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When Life Goes Our Way or Against Us: A Phenomenological Inquiry into the Human Experience of God in Contemporary Times

Dambar Chetry

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Kumar Bhaskar Varma Sanskrit and Ancient Studies University (KBVS&ASU), Nalbari,781337, Assam, India, Email- st8893434@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

The experience of God is an important dimension of human existence and is often understood through the changing circumstances of life. For instance, God may be interpreted, in terms of success and failure or satisfaction and dissatisfaction or pleasure and pain. Such experiences raise significant philosophical questions concerning the relation of human life, belief, and quest for meaning. It explores the epistemic effect of the life's favourable and unfavourable dilemma and goes beyond this dualism, particularly in the contemporary times. The study employs a qualitative, conceptual, and phenomenological approach by drawing from selected Indian and Western philosophical perspectives and examining the dialectics of living experience and religious consciousness. It argues that changing life circumstances may influence how individuals experience and interpret the divine, but they do not necessarily determine the depth of their faith. Here, the study highlights that happiness and pain may be important in understanding one's relationship with God.

1.Introduction

Human life is marked by changing circumstances, including happiness, success, suffering, and disappointment. These experiences not only influence the way individuals understand themselves and the

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world but may also shape how they experience and relate to God. When enjoying something, he or she might turn to God with gratitude, promise, satisfaction, and a feeling of confidence in the presence of God. But in an unfortunate event of suffering or disappointment, the same individual may invoke God through prayers, abandonment, questioning, or search for meaning. This raises a significant philosophical question: when our conditions of life change our experience of God, how are we to understand these differences

The relationship (if any) between the similarity of the experience of God in the human experience and the similarity of the experience of life has long been of interest in philosophy and theology. The question of the relationship of faith and spirituality, experience, suffering, meaning, consciousness of man has been explored in Indian and Western traditions (James, 1902; Otto, 1923; Radhakrishnan, 1929; Vivekananda, 1896). These perspectives suggest that the experience of God cannot be understood only through religious doctrines or established beliefs; it must also be considered in relation to the lived realities of individuals and the meanings they attach to their experiences.

In the contemporary world with pressures of career choices, pecuniary matters, emerging social relationships, personal expectations, and existential questions, this relationship is especially pertinent. Such situations may influence how they view the existence, meaning, and relevance of God in their daily life. In this context, the study adopts a phenomenological approach to divine experience in positive and negative circumstances and beyond the positive-negative binary in contemporary life. It is not about proving (or disproving) the existence of God or the strength of religious belief but the way people experience, interpret, and understand the divine in the light of changing conditions of human existence.

2. Research Gap

Phenomenological debates of religious experience and its emotional content, lived character, existence, suffering, and the search for meaning have received thoughtful attention from diverse philosophical views. By contrast, much less attention has been paid to experiences of God and humanity with specific reference to diverse life situations. Yet the interplay between favourable and unfavourable conditions and novel ways of experiencing, interpreting, and relating to God, particularly the context of present human existence, provides scope itself to continued philosophical investigation. The present study addresses this concern through a phenomenological approach in terms of how happiness, success, sorrow, and disappointment provide a meaningful background of human experience of God.

3. Objectives

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore the correlation between changing life situations and the human experience of God.
2. To explore the impact of happiness, success, suffering, and disappointment on the human experience of God.
3. To build a phenomenological perspective of the human experience of God, apart from favourable and unfavourable circumstances in modern times.

4. Methodology

The present study adopts a phenomenological approach based on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include selected philosophical and religious texts of Indian and Western traditions, while secondary sources include scholarly books, research articles, and relevant academic publications. It examines the ways in which people experience and conceptualize God in various life situations such as happiness, success, suffering, and disappointment. It uses phenomenological description and conceptual analysis to explore the connection between lived experience, faith, and the search for meaning within the framework of contemporary human life. As the study is non-empirical in nature, it does not involve interviews or surveys but relies on the interpretation and critical examination of relevant philosophical texts and perspectives.

5. Discussion

The human experience of God is closely connected with the changing circumstances of human life. Happiness, success, suffering, and disappointment may influence how individuals understand and relate to the divine. These experiences are not necessarily understood in the same way by everyone; rather, they are interpreted through individual beliefs, emotions, and personal circumstances. The following discussion examines the human experience of God in favourable and unfavourable situations and develops a phenomenological understanding of this experience in contemporary times:

5.1 The Human Experience of God in Favourable Circumstances

Every positive situation such as happiness, success, contentment, and fulfilment of goals creates the feeling in humans of appreciation and pleasure with life. In these instances, God might be seen as the blessing, protecting, guiding, and supporting the believers. The feeling of success and satisfaction may validate their belief in the divine presence and lead people to express gratitude in the forms of prayer, worship, and other religious practices. Where this situation is present, God is identified with the good aspects of the human life.

The Bhagavad Gita is a significant revelation of the link between human existence and changing circumstances. In chapter 2, verses 47 and 48, Krishna essentially suggests to accomplish duty without attachment to the fruits of action and to remain even in success and failure (Bhagavad Gita, 1948, 2.47-2.48). While these passages do not mention encountering God in happiness or success, it gives a more comprehensive idea of self-control in the face of outside forces. This approach implies that one's spirit does not have to rely on achievements or other favourable conditions.

According to William James (1902) in The Varieties of Religious Experience, the religious life depends upon strong sentiments, reactions, and experiences had by an individual. He places emphasis on the perceived link of a human with the divine and sees personal religious experience as an important facet of religious life. His approach can account for the existence of religious meanings in individual's religious experience in emotions of appreciation, satisfaction, and the feeling of presence of the divine in positive situations. This indicates that a religious experience is not only about formal dogmatisms or institutional activities but is anchored in personal awareness and existence.

However, one can't deny that one has only a chance to strengthen his or her faith if one experiences the presence of God under good conditions of success or happiness. One person may feel thankful to God for success, while another person may believe that he/she has succeeded because of his/her efforts. Therefore, it is the conditions themselves that do not lead to the experience of the God but rather how people infer the conditions and derive sense from them. Happiness and prosperity may create opportunity for individuals to recognize and express their feeling of connection with the divine, but they may not constitute the sole circumstances through which such an experience becomes meaningful.

5.2 The Human Experience of God in Unfavourable Circumstances

Unfavourable circumstances such as suffering, failure, loss, illness, disappointment, etc., causes confusion and pain in a human being's life, making him or her question the meaning of suffering, the presence of God, and the purpose of his or her life. While some may turn to prayer, hope, and sacrifice, others may be doubtful, angry, and even distant from God, and these are the various reactions proving that God and one's relationship with Him can be studied through the lens of suffering.

In Indian philosophy thought, the Bhagavad Gita gives a view of handling obstacles via endurance, self-discipline, and serenity. In Chapter 2, verse 14, Krishna states that pleasure and suffering are transient and that one should learn to tolerate them. Similarly, verse 48, discusses equal-mindedness toward achievement and failure (Bhagavad Gita, 1948, 2.14, 2.48). These beliefs emphasize that human thinking

should not be only influenced by good or bad events. They do not imply that pain should be disregarded; instead, they encourage people to face the problems of life with patience and fortitude.

William James (1902), in his discussion of the sick soul and the divided self, examines how suffering, inner conflict, and emotional distress influence religious consciousness. His study shows how personal struggles can force individuals to reassess their thinking system and look for the meaning beyond the observable reality. Suffering in this respect can be a significant backdrop to religious meditation, but it does not always lead to increased faith in all people.

Rudolf Otto (1923) refers to the religious experience as "numinous," the feeling of sensing a divine power with awe and mystery, unlike the ordinary human feeling. His viewpoint broadens the definition of religious experience from usual comfort/satisfaction. It exposes the intricate emotional and spiritual aspects of the divine experience. Although Otto does not suggest suffering as a means to better faith, his discussion can be useful in arguing that religious experience cannot be reduced to a mere state of happiness or personal satisfaction alone.

Nevertheless, suffering does not always lead individuals towards stronger faith or a closer relationship with God. For others, it may make them question and doubt their religion, while for some, it may strengthen their loyalty to their religion. Such distinctions show that the experience of God in suffering is not a simple one. The point is that pain is not always bad but rather that suffering makes people create purpose in the midst of adversity. Therefore, unfavourable circumstances should be seen as a significant dimension of human existence through which individuals may reassess their ideas, values, and relationship with the divine.

5.3 A Phenomenological Understanding of the Human Experience of God in Contemporary Times

A phenomenological understanding of the human experience of God should be about the experience and interpretation of God in human relations, commune, friendship, and day-to-day existence. It does not begin with an abstract presupposition regarding the presence of God but is interested in the ways in which people experience, comprehend, and interpret their relation to God. Phenomenology is a method of reflecting on the 'shape and content of experience at the level of conscious awareness' (Husserl, 1983). Applying this approach to the present study gives a method of studying how individuals perceive and understand the supernatural within diverse contexts of life.

Today many of our personal and social situations such as jobs, duties, family expectations, competition with peers, and what not, which may add up to stress and ambiguity in the matter of the future shape human

experience. These may change the role of faith and feeling, the presence of God in their daily lives. For example, a successful individual in career or academics may thank God, whereas an individual who is jobless or struggling financially may seek God's advice, hope, or emotional support. Similarly, personal loss or failure may cause a person to doubt the meaning of life and reassess his or her views about the existence of God. These instances illustrate that God's view should be linked to one's experience and situation.

From a phenomenological perspective, past experience, beliefs, emotions, and perception of life make some people view a similar scenario differently from others. The phenomenological approach of Husserl focuses on the interpretations people assign to their experiences. While, William James (1902) underlines the personal dimension of religious experience. These opinions highlight the unevenness of God experience from person to person. Rather, it is formed by the situations people are in and their perceptions from them.

The present study contends that one's experience of God changes in its expression and interpretation as per the circumstances of life. Happiness fosters thankfulness, achievement fosters the feeling of being blessed, pain fosters prayerfulness and submission, while disappointment fosters doubt and questions. But different reactions may not always represent the increasing depth of faith of a person. Rather, they illustrate varied ways on how people define and connect with God in their everyday contexts. Thus, the human experience of God in contemporary times should be understood beyond the simple distinction between favourable and unfavourable circumstances. Both joy and pain can become meaningful contexts for reflecting upon faith, human existence, and the search for meaning. A phenomenological understanding makes it possible to recognise these varied experiences without assuming that every individual responds to God in the same way.

6. Findings

6.1 Human Experience of God in Relation to Life Experiences: In good and bad life experiences, human experience of God is different. Happiness, success, suffering, and disappointment contribute to the process with which people experience, relate to, and even understand God.

6.2 Faith and Interpretation: Life experiences and interpretation enrich faith but do more than that. Interpretation of the varieties of life experience: Hope, surrender, doubts, prayer, questioning, thankfulness.

6.3 Phenomenology of God's experience: The experience of God is an active part of human life, based on the living experiences, interpretation of life, interpretation as a search for meaning today.

7. Conclusion

The present study examined the human experience of God in relation to changing circumstances of life such as joy, triumph, suffering, and frustration. It brings to light the fact that people can experience and interpret God differently in response to their living conditions. Good conditions can lead to thankfulness, hope, and the divine; bad conditions can lead to prayer, submission, questioning, doubt, and searching for meaning. But the other experiences do not always indicate the depth of faith.

The phenomenological approach to God experiences involves meanings people use to ascribe the lived experience in their lives. It is neither uniform nor limited to particular circumstances but reflects the diverse ways in which individuals relate to the divine in their everyday lives. Therefore, this relationship must be viewed as today, through uncertainties, individual struggles and victories, changing human life expectations. Indeed, the experience of God reveals not only how humans respond to happiness and suffering but also how humans understand their existence and address the uncertainties of life, define meanings beyond the present state. In this respect, the experience of God in human life is a very intimate and active aspect of human existence.

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