

CONTEXTUALIZING THE TERM ‘RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE’ IN THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE¹

Dr.Şaban Ali DÜZGÜN

Department of Theology,
Divinity Faculty of Ankara University, Turkey

ABSTRACT *In this paper, rather than taking ‘religious experience’ as a defined and well established term or category, we will focus on that which makes any experience ‘religious’ or ‘theological’. In this context, the term ‘religious experience’ will be predicated to awareness of God’s presence and activity, which will protect us from any imaginative God-vision and God-doctrine. So any imagination which will create some internal feelings such as awe, joy, etc. could find its roots in this presence and activity. The core of this religious experience is constructed by God via these realms, i.e. God functions in human thought through His presence and activity. This is the context we use religious experience as opposed to any imagination independent of this experienced realm. In our attempt to embed experience into theology, we do not try to reduce theology completely into experience, rather we intend to give experience a theological meaning. So, it is not consistent to justify an understanding which tries to reduce theology completely to concrete experience, which in the end creates a closed universe which leaves no window to the observer whatsoever to look through beyond himself and the universe he observes. This pure physical ontology has nothing to do with theology which yearns to consider every observed phenomenon as a cue of theistic reality (sign/âya) to look through beyond it.*

Preliminary Remarks

To bring ‘religious experience’ and ‘theology’ together might arouse some legitimate and significant thoughts in mind. Before we move on the context we use and the meaning we attribute to religious experience, it seems plausible first to analyse them respectively.

One thought to be incited in mind might seem to develop a new theological argument besides the classical ones. If this is the case, then why an additional basis and what is more the most equivocal and questionable one is needed for theology?

As is well known, in its classical structure, theology acted like science in gathering data, formulating concepts and general relationships, creating and using hypotheses and lastly deductive application of generalizations and hypotheses to particular situations.¹ As the science put a gap between observer and observed in order to secure the procedure and results, so did theology by forgetting its main task of bridging the gap between the two through the theological language which must conceive and conceptualize the phenomena in empirical level on the one hand and pursuit the deeper level that comes through looking beyond the obvious first projection of these images. And also in this structure all phenomena, i.e. experienced face of Being were considered purely as evidences of God. Nobody did attribute to these phenomena a meaning which finds its place deep down in the soul of the believer besides rational/logical and empirical demonstration of God. In this new sense, experience of this phenomenal world is more than an experimental observation in its detached form, as experience theologically requires to participate in it, to be part of it, not to detach from it. Accordingly such existential new concepts as death, suffering, internal conflict, failure and cognitive ones as intuition or

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total consciousness will be used in theological context so that our reason, intellect and faith will become operative. In short, in this new context, theology in addition to its commonality with science in their 'hypothetico-deductive' reasoning, considers experience as a ground for asserting God's *reality*, gives individual a *meaning* and maintains an ongoing *relation* between them.

Another thought to be incited by putting these two terms together comes forth in rejecting all theological evidences and taking religious experience as a unique basis for religion and theology as in F. Schleiermacher's case. Referring to religious experience as a theological basis and leaving other metaphysical, ethical evidences and ecclesiastical authority aside,² Schleiermacher brought religious experience forth to correlate experience, faith and understanding, which is a retrieval of Anselmian tradition:

“Nor do I seek to understand [*intelligere*] in order that I may believe [*credere*], but believe in order that I may understand. For he who does not believe does not experience [*experietur*], and he who does not experience, does not understand.”³

By shifting from classical hermeneutics which relied on the literal meaning of the Scriptures and the transcendent spiritual realities to which they refer, Friedrich Schleiermacher created a kind of hermeneutics of experience which excludes every authority, church or Scripture. By excluding these authorities, F. Schleiermacher became the paradigmatic figures of modern and liberal approach to relate theology to its grounding in human subjectivity. In this approach intrinsic evidence or personal experience determines how to believe and what to count as the binding source and authority no longer resolves issues of identity; instead, subjective experience determines what counts as an authority.⁴ As Jürgen Habermas has noted, in modernity “religious life, state, and society, as well as science, morality, and art are transformed into just so many embodiments of the principle of subjectivity”⁵ and Schleiermacher was a prominent pioneer of this tendency.

In the forthcoming pages, the relation among *experience*, *faith* and *understanding* will be dealt with and Schleiermacher's emphasis on these elements will be justified with a difference that the meaning we attribute to experience has a wide range scope including rational and discursive reasoning based on external world not just internal one. This external realm of reference has no any serious meaning in Schleiermacher's system of “existential consciousness.” He sees this external realm as a means of *excessive* rationalization of “essences,” “natures,” “reasons,” and “deductions” in the hand of metaphysics. Although we are completely in the same line in his judgment of metaphysics,⁶ his claim that “religion's essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling”⁷ might amount to new problems such as negation of events/history as an echo of theological thinking.

I. THE GROUND FOR AND MEANING OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

In general, “religious experience” is defined as an awareness of Being or of “being itself”, as distinct from experiences of things whose reality depends upon and expresses it. Gabriel Marcel writes of God as that ‘Absolute Being’ which is ‘rebellious to descriptions’ but can be given ‘as Absolute Presence in worship’.⁸

Another understanding of religious experience is represented by those who hold that its authentic form is the experience of the *absence of God*. Although those advancing this view are usually vague about what would constitute experience of the presence of God, they are convinced that people today are aware of God's non-presence; it is like the positive absence of someone who is desired to be present and so is missed, not the vague non-presence of what, like a unicorn, has never been present. Buber writes of it as a sense of ‘the eclipse of God’.⁹

We take religious experience as a kind of *perception* in which even heart is considered as a perceptive organ. In this meaning, the mundane world of physical bodies, physical processes, and narrow centers of consciousness are not the whole or ultimate reality. To contextualize this experience religiously or theologically, ordinary physical bodies and processes, in addition to their empirical interpretation, need to be interpreted rationally and intuitively. This rational and intuitive character of outer world will pave way to unseen world or metaphysics.

Whatever its conclusions, most arguments from religious experience employ an analogy between religious experience and our ordinary experience of the world. Just as perceptual experience justifies our beliefs about the material world around us, religious experiences warrant beliefs about the divine or sacred. The argument is thus *a posteriori* as opposed to *a priori*. The term '*numinous*' is used to describe this experience. This experience of God may or may not involve sensations, but it refers principally to a kind of sensing, perceiving, or apprehending of God. Keith Yandell writes:

“A standard term for alleged experience of God is *numinous* experience, and its classic characterization goes something as follows. The subject, on the one hand, has a sense of being in some manner in the presence of a being who at least seems to have certain properties; on the other hand, the subject has certain responses to this sense of being in the presence of a being who at least seems to have these properties. The former is the core of the experience; the responses are conditioned by, or are functions of, the at least apparent existence of a being who seems worthy of attention.”¹⁰

In a numinous experience, *a person seems to apprehend a divine reality independent of oneself*. Subsequent experiences of, say, the desire to worship, venerate, delight in or fear the object of experience follow from this prior experience of what is assumed to be the reality of the divine.¹¹

On the other hand, religious experience, sensory or numinous, needs a language or rhetoric in general to be conveyed to others, and it may be supposed that this theological language is largely grounded upon and develops directly out of this kind of “religious experience.” This view is an expression of the notion that all our language and thought is rooted in experience and is essentially the articulation and interpretation of experience.¹² To understand theological language, we must locate and describe that particular domain of human experience, or those special qualities of experience, which is grounded upon and expressed. In order to be able to unearth this pretheological basis of theology a scrupulous phenomenological study should be carried out, thus we can come into a position to see how theological terms and concepts are created and shaped; and we should be able to develop criteria for assessing the adequacy of those notions we have inherited from the tradition, criteria that will also assist us in reformulating and reconstructing them to serve more adequately in the contemporary situation.

II. DIFFERENT MODES AND INTERPRETATIONS OF EXPERIENCE

To make any experience religious or theological, two concepts are to be kept in mind: *awareness* and *aim/telos*. To create awareness with an aim/telos, all cognitive and prescriptive faculties such as senses, reasoning, imagination, contemplation, understanding, judging and deciding must be activated. Although this procedure has many cognitive parts such as experiential, intellectual, rational, etc., it is essentially a unified whole, and only this *holistic structure* can have a meaning in theology. Just imagination or sense data or pure reasoning can not give us a frame which is meaningful theologically. So imagination, for instance, can be taken theologically only if it is also subjected to rational and intellectual analysis. Otherwise it is just an imagination which theology has nothing to do with. In order to make these cognitive elements theologically meaningful and operative, we have to put them in a web of cognitive

relations which support one another. As a result of this relations, our paradigm/worldview gains a theological color and affects our perception of things, and the power of this perception increases or decreases one's faith or makes him/her more or less enlightened.

With these aspects, religious or theological experience has different modes and dimensions:

II.a. Cognitive Dimension of Experience: The Problem of Representation

An important point in religious experience is its *cognitive* or *communicative* side, lack of which will in the last analysis lead to sheer agnosticism and scepticism. If we said that nothing in our language can speak of God in a way that gives us any knowledge of God, then all theologians could only, at best, be agnostic. As God has revealed himself to and through His creatures, which constitutes the basis of this communication, any kind of agnosticism is impossible theologically. When tackling cognitive or communicative side of religious experience, we use *cognition* as the experience of knowing which includes *perception*, *recognition* and *reasoning* as distinguished from experience of feeling, and cognitive nature of experience is the unique way of sharing it with others and forming a common language and culture around it, and theology needs and employs concepts, ideas, metaphors, symbols, grammar, in short a rhetoric in this communication.

Theology uses *reason/ratio or logos* and *intellectus or nous* to interpret experience cognitively. *Reason/ratio or logos* is used to signify human capacity of reasoning, the power of logical discourse and of assemble evidences and draw conclusions from them. It is a capacity, without which man would not be man, for it is only by its exercise that we obtain information about the surrounding world, and are able to foresee consequences. On the other hand, ratio itself would be useless if it were the only thought-function we could perform. Equally necessary is the capacity to grasp a complex of related terms intuitively, in a single glance, as constituting a whole. This capacity of grasping a structured whole is called in Latin *intellectus* and in Greek *nous*; the English equivalent is often 'understanding'. *Intellectus* and *ratio*, mutually dependent and playing into one another's hand, together constitute the thinking capacity of man.¹³

However, how communication is possible, how human modes of cognitive expression are capable of being meaningful at all and similar questions need answering. This can also be seen as the problem of representation, i.e. the extent which communication or interpretation represents what is experienced. Let's put it to the questions:

As there is no uninterpreted experience, is it possible to put a clear-cut distinction between experience and its interpretation? As the observer uses *his* own historical and cultural codes to transmit his experience, he can transmit it within a limited linguistic framework and this will make it a *sui generis* one, which is not very easy to claim that it clearly and undoubtedly represents what he conceives or experiences.

Because experience has interpretation in its very basis, and "understanding is always interpretation"¹⁴ religious experience will accordingly be *a kind of* interpretation of internal or external reality through which a faithful discloses his inner feelings. So, in terms of religious experience this external reality does not necessarily create feelings of awe, reverence or orientation within us, i.e. they do not have 'attention-directing' function in themselves. Cultural or given religious presuppositions condition any interpretive process. Before our observation of this phenomenal realm we have in our mind our respective paradigms to see this reality 'as' or to interpret it 'as'. In order to underline this point, different models of experience have been put forward such as 'seing as' (L. Wittgenstein and later J. Wisdom), 'experiencing as' (J. Hick), and 'interpreting as' (I. Barbour).¹⁵

In our experience of the phenomena or images we first see the figure in empirical or experiential level, and then we conceive it in a deeper level that comes through looking beyond the obvious first projection of the image. This *second experience* requires our *will* and *consciousness* of the fact that there might be different faces of the reality than it appeared to us first.

It seems that a difference is to be put between these categories which seem on the face of it to serve to the same aim. 'Seing as' or 'experiencing as' are categories that find their roots in our ontic structure and there is no way of getting rid of them. That means, to experience or to see "a tuft of grass as a rabbit in the twilight" can easily be corrected by seing it otherwise or sometimes reasoning helps in these situations. However, 'interpret as' is more than an ontic one, it also involves our cognition, evaluation, and most importantly our will. So, if we are to speak about an encounter with God which involves one's whole personality and total life, this is so because he intentionally and consciously interpret it so and accordingly create a model to follow. The summons Qur'an made to human beings to direct their attention to created world, to mountains, to stars even to camel is a kind of '*second experience*' which involves this interpretation and categories it uses in this process are cognitive ones such as reasoning/*ta'qqul*, thinking/*nazar*, *dirayah*, etc., all of which make this process theological as different from former ones and render it totally ours.

The first experience of external world functions mostly as a veil between God and man. In order to make this ordinary experience of external world religious or theological, one must go beyond it, rethinking or gaining a second experience as we call it. This is stated in a Qur'anic verse:

"It is not given to any human being that God should speak to him unless (it be) by Inspiration, or from *behind a veil*, or (that) He sends a Messenger to reveal what He wills by His Leave. Verily, He is Most High, Most Wise."¹⁶

It is not very easy to conceive that there is a kind of *hierarchy of experiencing* in the phenomenal world and to try to transcend beyond this concrete and tangible experience of the world. When one with his contemplation and rereading the universe succeeds in transcending this tangible phenomena, he is led into an increasingly rich and profound understanding of all that the universe can yield him – until in the end, he suddenly break through to see it as a language of God's expression. Out of such experience, one is led to reconsider the nature and develop consciousness which apprehends the universe supplying the material of apprehension, and it is that which yields to us a '*spiritual vision*', a particular way of seeing the universe and ourselves within it as derived from God and related to him. To this approach without this 'spiritual vision' or total consciousness of being either the pure empiricism and rationalism or agnosticism will dominate over us.

Epistemologically rationalism and empiricism have been problematic for theology in considering this *hierarchy of experience*. These both by claiming only 'reason' or 'sense data' to unveil the reality created reductionism and thus destructed the unity and harmony in Being and led to foundationalism, which considers only one single faculty of man as the real discoverer of the reality. This reductionism, in addition to theology, has caused problems in social and even in exact sciences. Ignoring human capacity of *intellect=nous*, capacity of grasping a complex of related terms intuitively as constituting a whole, rationalism concentrated on reason or *ratio=logos*, the power of reasoning or ratiocination or logical discourse, and so by bringing forth only one facet of understanding reality, it destructed human integrity. This one faced rationality had been transformed into a system of criteria to value and judge others including theological propositions, and accordingly every thing which had nothing with rational or logical reasoning was rejected.

In order not to confine the parameters to a closed continuum of cause and effect, that is to go beyond this chain of cause-effect and to make room for metaphysical interpretation of being muslim mystics relied on *intuition*, while muslim theologians rested upon *reason*. But it seems more plausible to use *cognition* to reconcile these two approaches, as it implies both reason and intuition in perceiving beings. This cognition besides analogical reasoning and discursive observation of experienced realm, brings forth emotional and mysterious sides of being and thus creates a holistic perception as it is pretty much emphasised in the following quotation:

“The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed. This insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness...”¹⁷

These challenges in bridging the gap between experience and its clear communication and representation seem to have led some thinkers to agnosticism and scepticism on the one hand, and to develop a personal/existential and ethical approach toward religion and religious experience on the other. This scepticism and agnosticism can be seen in Sextus Empiricus’s book *Against the Dogmatists*, Al-Ghazâlî’s *al-Munqiz min al-Dalâl*, Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*, Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, Martin Buber’s *I and Thou* and *The Knowledge of Man*, and many more. It seems to these thinkers that there is an experience which contains more than could be said, and what could not be said is as important as what could be said in experience.

To see the possibility of representation, the concepts of ‘otherness’ as an *ontological category* and ‘communication or intercourse’ as *cognitive* ones are of vital importance for our analysis. It sounds that the existentialist theologians when dealing with *experience* have in their mind the word ‘totally other’, but difficulties in its possibility to communicate with us i.e. ‘intercourse’ poses them a difficulty to be overcome. Despite references to the totally other and our aspiration to make this dialogue come true, his being unrepresentable, that about whom ‘we know nothing’ and ‘the wordless anticipation (*Vorgestalt*) of saying Thou’, causes them to represent this ‘totally other’ only in an ontological level.¹⁸

This tendency can easily be seen in M. Buber’s I-You relation which totally excludes any communication, i.e. revelation. The revelation of God is no longer seen to be primarily propositions of statements. God is said to be one who is always a subject in relation to us. He is not an object of knowledge, but one who is known only in encounter.¹⁹ The word ‘dialogue’ Buber uses to show the relationship between God and man gives the clues of his approach. To him, we are not *in a dialogue* (emphasis is mine) but ‘we are dialogue’ (*Wir “sind” ein Gespräch*).²⁰ The distinction between ontological and ontic that ensures this dialogue and communication has no any meaning whatsoever in Buber, rather he combines them. Dialogue is something to live within and to ‘be aware of a thing or a being’ that is, ‘to experience it as a whole ... in all its concreteness’.²¹

The same agnosticism can also be seen in muslim thinkers, which is hardly the same as that of contemporary existential theologians and philosophers like M. Buber, G. Marcel and Karl Jaspers.²² By adding that God discloses himself outside world and that the world of nature is best, clearest and most universal evidence for the knowledge of Him, muslim thinkers try to escape from agnosticism and scepticism as in the case of al-Ghazâlî. Let’s follow it from Fazlur Rahman:

“Fundamentally, al-Ghazâlî affirmed an agnosticism about the ultimate and absolute nature of God and maintained that He was knowable only in so far as He was related to and revealed Himself to man. This revealed and relational nature of God is constituted by the Divine Names and Attributes.”²³

The same line can be traced in Ibn ‘Arabî:

“In whatever situation you are, either on earth or air, know it or not, think it or not, you are under Divine Names. These names are that which determine your movement and stand still, your contingency and existence. And this name says ‘I am God’, and it tells the truth. Considering that, you are supposed to say *Allah Akbar*/God is greater... . Know for sure that Divine Being does not show himself to you as He is, but under one of these Divine Names. As this is the case, you will never know what the name God means.”²⁴

Similarly after trying to develop a model of communication, Wittgenstein turned out to realize that a unique model for this task is unsatisfactory and developed such concepts as ‘*language games*’, ‘*meaning as use*’ and ‘*form of life*’, which put emphasis more on existential, ethical and practical sides of this experience to enable any meaningful communication. This means that a person who can understand and use language can do so only because he or she participates (at least to some degree) in a form of life. Within human life, there are many forms, and the meaning or use of some words are to be understood by a knowledge or understanding of a form of life. Religious language has its place in a form of life to which particular individuals may or may not have access. In order to have access to this language, one has to get an understanding of a form of life.²⁵

Religion and religious literature have undoubtedly a distinct place within these forms of life and the language representing it. This distinctiveness shows itself in the very first experience of the prophets when they experience *wahy/revelation* in whatever forms it is. This completely different experience needs a process to be conceived and understood clearly both by the prophet and the faithfuls. As an example of this can be given the Prophet Muhammad’s case when he first conceived the archangel Jibrîl/Gabriel. Until Waraqa b. Nawfal who thoroughly had information about Holy Bible explained to him that it was *Namus/nomos* that also appeared to the previous prophets, he had no any idea about it whatsoever, and he was just speechless, let alone any communication. This case means that one must in advance have labels or concept to adhere to the experience, otherwise it would be impossible to make it the subject of any communication.

The cases which language is incapable of representing is of course not confined to religious life. Many times such human inner feelings as inadequacy, incompetency, etc. create a distinct form of life and requires a different language to be represented. This diversity can only represent the life with its holistic structure if we are to talk about a representation.

II.b. Experience As a Ground for The Reality of God

To claim religious experience as a ground for the *reality of God* has more challenges than to claim it as a meaningful source for one’s individual and communal life. To be a ground for reality, it must have a definite and clear knowledge of some kind. What is said about God by reference to outer world or to our personal feelings are analogical, metaphorical or symbolic. In this case, how do these concepts give us the certainty to use as the ground for God’s reality? And also, is it possible to infer anything more than the universe itself, which is simply being experienced, read or interpreted in a particular way? As God does not present himself for

observation as an object among objects, how could we conclude some analytic or verifiable propositions depending on this experienced realm?

It seems that to enable communication and to certify our knowledge, it is taken for granted that there is a preceding *reality* from which our cognitive faculties deduce some knowledge, which develops an ontological basis both for individual and his knowledge of himself and of God and around which many *sui generis* forms of life are developed. Of course, what lies in the background of this understanding would appear to be a metaphysic of the individual and of his life process, which combine his awareness of his own relations, which lead on to an awareness of the Divine. In this form of relations, to be is always to be with and to know always to know something and to be aware is always to be aware of something, and this feeling puts humankind within a web of relations and creates both existential and prescriptive, i.e. ethical ground for being.

One way of handling this cognitive element in theology is to say that such is the *sine qua non*, that without which one can not even begin. To affirm God's reality and to make that a matter of one's own concern is to step within the theological circle. This alone makes theologizing possible. Some theologians also talk even more vaguely about "*being preceding knowledge*". That is, they resort to the ancient Parmenidean notion that any talk rests upon the prior recognition of reality. One cannot think (or talk) about non-being. Discourse presupposes being, or the intuition of being is antecedent to any speculation about it.²⁶

In this sense, one finds a strong suggestion that this ground is direct and immediate. It is as if an awareness is born in consciousness. In this sense, religious experience is defined as the consciousness of 'Absolute Being'. This Absolute Being resists all definitions, but shows himself in prayer with His Absolute presence.²⁷ As John Baillie writes:

"The witness of all true religion is that there is no reality which more directly confronts us than the reality of God. No other reality is nearer to us than he. The realities of sense are more obvious, but his is the more intimate, touching us as it does so much nearer to the core of our being."²⁸

In this sense Paul Tillich, for instance, takes this immediateness a kind of experience and calls it *ecstasy*²⁹ (*intuition*) which classically has been a word referring to a way of gaining real knowledge without benefit of such mediative functions as reasoning and teaching.

As for the certainty of this knowledge, it seems that Tillich, for instance, considers it in its classical meaning as self-certifying. It would seem that the ground for this claim was that ability to say something literal about an experienced reality implies encounter with something genuinely real, even if the language has meaning for only a limited group. Since the statements are symbolic, their exact meaning will everlastingly be hidden, as in the case of a painting or poetry. Tillich takes this reality as a matter of experience and attributes to it a kind of cognition (in the sense of perception and awareness in this context), but contends that nothing literal can be said about it:

"Something more is known of the mystery after it has become manifest in revelation. First, its reality has become a matter of experience. Second, our relation to it has become a matter of experience. Both of these are cognitive elements. *But revelation does not dissolve the mystery into knowledge.*"³⁰

The "cognitive elements", according to Tillich, are to be understood as coming to exist in the consciousness of living person. Deep personal inadequacy and dependence seems the basic motive in this preference.

In these assessments a kind of *cognition* rather than *knowledge* is emphasised and the bases it rests are determined as ‘consciousness’, ‘awareness’ and ‘web of relations’. Although these are completely true, one important cause seems to be ignored. To activate this ‘consciousness’ and ‘awareness’ and to develop this ‘web of relations’ and to make them general grounds for all, some more objective ground is to be searched for. This ground will to some extent bridge the gap between totally other being, namely God, and humans so that we can overcome the negative ontology and agnosticism. This can be done by rendering God *intelligible* or *cogitable* to humans in a way. But how?

As the religion has the very concept of revelation (*wahy: disclosure*) in its basis (be it in (1) oral or written communication as in the case of heavenly books tradition, or (2) as in God’s revealing himself through His creatures, that is His self-disclosure as signs and symbols in general, or (3) as His showing his living face in historical events), it is experimental* and as it takes humans’ ontic, epistemic and emotional integrity into account, it has an anthropological basis. With this basis, revelation, with its various forms, is open to humans’ experience. As humans are equipped with this ontic, epistemic and emotional integrity to experience, to cognize and to know, there has been and will be an ongoing and fruitful interaction between them. In order to secure this interaction on a wide scale, human subjects are equipped not only with one cognitive element but many as mentioned in the Qur’an such as *qalb/heart*, *fuâd/inner heart*, *sadr/breast*, *lubb/innermost heart* in addition to their *aql/ reason* and *nazar/ intellect*. With these faculties, “human beings are therefore by necessity *homo hermeneuma*, interpreters of signs. And human language, *par excellence*, illustrates the grammar of these signs within which we are caught.”³¹

These self-disclosures must occur in a manner which *corresponds* to human understanding. Hence we may speak of *modes* of Divine Self-disclosure, and it follows that the criterion for their adequacy is the degree to which they actually correspond to the process of *human* understanding. So the most adequate mode of God’s Self-disclosure to man must necessarily be the *human* mode.³²

But we are caught by a paradox here which is triggered by two kinds of Qur’anic verses, abundant in number. One kind sees absolute Being something beyond and above all human conceptions and references:

“Your Lord is holier than the qualities which they ascribe to Him.”³³

The other kind attributes the title *knowledge* to revelation which includes *written text*, *signs/symbols* in external world and *events* in history, all of which are supposed to increase our experience of God:

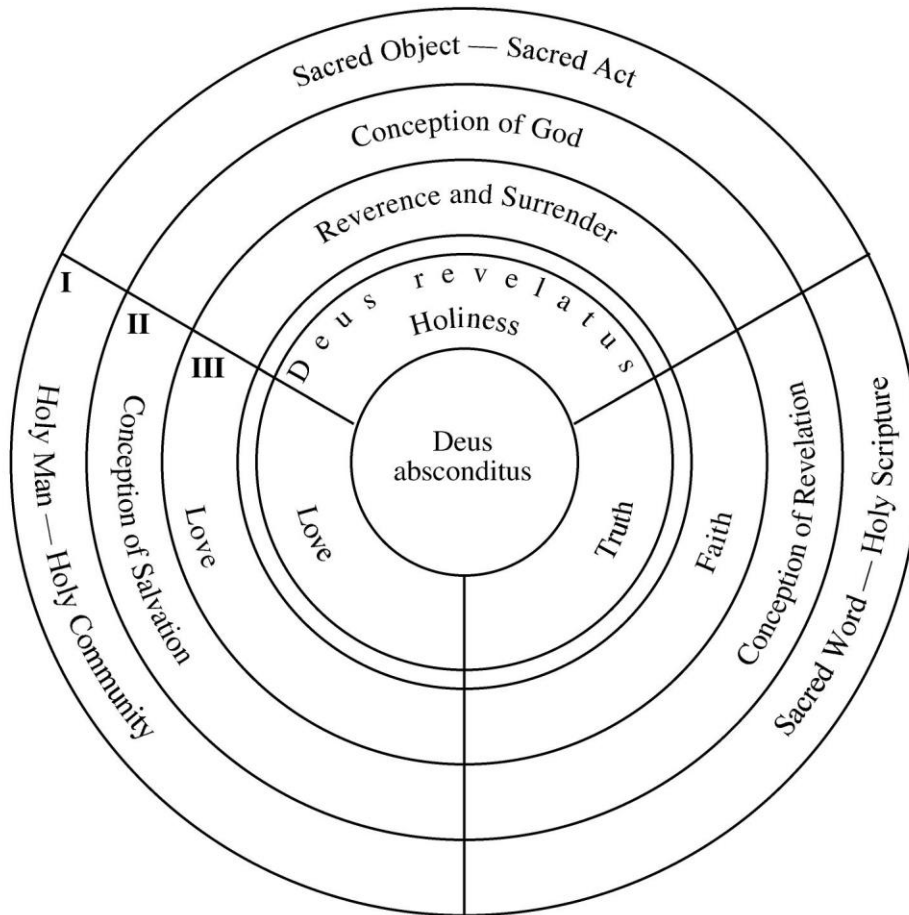
“...Verily, if you follow their desires after that which you have received of *knowledge* from God, then indeed you will be one of the wrong-doers.”³⁴

As any theory which excludes some kind of cognition and knowledge can not sustain itself as a general/objective ground for all, it is a must to develop one to reconcile these two. Trying this, we do not aim at removing this paradox. As there is a ‘totally other being’ we are supposed to refer to through our human language, this paradox will always be there. When disqualifying the superimpositions of language theories of positivist tradition, from perspective of theological language this must be case, which in no case poses any difficulty to theology. In the last analysis, all these fields are referred not to render them the subject of any theory of knowledge, but rather to develop and support this consciousness, awareness and cognition.

It seems then plausible to speak about this totally other Being only through the *written text*, *signs*³⁵ and *events* (*the means through which living face of God such as his mercy, wrath, etc.*

has been witnessed). Within these three fields, our different faculties are employed to conceive this Being as is mentioned above.

How God manifests himself in outside world or how He is conceptualized by human beings requires first a phenomenological study, a good example of which is given by Friedrich Heiler. Annemaria Schimmel gives detailed exposition of this model of concentric rings in which God's absolute beings and several strata of His self-disclosure are given:³⁶



- I. The *world of outer manifestations* comprises three sectors: Everything which is accepted as sacred such as the sacred object, the sacred room in which the cult takes place, the sacred time, in which the most important ritual is performed, the sacred number, by which the sacred objects, rooms, times, etc. are measured belong to this circle.
- II. The *world of religious imagination, the thoughts, images, ideas* concerning God's invisible being and visible works belong to this circle: the conception of God (theology), the conception of creation (cosmology and anthropology), the conception of revelation: the intimation of the divine will in the proclaimed word, in history, the fulfilment in the world to come (eschatology) are formed here.
- III. The *world of religious experience*, i.e. what happens deep down in the soul, as opposed to the fanciful or rational images of God. Reverence, fear, faith, hope, love are felt here.

- IV. The *objective world of religion*, the center of the circles, is the Divine Reality, which is understood through all external manifestations, inner notions, and experiences of the soul, in a double sense:
1. As the *Deus revelatus*, the God who has his face towards man, as absolute holiness, truth, justice, mercy, the personal God, experienced as ‘Thou’.
 2. As the *Deus ipse* or *absconditus*, the divinity, experienced as ‘It’, as absolute unity.

In this fourth circle God is not ‘other’ but, ‘totally other.’³⁷ The non-empirical/unexperiential side of ‘totally other’ is seen as Tawhîd in Islamic tradition.

In order that the ontological rings above be objectified, i.e. be perceived by people on a common level we need an epistemological structure that corresponds them. Not only reason and sense data (deductive and inductive reasoning) but also *Sadr/breast*, *Qalb/heart*, *Fuâd/inner heart* and *Lubb/innermost heart* are mentioned in the Holy Qur’an as the epistemic faculties of man to correspond and perceive these realms. And without doubt this is a *sui generis* perception which gives man a feeling as if he sees the God in His various manifestations and accordingly arranges his individual and personal/communal life which is called *Îhsân*.

As for the signs serving as bases of speaking about God, there are different ways to describe God or, at least to try to understand Him. Theologically speaking there are the *via causalitatis*/the way of causality, the *via eminentiae*/the way of eminence and the *via negationis*/the way of negation. All three can be comfortably applied to Islam, although the first one seems to be predominant in the Qur’anic message, so much so that one could transform the words of the *shahâda*³⁸ that ‘there is no deity save Him’ into the statement that there is no acting Power but Him, for all activities begin from Him.³⁹ His names, *al-Khaliq*/the Creator, *al-Bârî*/the Shaper, *al-Musawwir*/the Form-giver are all related to *via causalitatis*, for “Every moment He is in some work”⁴⁰ and his name *al-haqq*/Truth is predicated to every action whose main character is to lead those follow them to truth so His works can rightly be understood by humankind.*

In addition to *via causalitatis*, the Qur’an use *via eminentiae*, that is, He is greater than everything conceivable, as is stated in a Qur’anic verse: “Your Lord is holier than the qualities which they ascribe to Him.”⁴¹ As His perfection is infinite, nothing can be compared to Him, and He is above and beyond what we think of and attribute to Him. He has the highest form of every perfection attributed to him. This principle preserves the Creator-creature distinction.

As for the *via negationis*, it denies of God imperfections found in the creature. It aims to state, not what God is, but rather what he is not. This method safeguards "God's transcendence" and indicates the "limits of our knowledge", namely sense perception.

Keeping in mind all these ways of getting some knowledge of God, it must be emphasised that all these ways are only ‘means’ not ‘aims’. These means are over there not just to try to get some knowledge about God, but to suffice the mind with them, to try to create a moral realm, which is the prescriptive side of experience and main character of theological language.

II.c. Ethical or Prescriptive Dimension of Religious Experience

In order that religious experience can be saved from being just an intellectual act, it must follow the following process and thus got a social and communal dimension:

- *Experience*: Empirical level in which sense data are operative;
- *Understanding*: Intellectual level in which we try to understand and expose what is perceived;

- *Judgment*: Rational level in which we check the plausibility of our understanding and exposition;
- *Decision*: Factual or real level in which our rational knowledge poses us responsibility with an awareness to act socially and communally.⁴²

Of course, this social and communal role, i.e. the prescriptive dimension we attribute to religious experience is not a common denominator among thinkers who speak about experience. For instance, while some thinkers, like R. Otto and F. Schleiermacher do not posit any ethical or moral task to experience,⁴³ others like Kant with his Categorical Imperator, want to see God's hidden face as displayed in moral behaviors and conducts.⁴⁴ The popular view of conscience as the voice of God is expressed in Kant's statement that 'religion is (subjectively regarded) the recognition of all duties as divine commands.'⁴⁵

The dialogue or encounter in Buber is more personal. To him, one can interpret the neighbour's need as a divine summons. Encounter with the human "Thou" is a form of encounter with the eternal "Thou." One understands oneself to be addressed through events. 'The sound of which the speech consists are the events of personal every-day life.' A person replies through the speech of his life; he answers with his actions. Events in daily life can be interpreted as dialogue with God.⁴⁶ Similar echo can be heard from Tillich:

"In the act of the courage to be the power of being is effective in us, whether we recognize it or not. Every act of courage is a manifestation of the ground of being ... Not arguments but the courage to be reveals the true nature of being itself. By affirming our being we participate in the self-affirmation of being-itself. There are no valid arguments for the existence of God, but there are acts of courage in which we affirm the power of being, whether we know it or not."⁴⁷

On the other hand, religious assertions are declarations of adherence to a policy of action, and of commitment to a way of life. So, religious language and parables used within this language are not but means of expressing and evoking distinctive moral and ethical attitudes. In this sense, the holy texts are not descriptive but prescriptive, i.e. they endorse a set of moral principles and recommend them to the faithfuls and evoke a distinctive self-commitment in them. This practical use of religion in focusing on values and way of life finds its basis in Holy Books. However, this basis does not give us a specific model which is imposed to everybody to follow, rather it displays a set of norms, from which many ways of life can be deduced. This understanding of basis as a set of norms will also make room for human respond to and interact with the text. The *meaning* can come up only if this interaction is provided. Without the contribution of both, there is no meaning. So, many times the text does not tell the whole story, but desires reader to bridge the 'gaps' or 'blanks' by his active feeling and thinking, and accordingly arrange his moral conduct.⁴⁸ There is always a hermeneutical circle between the text and the reader, through which the desired outcome is yielded. To increase our awareness/consciousness of God, we are invited to reread historical facts, the stories of the past in order to discover to modes of God's presence for us: *jalal* and *jamal*. This awareness is the result of the living encounter of man with the God of religion, the living face of whom is seen in actions and events, that is in history.

Sometimes imaginary parables are told besides real historical events as follows:

"Set forth to them the parable of two men: for one of them We provided two gardens of grape-vines and surrounded them with date palms; in between the two We placed tillage. Each of those gardens brought forth its produce, and failed not in the least therein: in the midst of them We caused a river to flow. (Abundant) was the produce this man had: he said to his companion, in the course of a mutual argument: "more wealth have I than you,

and more honor and power in men.” He went into his garden while he wronged himself: He said, “I deem not that this will ever perish, Nor do I deem that the Hour (of Judgment) will (ever) come: Even if I am brought back to my Lord, I shall surely find something better in exchange.” His companion said to him, in the course of the argument with him: "Do you deny Him Who created you out of dust, then out of a sperm-drop, then fashioned you into a man? But as for my part, Allah is my Lord, and none shall I associate with my Lord. "Why did thou not, as thou wentest into thy garden, say: 'Allah's will (be done)! There is no power but with Allah.' If you see me less than thee in wealth and sons, "It may be that my Lord will give me something better than thy garden, and that He will send on thy garden thunderbolts from heaven, making it (but) slippery sand! Or the water of the garden will run off underground so that thou will never be able to find it. So his fruits were encompassed (with ruin), and he remained twisting and turning his hands over what he had spent on his property, which had (now) tumbled to pieces to its very foundations, and he could only say, "Woe is me! Would I had never ascribed partners to my Lord and Cherisher!"⁴⁹

This emphasis on communal and moral that is conative side of religious language must not reduce religion to mere instrument ignoring its cognitive and emotional basis. In order to gain an enduring social character, this experience must first find its place deep down of our spirit as Caussade writes:

“As it is fire and not the philosophy or scientific knowledge of fire that warms us, so it is the will and designs of God that produce sanctity in our souls and not intellectual speculation about this principle and its effects. If we wish to quench our thirst, we must lay aside books which explain thirst, and take a drink.”⁵⁰

As is emphasised, Theology, in this new form, will consider religious experience something which makes room for both intellectual thinking, intuition and moral obligation. In this sense, religious experience proves itself in social structure, in interpersonal relations in addition to personal life. The feeling of religious experience must create a sense of responding moral demands, taking part in social acts and total commitment. Awe, reverence, mystery, holiness, sacredness, and many other categories are to be used to support this correlation. Thus one can move from descriptive thinking, a personal context to prescriptive acting, a social context in which the living face of God is fully experienced.

In this model the function of religious experience is evocation of distinctive attitude, which includes feelings, value judgments and social action. This moral or ethical context requires one to turn from speculation and theory to action and taking responsibility which is a different context. From standpoint of objective thinking many action in this matrix has no any sufficient reason, but for faithful there are more reasons to act in this way. So, ethics can not be appropriated “objectively” as we acquire a knowledge of any field, physics, mathematics, etc. Ethical claims have to do with the kind of *subject* a person is to become, using his “will,” “choose,” “decision,” etc. not with a demonstration about objects. In the final analysis our experience, understanding, interpretation, judgment and decision must lead us to this ethical point, which requires action both personally and socially.

Concluding Remarks

To contextualize the term “religious experience” in theological discourse requires three distinct features as different from its other usages. *First*, it has external/outer world as a concrete basis which enables any communication or representation. This is vital, as this experience does not rely exclusively on imagination or personal feelings. However, this external world is not “religious” or “theological” on its own, rather what makes it religious or theological is our contemplation and reflection. This reflection embeds our will and

awareness/consciousness which makes the whole process our own. *Secondly*, this experience has a basis for the reality of God. God opted for disclosing (*wahy*) himself to his beings, which eliminates any possibility of agnosticism and enables us to develop a theological rhetoric about God. This language takes it for granted that there is a preceding reality through which we are able to speak about Him. *Thirdly*, as religious propositions, parables, metaphors, symbols, ect. are all but means of declarations of adherence to a policy of action, religious experience has a prescriptive or communal dimension. God's activity together with ours in communal level creates history and forms real conception of God and shows us his living face. Only in this level can we uncover his *mercy*, *wrath*, etc. and in this process, besides intellect and reason, our very being in its wholeness feels and judges Him.

¹ See Harold K. Schilling *Science and Religion: An Interpretation of Two Communities* (New York: Scribner's 1962), 37.

² Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Univ. of California Press, 1985), 219.

³ "Neque enim quaero intelligere ut credam, sed credo ut intelligam. Nam qui non crediderit, non experietur, et qui expertus non fuerit, non intelliget." Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*. I. De Fide Trin. 2, quoted from Thomas M. Kelly, *Theology at the Void: The Retrieval of Experience* (Univ. of Notre Dame, 2002), 11.

⁴ See Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 18.

⁶ See our paper "The Problem of Metaphysics and the Possibility of a Non-metaphysical Theology" *Current Credal Problems* (Erzurum, 2002).

⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101; T. M. Kelly, *ibid.*, 17.

⁸ Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having* (London: Collins, 1965), 184.

⁹ David Pailin, *The Anthropological Character of Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 90.

¹⁰ K. Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 9.

¹¹ Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Massachusetts, 1998), 265.

¹² Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Atlanta, 1995), 4.

¹³ See H.A. Hodges, *God Beyond Knowledge* (Macmillian Press Ltd., London, 1979), 158.

¹⁴ H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. And revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York,: Crossroad, 1989), 267-307.

¹⁵ See for detail Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Basil Blackwell 1953), 194; John Wisdom, "Gods", ed. Antony Flew, in *Logic and Language*, vol. I (Basil Blackwell, 1951); John Hick,

Faith and Knowledge (2nd ed., Macmillan 1967), 142 ff.; Ian Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1974), 55.

¹⁶ Shura 42: 51.

¹⁷ Albert Einstein, "What I Believe," *The Forum* 84 (October, 1930), 194, from Frederic Ferré, "Einstein on Religion and Science", *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, vol: I, No. 1, 1980, 21.

¹⁸ For the analysis of 'otherness' and 'social ontology' see F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 5 ff.; Michael Theunissen, *The Other: Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre and Buber*, tr. Christopher Macann (Cambridge Mass: MIT Press, 1986); Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) chapters 3 and 6.

¹⁹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, tr. by R. Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. And T. Clark, 1937), 76, 80; See also Diogenes Allen, Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1985), 253; Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 126 ff.

²⁰ Martin Buber, *Logos* (Heidelberg, 1960), 72.

²¹ M. Buber, *The Knowledge of Man*, tr. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 80.

²² For their approach see Diagonos Allen, *op. cit.*, 254.

²³ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (London, 1966), 95.

²⁴ Ibn 'Arabî, *Al-Tanazzulât al-Mawsiliyya*, ed. Abd al-Rahman Mahmud (Cairo: Maktabat 'Alam al-Fikr, 1986), pp. 90-1. Also see Stephen Hirstenstein, *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabî* (Oxford, 1999), 177.

²⁵ Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1985), 268; Also see D.Z. Phillips, "Religious Beliefs and Language Games", *The Philosophy of Religion*, ed. B. Mitchell (Oxford Univ. Press: Hong Kong, 1986).

²⁶ Donal R. Weisbaker, "Paul Tillich on the Experiential Ground of Religious Certainty" *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, vol: 1, No. 2, May 1980, 37.

²⁷ Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having* (London: Collins, 1965), 184.

²⁸ John Baillie, *Our Knowledge of God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1939) 155; Ian Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (London, 1966), 209.

²⁹ Giving the forthcoming traits to *ecstasy* he tries to rescue it from the position it has fallen across theological history: 1. Ecstasy is not a state of mind beyond reason; it is reason transcending the ordinary subject-object structure of its noetic experience. 2. The ecstatic state occurs, however, only if the mind is grasped by that which is beyond any subject-object structure, namely God or the ground of being and meaning. 3. Ecstatic experience contains an objective element as well as a subjective one, and as such it can be the basis of "... new practical or theoretical intepretation of what concerns us ultimately...". 4. Ecstasy contains not only an awareness of the ground and power of being, but also of

the abyss, that is, of the contingency of dependency of one's own being. 5. Ecstatic experience does not destroy the mind's rational structure. 6. Ecstasy has an emotional side, but it is not of great import to deal with it. *Systematic Theology*, I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 113.

³⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 109.

* For an evaluation of differences between religious experience and *vahy* see Adnan Aslan, "What is wrong with the concept of Religious Experience", *Islam, Christian-Muslim Relations*, vol.: 14, no: 3, July 2003, 299-312.

³¹ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, tr. R. Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), I, 132; see also Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 54; Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, tr. R. Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), I, 132.

³² M.S. Raschid, *Iqbal's Concept of God* (Kegan Paul International: London, 1981), 102.

³³ Saffât 37: 180. Similarly, the prohibition of graven images 'or any likenes' (Ex. 20: 4) in biblical tradition serves the same cause both as a rejection of idolatry and as an acknowledgment that God cannot be adequately represented in visual or mental imagery.

³⁴ Baqara 2: 145; See also "And thus have We revealed it, a true judgment in Arabic, and if you follow their low desires after what has come to you of *knowledge*, you shall not have against God any guardian or a protector" Ra'd 13: 37 and "He taught (gave as knowledge/*ilm*) the Qur'ân", Al-Rahmân 55: 2.

³⁵ Fussilat 41: 53

³⁶ Annemaria Schimmel, *Deciphering The Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994), XVI.

³⁷ In order to emphasise the difference between "other" and "totally other," E. Levinas uses two French words: *autre*: totally other, which is completely outside the phenomenological realm, and *autrui*: other. This totally other is one upon whom existence can be predicated, and He is the only One who has the right to say 'I'. See E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, terc. Alphonso Lingis (Le Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 183.

³⁸ *Wahdat al-Shuhûd* as developed by Ahmad Sirhindî departs from this term. As is known, in Islamic tradition, with regard to man and this relation to God some sophisticated concepts like *Wahdat al-Wujûd* (Unity in Existence), *Wahdat al-Shuhûd* (unity in Experience) and *transcendent being* (theological approach) have been employed. While *Wahdat al-Wujûd* is a speculative matter, *Wahdat al-Shuhûd* has the experience in its basis, so more open to cognition and knowledge, in that one's devotional and contemplative concentration on God's work is so intense that everything else fades out of his consciousness. Ahmad Sirhindî calls it *shuhûd* or experience (literally: 'seing' or 'witnessing') (See Fazlur Rahman, *Selected Letters of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindî* (Karachi, 1968), 44; M.S. Raschid, *Iqbal's Concept of God* (Kegan Paul International: London, 1981), 103.) Considering *Wahdat al-Wujûd* and Transcendent, unaccessible God of theology, as two edges of the pendulum, *Wahdat al-Shuhûd* is a good

base to rely on. On the one hand, it separates the self from its world, it gives a distance to the self to observe its object, and it ascribes a teleological life to this self as it has a relation to Being (Wujûd) on the other. By doing so, we can reduce the tension between Divine transcendence and immanence, between theologically defined impersonality and experienced personality on the one hand, and we can also save us from idealistic tradition's reducing object into subject or vice versa in order to solve the problems of 'unity' and knowledge on the other.

³⁹ See Annemaria Schimmel, *Deciphering The Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1994), 220.

⁴⁰ Fussilat 55: 29.

* In order to secure this relation He calls them *insân*/human which etymologically means 'to observe/to experience' and 'iris of eye' (see Nisâ 4: 6), and also shares His name *Rab* with them (Âl-i Imrân 3: 79). The former safeguards their natural side, and the latter their closeness to God. From both sides they have some correlation to deduce from nature what is essential and vital for a good personal and communal life.

⁴¹ Saffât 37: 180.

⁴² Bkz. For the detailed exposition of each level see. Joseph Flanagan, "Knowing and Language in the Thought of Bernard Lonergan", *Language, Truth and Meaning*, ed. Philip McShane (Notre Dame, 1972), 49 ff.

⁴³ F. Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101

⁴⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, transl. By T.M. Green and H.H. Hudson (New York: Harper, 1960), 142.

⁴⁵ Immanuel Kant, op. cit.

⁴⁶ M. Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. R.G. Smith (T. & T. Clark, 1937); and *Between Man and Man* (Macmillan, 1947); Also see Ian Barbour, *Myths, ...* 55.

⁴⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 181.

⁴⁸ This is the reader response-theory. For detail information on this theory, see Dan R. Stiver, *The Philosophy of Religious Language: Sign, Symbol and Story* (Blackwell Publishers: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1996), 107; Wolfgang Iser, "Interaction Between Text and Reader," in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, ed. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1980), pp.106-19; Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader Response Criticism*, (Methuen, London, 1987).

⁴⁹ Kahf 18: 32-42.

⁵⁰ De Caussade, i. I. 54. From John Bowker, *The Religious Imagination and the Sense of God* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1978), 196.