

Religious Experience Knowledge Organiser

Key words

Conversion experience: an experience which produces a radical change in someone's belief system e.g. St Paul.

Corporate religious experience: religious experience which happens to a group of people "as a body" e.g. the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost

Mystical experience: experience of God or of the supernatural which goes beyond everyday sense experience e.g. Isaiah.

Naturalistic explanation: an explanation referring to natural rather than supernatural causes.

Neurophysiology: an area of science which studies the brain and the nervous system.

Numinous experience: an indescribable experience which invokes feelings of awe, worship and fascination e.g. wind in the willows.

Principle of credulity: Swinburne's principle that we should usually believe what our senses tell us we are perceiving.

Principle of testimony: Swinburne's principle that we should usually trust that other people are telling us the truth.

What is a religious experience?

- There are different understandings of religious experience. Some believe it refers to any type of religious context, whereas others believe it refers to a specific life-changing event
- Religious experience can sometimes be personal but also corporate (Muslim pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca and the Eucharist within Christianity), others will say it refers to dramatic events out of the ordinary.
- **So what is religious experience?** Numinous experiences, perceptions of visions, near death experiences, perceptions of voices and conversion experiences are all examples of religious experiences.

Some issues with religious experiences

- All experiences have to be understood through language and language is shaped by the culture from which it comes. Are people describing the same experience?
- Are religious experiences genuine encounters with something that exists in reality? Or are they the result of overactive imaginations/hallucinations that can be explained by science?

Influence of religious experience

- There are stories in many holy books and experiences of central figures in religion that have shaped traditions.
- On a personal level they can change people's lives
- Collective groups have drawn on the experience of others in the formation of doctrines and practices e.g. in the case of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) on the Night of Power.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834)

- Claimed essence of religion was in personal experience and should be at the heart of faith.
- Believed that every person had a consciousness of the divine but in many it is obscured. Religious people are those that are aware of, and try to develop, the divine.
- He believed that religious experience is self-authenticating.
- He thought that doctrines such as the creed were attempts by individuals to understand their religious experiences.
- He believed religious experiences should have priority and statements of belief should be formulated to fit them.
- He called religion '*a sense and taste for the infinite*' and '*the feeling of absolute dependence*' - An individual's religious experience was based on the sense of being wholly dependent. He believed Christianity was the highest of religions because in Jesus there was the only example of someone with complete 'God - consciousness'

William James (1842-1910)

- Wrote probably the best known book ever on religious experiences '*The varieties of religious experiences*' in 1902.
- His aim was to take an objective stance, to take personal accounts of religious experience seriously and to make observations about them which he hoped would lead to significant insights
- He looks at how conversion can be understood - his understanding is the term relates to a process where someone is divided and conscious of being wrong and unhappy becomes much more confident about what is right as a 'consequence of a firmer hold on religious realities'
- He believed that up to a point, experiences could be tested for validity. The real test of what happened is the long-term change in a person.
- James identified four main qualities of a religious experience: 1) Ineffability 2) Noetic quality 3) Transience 4) Passivity

Rudolph Otto (1869 - 1937)

- Tried to identify what it was about a religious experience that made it religious, rather than just an experience. He wanted to show that it was fundamental to religion that individuals should have a sense of a personal encounter with natural forces, which he described as '*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*' - an awe-inspiring, fascinating mystery
- Said the divine would have three main qualities: 1) Quality of mystery, 2) God is recognised as being of ultimate importance, 3) God has a quality that is both attractive and dangerous
- Said that ordinary language could not do justice to religious experience, because it is an experience unlike others. All the person who has had the experience can do is try and describe his/her feelings during the experience, rather than explain what was giving rise to the feelings.

Mystical experience

- They are dramatic events where people see visions and hear voices, times where people feel that in some way they have encountered and perhaps been united with God, moments where people feel an overwhelming sense of being in the presence of God, experiences of God or the supernatural which go beyond everyday sense experience.
- When people have mystical experience, they feel they have reached an understanding of spiritual truth, which cannot be accessed through the use of reason and 'normal' sense experience alone.
- Lots of accounts of events where individuals felt that they had encountered God on a deep personal level.
- These writings convey a sense of mystery and the otherness of God, feelings of great peace but also a realisation that God will always remain beyond human comprehension/knowledge.

Happold's study of mysticism

- Presented a study of mysticism in the 1960's - his book '*Mysticism, A Study and Anthology*' reflected sense of a personal search for truth might involve looking at religious belief systems outside, as well as inside, traditional Christianity.
- He writes about how he understands mysticism as underlying religion in all its forms and how it depends on the non-rational, intuitional side of human understanding.
- Happold argues there are lots of strikingly similar features of mysticism, including:
 - The mystic understands that this physical, material world is only a part of reality, and that it comes from a 'Divine Ground'
 - Human nature is such that people can know the 'Divine Ground', not through reason but intuition
 - People have two distinct natures: the ego, which is the part of which we are always conscious, and the spiritual 'eternal self', 'the spark of divinity within him'
 - The purpose of humanity is to discover this 'eternal self' and to unite it with the 'Divine Ground'

Christian mysticism and numinous experience

- Visions and voices from God are forms of experience that people think of when they consider mystical religious experience.
- Examples; the Virgin Mary, Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-18), Bernadette of Lourdes.

Numinous experience

- By nature, difficult to define.
- According to Otto, numinous experiences are at the heart of all religious experience. He describes it as 'the distinctive experience of God, at once ineffably transcendent, remote, yet stirring a recognition that here is the primary source of beauty and love' (The Idea of the Holy, 1917, p.158)
- These are times when the individual feels: a new and deeper understanding of reality, touched on a different dimension, filled with a sense of awe and wonder. The experience itself may be fleeting, but the effects can be lasting.

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Conversion experience

An experience which produces a radical change in someone's belief system. E.g. Saul's conversion from Acts 9:1-22.

- Conversion experience refers to when someone abandons an old way of life and adopts a new one, based on the experience. Most conversion experiences tend to follow a pattern: a) the individual is unhappy with current 'system of ideas' b) the person searches for a basis on which to make a decision c) there is a point of crisis d) followed by a sense of peace and joy e) gives them a change of direction and a new sense of purpose in life.



William James on conversion experiences:

- If after a conversion experience the person is happier, kinder, more loving and more positive this is enough evidence to suggest that the conversion experience was valid.
- Christian believers might support James' argument if the Bible refers to 'evidence' of the Holy Spirit as a way for Christians to test their experiences and the claims of others.
- Conversion experiences can be the subject of controversy as it could be argued that they are the result of social and psychological factors rather than the result of the activity of God.



Corporate religious experience

- Religious experiences which happen to a group of people 'as a body' Examples; the story of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the experiences of those reported in the town of Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the 'Toronto Blessing'

How might religious experience be understood?

- Through a personal encounter with God for some. For others it can be explained in other ways which do not involve belief in God.
- Sometimes they can be used to support an a posteriori argument for the existence of God. Some say other natural explanations are more convincing.

Richard Swinburne



- We should treat reports of religious experience the same as other experiences- **BELIEVE THEM!** Religious experiences can be used as evidence for the existence of God. They should be taken seriously/ we should believe them and take them at face value.
- He uses the following two principles to support this claim: the Principle of Credulity (PoC) and the Principle of Testimony (PoT)

Strengths of Swinburne

- Uses the 'cumulative argument' - suggests that if we take all the arguments from the existence of God, these arguments are stronger when taken together, so the argument that religious experiences show the existence of God strengthens those arguments and is strengthened by them.
- His conclusion is supported by the testimony of others who claim to have similar experiences of God, and we can see changes to lifestyle.
- When he says that if someone really believes they've had a religious experience they will have a change of lifestyle and there is often a change of lifestyle - strong evidence for the reliability of the claim.

Weaknesses of Swinburne

- Martin - atheist - argued Swinburne's principles can also lead to the conclusion there is no God
- Gale - he argues religious experience is not the same as other experiences and therefore usual rules about accepting things at face value do not apply
- If every single person who has had a religious experience believed completely that it was an experience of God, it would still not prove God is the right explanation
- Swinburne is saying that since normal sense experiences are reliable, religious experiences are reliable evidence of God's existence - that requires a huge leap of faith



Ludwig Feuerbach



- Naturalistic explanation of religious beliefs and feelings - an explanation referring to natural rather than supernatural causes
- He argued that belief and religious experience are in the mind and not from God. He believed that humans are only worshipping their own human nature **NOT** God. People created God in **THEIR OWN** image, in order to meet their needs.

Sigmund Freud

- People who feel themselves in the presence of God are deluded.
- Argues that the human psyche works on more than one level and has three layers; the ego; the id; the super-ego. Freud thought people who believe that they encounter a God are fooling themselves. He argued that people mistake the moral commands of their own super egos as being the voice of God. He thought that some people are unable to cope with the idea of adult life, and so they invent a parent-figure who will look after them.



Critique of Freud (ish) - Winnicott; argued we need illusion and imagination to make sense of ourselves and our place in the world and to give it significance. He argues that illusion of religious experience becomes 'madness' when the person tries to impose his or her illusions on to others and expects them to give it credibility as 'real'.

Physiological interpretation of religious experience

- Neurophysiology - an area of science which studies the brain and nervous system. Experiment by Persinger in the 1980's has raised the possibility that religious experiences could be explained by natural, rather than supernatural, causes.



Near death experiences

- Sometimes reported by people whose hearts may have stopped beating. Mobbs and Watts argue that some of the medication used to treat patients suffering severe trauma could account for some of the sensations reported in near-death experiences. Could be argued that physiology offers a more plausible explanation of religious experience than that it comes from God.

Discussing religious experience; is personal testimony enough to support the validity of a religious experience?

- Some would say no as experiences cannot be tested by others and this makes them unsuitable for scientific study as these experiences cannot be repeated.
- Even if we try to copy the circumstances we cannot make the same experiences happen ourselves.

Discussing religious experience; does personal witness have evidential force?

- Agreement: Swinburne - Principle of Testimony. James - if we can see long-lasting effects = St Paul.
- Disagreement; Bertrand Russell - 'The fact that a belief has a good moral effect upon a man is no evidence whatsoever in favour of its truth'

Discussing religious experience; can corporate religious experiences be considered more reliable than individual experiences?

- They can be more reliable = if several people give the same details and report the same thing happening (e.g. children in Bosnia seeing the Virgin Mary) However others argue because they were brought up the same they knew what the statues looked like
- People might want to feel included (Toronto Blessing some argue there was a heightened emotional atmosphere rather than it being caused by the Holy Spirit)

Discussing religious experience; does religious experience provide a basis for belief in God or a greater power?

- Some argue they are only authoritative for people who have them
- Religious experience cannot be tested by others in a way that might be said to provide conclusive proof.
- Because religious experience is unique to the individual it cannot be validated. For others, they hold great authority (E.g. Muslims and the Prophet Muhammad PBUH)

Strengths and Weaknesses of religious experience

Strengths

- Many claim to have been influenced by other people's experiences, which they would take as authoritative. Muslims take the religious experiences of the Prophet Muhammad to be supremely authoritative and they are the basis of a lot of the beliefs and practices within the religion.



Weakness

- Those who prefer a naturalistic interpretation of religious experience might point out that Francis of Assisi had religious experiences after severe illness so might have been hallucinating. Those present at Pentecost who claimed to have been given the Holy Spirit might have been carried away with emotion, given that it was so soon after the death of Jesus.
- Science might one day be able to explain these experiences without any reference to God.
- Religious experiences are just the result of hallucinations, they are not proof of the existence of God due to the lack of ways in which they can be verified and proven to be true.
- Critics point out that members of different faiths experience God in a way which matches their previously held beliefs;
- There are so many different types of experiences that people have and they can interpret them differently. This may be determined by culture and upbringing or a predisposition to believe in a God. It could be argued it is impossible to tell conclusively which interpretation is the right one.
- If God wants his followers to recognise him when he reveals himself to them, he is going to choose a form that they would recognise and understand.