or at least religion will be meaningless. Therefore, anything related to God will be a religious reality. In fact, there is not a single existent that is not related to God. Nonetheless, not all man is aware of this. The moment a person becomes aware of God and how everything is related to Him, that is the moment he is having a religious experience, but however we consider this in its very general sense.

Philosophy and theology in their own way have been able to prove the existence of “religious realities”. Philosophy on its part, has given us a conceptual understanding of religious realities, while theology teaches us the meaning of having belief to those realities and also provides proofs to justify them. Religion in its turn gives us the experience of those realities by binding the human existence with those realities. Religion through beliefs, rituals and

morality puts man into the domain of experience.

### **The Three Views on "Religious Experiences"**

There are at least three views in relation to the nature of "religious experiences"; they are (Peterson 13-26): (1) a religious experience is a kind of emotional experience (2) a religious experience is a kind of sensorial experience (3) a religious experience is an explication of a supernatural experience.

The first view has been presented by Friedrich Schleiermacher. A religious experience is not cognitive but more of emotions and feelings. It is a feeling of being totally related or connected to a source that is not of this world. It is feelings and is independent from concepts and understandings, even from religious creeds and rituals. Religious creeds and rituals are a posteriori from these experiences. In fact, those religious creeds and rituals are interpretations of the experiences for the very reason that the experiences are a priori to concepts. In other words, man will first experience and then he interpret the experiences into beliefs and rituals.

The second view came from William Alston. According to him, a religious experience is similar to a sensorial experience because it shares three common elements with the sensorial experience. There are three elements in a sensorial perception; the subject who perceives, the object of perception and perception itself. A religious experience also contains these three elements; the subject who experiences, God as the object of experience and the appearance of God for the person who is having the experience.

The third view is from Proudfoot (Peterson 20-22). Proudfoot's idea of religious experience may be understood through these points:

- a) There are two things in a sensorial experience; external cause and awareness to the external phenomena. This external cause is actually the cause for the experience in the subject. In other words, a sensorial experience related to an external object will cause the appearance of an experience within the subject. When a person sees a table, this sensorial experience implies two things; that the table exists and that this table is the cause for the experience of seeing in the person. If there was no table, then the person would not have any experience. If apparently he experiences something, then that experience is actually nothing more than just an illusion.

- b) The consequence of the first point is that the object of experience must have existence. Otherwise it would not be an object of experience and there would not be an experience. This assumption only narrows the dimension of experience. Therefore an experience should be considered from the view of the subject that is having the experience. An experience is considered religious from the point of view of the experiencing subject means that he believes that a naturalistic explanation of his experience is incorrect, and a correct explanation will be an explanation based on his religious beliefs. Hence there are two things that are considered here; a 'naturalistic explanation' and a 'supernatural explanation'. The former does not make an experience become "religious", instead the latter is that which qualifies the experience as being religious. A naturalistic explanation is based on natural factors such as psychological, biological, physical and or sociological. But a supernatural explanation is based on supernatural factors such as an immaterial existence. Therefore, an experience is qualified as being religious from the point of view of the experiencing subject in the sense that the person who experiences does not accept a natural explanation but believes that his experience has a supernatural explanation (Ali Reza 43-46).

### **Another approach on religious experiences**

In Islamic philosophy especially in the *al-Hikmat al-Muta'aliyah* and also Sufism, the transcendent realities are projected in different levels and modes of existence. From the spiritual-immaterial to the "imaginal" (i.e. the *barzakh* as it is understood in Islamic philosophy and mysticism) and finally to the corporeal realm. Man is able to be aware of all the different levels by a faculty that corresponds to the different realms. Of course, through his senses he may have sensorial experiences of the corporeal projection of the transcendent realities. And through various faculties of his soul, he may have a more inner experience of the realities. His experiences are not only sensorial but also of the soul. The different levels determine the distinctions amongst the experiences. The moment he realizes that all the projected realities that he is experiencing is existentially related to God as the Ultimate Reality, then he is said to have a religious experience. Otherwise, it would simply be either a sensorial experience or an experience of the soul.

This approach seems similar to Proudfoot but in fact it is different. For Proudfoot a religious experience depends on the point of view of the subject

who is experiencing, in the sense that the subject considers the cause of his experience is of a supernatural order. In other words, the subject who is having the experience interprets the experience based on a series of religious concepts and beliefs in relation to supernatural matters.

An experience is qualified as being religious mainly on the point of view of the subject of experience who interprets it. A religious experience is a matter of interpretation, thus it is within the domain of "knowledge by correspondence" (or *al-'ilm al-busuli* in Islamic philosophy). While what we are proposing here is that a religious experience is not merely a matter of interpretation, but it is of "experiencing" a presence that presents Himself to the subject. Due to the subject's level of awareness, he may not be in a level where he could realize clearly what he is experiencing, and therefore he may need a person who has this spiritual awareness to explain to him what it is that he is experiencing. That person's explanation is not based on interpretation but of consciousness that is of "knowledge by presence" (or *al-'ilm al-buduri* as it is known in Islamic philosophy). This knowledge is a mystical consciousness. It is a deeper level, a level even beyond the soul, which is the spirit, at a level when the spirit realizes and becomes aware of the transcendent realities and finally the Ultimate Reality, man no longer experiences but returns to his Divine Origin. It is not without significance that religions have not used the term "experience" to signify this spiritual state. Instead religions have been using terms such as "awakening" and "gnosis" or "annihilation" and others which are the almost English equivalents of traditional terms.

### **The Mystical and the Religious**

The mystical level is the level of awareness and consciousness. It is not in contrast with the religious experience. It is actually a deeper level of religious experience. It is where the divine in the human that is the heart meets the Divine that is the God. It may happen in a same prayer such as invocation, but a religious experience is only at the sensorial level and at most the level of the soul. While the mystic in his invocation attains awareness of the Divine in a much deeper level.

The deeper is the consciousness the more vivid it will be. This consciousness leaves no room for any kind of interpretations. The subject is in union with the object. This is a mystical consciousness.

Finally, I would conclude that a religious experience would be justified and interpreted by a mystical consciousness. It reminds us of a tradition where one of the Prophet's companions by the name of Al-Harithah from the Ansaris came to the prophet and exclaimed; "I have become a true *mu'min* this morning!" to this claim the Prophet responded: "All truths have a reality. Hence, what is the reality of your faith?" Harithah replied: "I have detached myself from the world and everything in it, thus for me the stone and the gold of the world is the same. And it is as if I see the people of heaven in heaven visiting each other, and the people of hell in hell helping each other. And it is as if I see the throne of my Lord so clearly!" the Prophet affirmed him and said: "You have attained, therefore commit!"(al-Kulayni 2:54; Syaikh Shaduq 187).

In conclusion, I would say that religious experiences should be understood in the light of mystical consciousness which is metaphysical in nature. And yet, this conclusion is only a conclusion of this article. There is still room for more elucidations.



## **Bibliography**

“Tajrebeye deeniy va gowhare deen” (translated as ‘The Religious Experience and the Substance of Religion’), ‘Ali Reza Qaimi Niya, p 36.

Peterson, Michael , William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach and David Bassinger.  
*Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Oxford 1991.

Alston, William P. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993.

Al-Kafi, al-Kulayni, v 2, p 54 and Ma’aniyu l-akhbar, Syakh Saduq, p 187.