

HE WHO COMES TO GOD.....

- A COMPARISON OF THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
OF PAUL AND AL-GHAZZĀLĪ.

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Theology

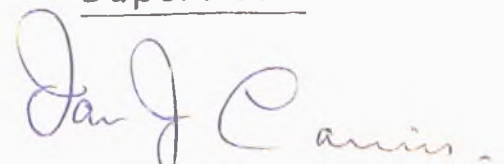
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Preliminary Survey

"He that cometh to God must believe that he is."
Hebrews 11:6 (KJV)

The search for the divine is one of the basic intuitions of man. Every religion represents a human attempt to search for God. Both Christianity and Islām call mankind to an encounter with the living God. Yet in each religion there is also the awareness that man must come on God's terms. Christianity calls upon mankind to seek God through faith in Jesus Christ. In Islām there is the awareness that if man is to stand before God, he must come to Allāh with a sound heart, (Ṣūra 26:89), that is, a heart cleansed from the disease of disobedience. Both Christianity and Islām emphasize faith in God; in Christianity this faith in God is expressed by surrender to Jesus Christ, while in Islām faith in God is expressed by dependence on the validity of man's own works. 1

Naturally, this difference in starting-point has consequences for the respective religious systems and to a large extent determines the religious experience of the two men with whom we will deal in this thesis. The above-mentioned starting-point is not meant to predetermine what kind of religious experience the two men should have had and then press them into that particular mould. 2 We will endeavour to examine the religious experience of Paul and al-Ghazzālī on the basis of their own testimony, both before and after their "crisis" experience. Since, however, this thesis is meant to be a comparison, we cannot be satisfied with an approach which only describes religious phenomena, without evaluating them. We are forced in this thesis to establish some principle of comparison; some criterion by which we can evaluate the

1. W.Cantwell Smith, Islam in modern History, p.27
2. Some of the "moulds" into which the experience and theology of Paul and al-Ghazzali have been pressed, will be discussed in Chapter I.

religious experience of the two men. In doing so, we should aim at being as "objective" as we can in trying to understand the two men as they describe their encounter with the living God.

We can take the religious experience of al-Ghazzālī seriously (without making him a pseudo-Christian) by adducing Scriptural evidence about God's concern with mankind. This evidence will add to the depth and seriousness of our study and will remind us that behind man's groping for spiritual reality, there is God who never leaves Himself without a witness. Acts 14:17

The comparison between the two men is a reasonable one in that both may be considered religious "giants".³ Al-Ghazzālī and Paul were disillusioned with the institutional, religious systems in which they found themselves, and earnestly longed for spiritual truth and reality. It is this search for God that we wish to study and from which we wish to draw some conclusions as to how each experienced his moment of encounter with God.

(i) can we know the religious faith of others?

As soon as the Christian speaks about the religious experience of a Muslim and vice-versa, the question arises whether we can know the religious faith of others. Those who take their starting-point in an existentialist epistemology will answer that we cannot know. Unless one participates subjectively in the religious faith of another, one cannot really know about it. There is much truth in this assertion. As W. Cantwell Smith puts it:

The observer's concept of a religion is beautifully suited to ignore it (the faith of another). The participant can see very clearly that the outsider may know all about a religious system, and yet may totally miss the point. The outsider may intellectually command all the

3. al-Ghazzālī has been given the title: hujjat al-Islām (the proof of Islām); thus H. Rus'an in Menjungkap Rahasia Kebahagiaan, Jakarta, 1966, p.5; an Indonesian translation of Kīmiyā' al-sa'āda, which is a short summary of the Iḥwā' intended for Bengali

details of its external facts, and yet may be indeed, as an outsider presumably must be or demonstratively is - untouched by the heart of the matter. 4

Without going into this matter too deeply, 5 I would hold that it is possible, to a significant extent, to understand the religious faith of others. This is so because of the external data available to us, the quality of the believer's life and because the other person is prepared to disclose something about his personal faith. Moreover, our own faith is also oriented to God and involves a religious experience, which will help us to grasp the meaning of faith for the other person.

If you are atheist or indifferent, if the idea of God leaves you totally cold or you find it repulsive, then it will be quite an extraordinary feat of sympathetic imagination if you can nonetheless enter validly into the experience of the Muslim; whereas those of us whose immediate awareness of God's presence is vivid can much more readily appreciate what the devout Muslim is talking about when he speaks of living in that presence also. 6

There is an affinity between men of faith. Our whole life represents a response to something or someone behind and beyond man. We experience the religious consciousness which may be defined as the innate impulse of the human self-hood to direct itself toward the true or toward a pretended absolute origin of all temporal diversity of meaning which it finds focused concentrically in itself. 7 All religious men deal with the same basic issues of life and existence. Bavinck calls these issues the "five magnetic points"; I and the cosmos, I and the norm, I and the riddle of my existence, I and salvation, I and the Supreme power. 8

4. W. Cantwell Smith, The meaning and end of religion, New York, 1962, p. 134

5. For a detailed discussion of this subject, see A. R. Gualtier "Can we know the religious faith of others?", Religion and Society, Vol. XX, No. 3

6. W. Cantwell Smith, The Faith of other Men, New York, 1965, p. 78

7. H. Dooyeweerd. A new critique of Theoretical Thought

These five points create an affinity between men of different faiths and even between men who are supposedly non-religious.

However, this does not mean that it is a simple matter to understand the faith of another person. Even more so when the other person is separated from us by many centuries and bound by the culture, thought-patterns and religious situation of his day.

The difficulty of making a comparison between Paul and al-Ghazzālī 9 is increased by the fact that al-Ghazzālī is little known to the Western student, that some writings are falsely attributed to al-Ghazzālī 10 and that the *Munqidh* is of a personal, apologetic nature. In making the comparison we depend on what Paul and al-Ghazzālī have revealed about themselves and their thinking in the New Testament and in the *Munqidh min-al-dalāl*. ("What delivers from error") This latter work which is the source of most of our knowledge about al-Ghazzālī's religious struggles, is an autobiographical work in which al-Ghazzālī presents us with an intellectual apologia which is rather schematic in nature. For his "post-conversion" days, we depend to a large extent on al-Ghazzālī's major work, *Ihyā 'ulūm al-dīn*, (The Revitalization of the Sciences of Religion), especially on the third book of the fourth Volume, "The book of Fear and Hope", dealing with the means of salvation.

(ii) a principle of comparison

Assuming, then, that we can form a relatively objective view of the life and work of Paul and al-Ghazzālī, we are to formulate some principle of comparison.

9. the full name is Abū Ḥamid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī al-Shāfi'ī. Realizing that there is some discussion about the spelling of al-Ghazzālī's name, we will adhere to the spelling as given by the Shorter Encyclopedia of Islām. For a note on this: W.M.Watt: Muslim Intellectual, p.181-182
10. see W.M.Watt, Islamic Philosophy and Theology, Islamic Surveys, No.1, Edinburgh, 1962, p.121

What is it that we want to compare? What is our criterion in comparing religious experience? It is not our intention to evaluate the mystical experiences of Paul and al-Ghazzālī in order to come to a conclusion as to which is true and which is false. The choice false or true would be too facile a solution.

This paper is based on the assumption that the religious experience of Paul and al-Ghazzālī represents a moment of encounter between man and God. Or we might say that both Paul and al-Ghazzālī responded to a religious impulse, derived from a divine activity within them. Each experienced this divine activity in a different context. Paul's experience amounted to an encounter with Jesus Christ, while al-Ghazzālī was overwhelmed by a sense of the presence of God. Each understood the revelation of God in a different way and in the context of his own religious background. In order, then, to make a genuine comparison between Paul and al-Ghazzālī, we would like to formulate our principle of comparison as follows: To what extent does the religious experience of Paul and al-Ghazzālī represent a genuine response to the moment of encounter with God and how does their post-conversion life testify to that encounter?

In other words we are applying the criterion - "you will know them by their fruits". Matthew 7:16. Unless there is "fruit" we have every reason to doubt the work and genuineness of a man's religious experience.

As we thus seek to understand the religious experience of Paul and al-Ghazzālī, we will consider such questions as: By what processes were the two men brought to an encounter with God? To what extent were their experiences conditioned by and checked by their respective dogmatic presuppositions? What is the difference in their respective responses? How is the response to the encounter with God worked out in their subsequent life?

The above assumption that both al-Ghazzālī and Paul experienced a moment of encounter with God, leads directly to an underlying epistemological issue. This assumption cannot be proved by religio-philosophical reasoning. It represents my own world-view viz. that this world is "open" to the activity of God whose nature leads Him to disclose Himself to man. Once this presupposition has been accepted, the possibility of religious experience as an encounter with the Divine Reality presents no problem, except perhaps the problem of distinguishing between different kinds of religious experience. I am thinking here of such phenomena as nature mysticism, oneness with the Absolute, personal communion with God. We will not deal with all these phenomena. Our interest lies in the religious experience which may be qualified as "theistic", related as it is to a God conceived of in intensely personal terms. It is of fundamental importance in this epistemological issue that we acknowledge the truth of what Kraemer wrote:

There is only one escape out of this epistemological dilemma; namely to recognize the fact to which we have often alluded already, that the ultimate, inexplicable fact in human consciousness with which we are confronted is that, prior to all fundamental ideas and attitudes which shape our religion or philosophy or Weltanschauung, there is a primordial decision and act of faith which determines our religion, philosophy or Weltanschauung. 11

If, then we want to go beyond the psychological and phenomenological approach to religious experience, our starting-point will have to be theological. 12

11. H. Kraemer, Religion and the Christian Faith, London 1961, p.85-86

12. for the psychology of religion approach, see W. James, Varieties of Religious Experience, New York, 1960; for the phenomenological approach, see R. Otto, The Idea of the Holy, Oxford University Press, 1970

Only on the basis of theology are we able to appreciate and evaluate that to which (or the one to whom) the religious experience responds. In order to deal with the experience of Paul and al-Ghazzālī in the context of their life-relationship with God, I would like to present the following theological notions underlying this thesis:

(1) There is always a life-relationship between God and man, not just because of man's possession of the life-principle (psyche), but because God has chosen to reveal Himself to man whom He created in His image. Romans 1:20,32; 2:14,15, Acts 17:28; 14:17

(2) God is concerned with mankind." He has not left Himself without a witness" (Acts 14:15-17). (*ὁὐκ ἀπερτερον*) This "witness" is God's care and kindness towards man. Throughout the Scriptures we may note a positive witness concerning God's dealings with mankind. Psalm 145:16; 72:11-17; Isaiah 55:5; Jeremiah 4:2; Zechariah 8:22; Malachi 1:11.

(3) Because of God's concern with mankind, the world of man may not be regarded simply as one of utter rebellion.

It is also the world in which the humanum is not annihilated and destroyed, but shows itself in deep longings and gropings towards God. 13 (c.f. Romans 8:19,22)

This groping of sinful humanity is worked out in more detail by Bavinck, when he speaks of the "five magnetic points". 14

13. H.Kraemer, op.cit. p.311

14. see note 8 above

(4) Man, because of his rebelliousness, represses this witness of God. (Romans 1:18 - *κατακλινω*) The truth of God is perverted into a lie. (*εἰς ψεῦδος* verse 25). The divine self-disclosure in nature and in man's conscience is corrupted and distorted. (Romans 1:23)

(5) Nevertheless, human religion may be regarded as a response-distorted and feeble- to God's concern with mankind. On the basis of such a theological starting-point it may well be true that

those mystics from other religious traditions who have genuinely sought the face of God -as some undoubtedly have- with a real sense of sin and need, have in all probability experienced his grace and forgiveness in Christ, little though they may have understood it. 15

The point here is that we may not underestimate God's concern with mankind by maintaining a narrow view of election and revelation. On the other hand it ought to be emphasized that the revelation of God may not be divorced from Jesus Christ. (Hebrews 1:2) We may not, therefore, embrace an unbiblical kind of universalism and thereby deny the uniqueness of Christ. Both God's concern with mankind and the pre-eminence of Christ are to be affirmed. (Colossians 1:15-20) It is Christ who has created all things and it is He who reconciles all things to Himself through the blood of the cross. Whether man is conscious of this fact is another matter. Only in the light of God's concern with mankind in the redeeming activity of Jesus Christ, are we able to attempt a sympathetic understanding of the religious experience of our neighbour.

It needs to be underscored that we are not trying to discover whether al-Ghazzālī's and Paul's experience was a true or false response to God's revelation, but

rather, how each responded to God's revelational activity as each understood this and in the context of their respective religious backgrounds. That is our principle of comparison.

(iii) what is religious experience?

Since both Paul and al-Ghazzālī were adherents of monotheistic religions, they conceived of God in personal terms and we would therefore expect many similarities in their religious experience. We are suggesting here that there are different kinds of religious experience, dependent to a large extent on the presuppositions of the person undergoing the experience. We ought to define a little more fully what is meant by religious experience, since

a blanket statement about religious experience is valueless and usually mischievously misleading. 16

Religious experiences are of different kinds, sometimes the one contradicting the other. There is the monistic mysticism in which the experient feels himself one with the life of the universe. (Cosmic Consciousness) There is a kind of Vedanta mysticism brought about by Yoga, where there is a loss of identity of the individual. (Oneness with the Absolute) Profane mystical experiences, portraying many similarities with religious experience, may also be brought about by certain drugs. 17

There is also the I-Thou experience in which the human personality is not dissolved but rather experiences personal communion with a personal God.

16. R. Brow, Religion-Origins and Ideas, London, 1966, p.115

17. see R.C. Zaehner, Mysticism - Sacred and Profane, Oxford University Press, 1973, p.1-29. In these pages Zaehner deals with the effects of the drug mescaline.

As there are many different kinds of love, so there are many different kinds of religious experience. It would be absurd to say that every religious experience is basically the same, since it is oriented toward the same goal. Granted that this is so, we nevertheless need to say a few words about what is understood by religious experience. An experience may be considered religious, according to Smart, when it

involves some kind of perception of the invisible world, or involves a perception that some visible person or thing is a manifestation of the invisible world. 18

This definition is of necessity a very general one, since it must cover such a wide range of experiences, all of which may be qualified as "religious". Robert Brow mentions some of the following religious experiences in order to show that distinctions are necessary. There is the experience of entering into relationship with the divine as one enters a cathedral; there is the self-righteous experience of the Pharisee; scholars have a religious experience as they work out intricate theological systems; the monk in silent contemplation and the small-group of religious enthusiasts all have an experience which may be termed religious. 19 Yet the experiences can hardly be identical. The religious experience of mankind has at least this in common - it is an attempt to come to grips with cosmic questions; questions about the nature and destiny of man and the world and man's role in determining that destiny.

When we speak of religious experience we are not thinking of something which happens in the unseen, spiritual world, beyond the reach of the ordinary person living in this material world. As Miles says:

18. N.Smart, The Religious Experience of Mankind, New York, 1969, p.28

19. R.Brow, op.cit.p115

....a person can describe his religious experiences - that is, his experiences when he tries to come to terms with cosmic issues- in the same way logically as he can describe, for instance, the experiences which he had last summer in Norway; in neither case does it make sense to ask if his experiences were mental events or if they made him aware of something non-material. 20

Miles rejects the whole "natural-supernatural" distinction and looks for a causal explanation when faced with "supernatural" events. When discussing the conversion of Paul, Miles regards the "natural-supernatural" categories as inadequate. To the supernaturalist he says:

..... It is surely an obscurantist form of religion which depends for its truth on gaps in our historical or medical knowledge. 21

Miles suggests here that the term "supernatural" is simply a term to cover our ignorance! There is no basis for regarding Paul's experience as supernatural. The naturalist, adopting a mechanistic view of the universe will hold that Paul

was an epileptic or was overwhelmed by guilt feelings because of his persecution of the Christians. 22

This is the dilemma posed by Miles on the basis of the natural-supernatural distinction. Miles, quite consistently, has to conclude:

In attempting to come to terms with cosmic questions there is in the last resort no alternative to silence..... and where all words are inadequate I take the view that silence can sometimes be more reverent than speech. 23

20. T.R.Miles, Religious Experience, London, 1972, p.23

21. *ibid.* p.47

22. *ibid.* p.47

23. *ibid.* p.50-51

Miles' book shows clearly the need to recognize that behind all our philosophical and theological reasoning, there is a personal Weltanschauung, which determines our thinking processes. Miles has obviously accepted a diffuse, immanentistic notion of God ²⁴ and on the basis of this concept of God has to modify his concept of every other aspect of spiritual reality. To those who accept the existence of a personal God who acts in history, the world becomes open to divine activity and intervention. The latter view is a precondition for intelligent discussion of the religious experience of a person in coming to terms with spiritual and cosmic realities.

(iv) reasons for choosing this topic

I have chosen this topic, firstly, because of the conviction that the study of Paul and al-Ghazzālī will lead to a greater appreciation of what Christianity and Islām stand for. All too often religions are conceived of as doctrinal systems, without due regard for the inner, experiential side of religion. Consequently, there is much misunderstanding and prejudice. As an example we can point to the influential Ahmadiya movement ²⁵ which posits a fundamental contrast between the religion of Jesus and Paul. According to this movement it was Paul who falsified the Gospel with his introduction of the Trinity, original sin, reconciliation through the blood of Christ and other fundamental points of doctrine. Others have taken over this opinion and concluded that Christianity is a falsified version of the religion of Jesus. ²⁶ On that basis, it is impossible to make a fair, comparative study of Islām and Christianity.

24. *ibid.* p.51

25. A high court in Hubli, 1971, forbade adherents of this movement to call themselves muslim.

26. so for example O.Hashem, Marxisme dan Agama, Surabaya, 1965, p.26ff; Yoesoef Sou'yb, Jesus ataukah Paulus? Jakarta, 1971; Sjech Abuzahrah, Tinjauan tentang Agama

The prejudice, however, is not only on the Muslim's side. This is emphasized by Montgomery Watt when he notes:

From the Qur'ān itself we learn that the pagan Meccans called the messages "old-world tales" (asātīr al-awwalīn), while the Jews of Medina mocked Muhammad's claims. These criticisms were taken up by Christian scholars. In Medieval Europe there was elaborated the conception of Muhammad as a false prophet, who merely pretended to receive messages from God; and this and other falsifications of medieval war-propaganda are only slowly being expunged from the mind of Europe and of Christendom. 27

If it could be granted that for the Muslim, religion is not primarily an assent to certain propositional truths, but rather a living contact with a Presence, there would result a deeper understanding of Islām. I do not mean to say that experience can be divorced from doctrine. Doctrine influences experience and experience in turn is shaped by doctrine. The point here is that in order to understand what religion means for another, we certainly ought to take into account the experiential aspect of his religious life. The Roman Catholic Church, of late, is making attempts to come to terms with Islām. On 'Īd al-Fiṭr 1388 (the festival marking the end of the month of fasting), radio Vatican said in a broadcast addressed to the Islamic world:

The Spirit of getting close to God and of submission to His Will, expressed by the fast of Ramadhan, is of genuine religious value. Christians can only rejoice to find it expressed by others..... So let us be gladdened by the sight of God being honoured in this way by millions of men and women, adults and adolescents, sometimes at very great sacrifice. 28

27. W.M.Watt, Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān, Edinburgh, 1970, p.17

28. J.W.M.Bakker, S.J. Dialog dengan Islam, Puskat, Yogyakarta, 1972, p.30

Such an attitude of trying to enter into the experience of others can only lead to a deeper appreciation of the elements of truth found in Islām.

Secondly, an honest appraisal of the religious experience of Paul and al-Ghazzālī - both of whom have made a substantial contribution to Christianity and Islām respectively- could help in the continuing dialogue between Christianity and Islām. Whatever one's attitude to interreligious dialogue -and this cannot be dealt with here- it would be hard to deny that dialogue is a necessity in our present world.²⁹ This is recognized by both the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches. From the Protestant side, we may refer to the words of M.M.Thomas on the occasion of the World Missionary Conference in Mexico,1963:

There is a growing sense of common humanity or human solidarity in the world which finds its expression in mutual concern, a sense of participation in the struggle of others for their fundamental rights and a common endeavour in building structures of a world community and searching for an ethos to make them stable. This "secular ecumenical movement" may be only beginning, but it is already a genuine movement of human solidarity which we must recognize as a new factor of no small significance in the world today. 30

To this significant statement, we may add the words of the Ajaltoun memorandum, pleading for evangelical openness towards men of other faiths:

Interfaith dialogue is not a mere encounter of commitments and beliefs held in deep sincerity and faith, and acknowledgment and even promotion of the right of freedom of

29. On dialogue, see H.W.Gensichen: "Dialogue with non-Christian Religions" in The Future of the Christian World Mission, Danker and Kang (ed), Grand Rapids, 1971
30. "Witness in Six Continents", London, 1964, p.15

pursuit. While it is not less than this, it is certainly more than a meeting of faiths. It is "sharing". 31

The Roman Catholic Church has for some time already had a special commission on relations with Islām and in December 1970 held a conference in the Vatican with many representatives of the Islamic world.

In the encyclical entitled "Nostra Aetate", 28th October 1965, the following was said about Islām:

Gereja Katolik memandang ummat Islam dengan penghargaan besar. Mereka itu menyembah Allah yang MahaEsa.....Umat Islam berdaya-upaya untuk menyerahkan diri dengan ichlas hati kepada hukum2 Allah yang tersembunji..... mereka tidak mengakui Jesus sebagai Allah, namun menghormatinya sebagai nabi....Sedemikian itu Ummat Islam menjunjung tinggi achlak dan mengabdikan Tuhan, terutama dengan mendirikan shalat, memberikan sedekah (zakat) serta berpuasa.

Meskipun dalam abad2 yang lampau tidak sedikitlah perbedaan faham yang timbul antara fihak Kristiani dan Muslim, namun Majelis Tinggi ini mendesak kita semua untuk melupakan yang lampau itu serta berdaya-upaya dengan se-ichlas2-nya untuk menciptakan suasana saling mengerti. 32

The need for new initiatives and approaches to an understanding of Islām is very urgent, especially in view of the fact that in Indonesia the relationship

31. The Ayalton memorandum in "Dialogue with men of living faiths", Geneva, 1971, p.109, 110. While I quote documents of the W.C.C. here, we ought not to forget that there is an increasingly strong reaction against what is popularly referred to as the "theology of the W.C.C.", which is supposedly moving in the direction of humanization rather than redemption. See P. Beyerhaus, Missions: Which Way?, Grand Rapids, 1971; see also the Frankfurt Declaration 1970 and the Berlin Declaration on Ecumenism, 1974, entitled: "Freedom and Fellowship in Christ".
32. from the Indonesian translation given by J.W.M. Bakker, S.J. in Dialog dengan Islam, p.2

between Christianity and Islām has been spoiled by superficial polemics. 33 As new initiatives emerge and contacts are made, we may come to the surprising realization that the extent of the grace of God is wider than we generally tend to think!

Lastly, as we investigate the religious experience of Paul and al-Ghazzālī, we ourselves may be led to a reappraisal of our own religious certainty and to a personal experience of God's presence. "For he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him." (Hebrews 11:6 K.J.V.)

Wherever we refer to the Ḳur'ān in this thesis we will follow the verse-division of Richard Bell, who follows the division of G.Flügel. As far as the transcription of Arabic letters is concerned, we will follow the transcription of the Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam.

Quotations from the Bible are from the Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated. References to the New Testament Greek are taken from the British and Foreign Bible Society -second edition, 1958, which is a slightly modified version of the Nestle edition of 1904.

33. see B.J.Boland, The Struggle of Islam in Modern Indonesia, The Hague, 1971, p.224 ff.