

Religious experiences are all illusions essay



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Most arguments for the existence of God are 'a posteriori', seeking to move from experiences within the world to the existence of God rather than relying on the definition of God to prove his existence. Religious experience is an interaction with God or a feeling of connection with a higher power. It is interesting to note that William James never spoke of 'God' but of the 'spiritual', 'unseen order' or 'higher' aspects of the world. Does a person have to be sure they encountered God rather than connecting with a higher power for their experience to be classed as 'religious experience'?

The basic problem when trying to verify religious experiences is providing proof to show others that what is claimed actually did happen and that it was not simply an 'illusion'. Although there may be no evidence to fully prove religious experiences, there is also no evidence to disprove them, hence I will be looking at both sides of the argument but coming up with my own arguments that reflect my personal view that religious experiences have a real basis and are true encounters with something which we can only begin to try and comprehend. The word 'illusion' must be addressed.

If one feels one encountered something beyond the normal world but did not know whether this was God then does this mean this was only an illusion? Freud believed that 'we call a belief an illusion when a wish-fulfilment is a prominent factor in its motivation, and in doing so we disregard its relation to its reality, just as the illusion itself sets no store by verification.' This suggests Freud believed that we only see the things which we would like to see. Freud's view is that things which are not provable can only be classed as illusion.

Therefore if we cannot prove religious experience at all, Freud would place all experiences, whether with God or a higher power, in the same category; illusion. Swinburne came up with five categories for religious experience to show the many variations of religious experience that can be had, however this does not prove whether these 'religious experiences' are encounters with God or a high power, or are tricks of the mind. Swinburne pointed out that religious experience is authoritative for the individual receiving it, even though others hearing about it may remain sceptical.

He identified three types of evidence that may give us reasons for doubting the claimed experience. Firstly, if the circumstances surrounding the experience make the results unreliable e. g. hallucinatory drugs, secondly, if we have evidence to show that things were not as reported e. g. we know the person was not where they claimed to be when they had the experience, and thirdly if there is evidence to show the experience wasn't caused by God, such as if the person had a fever or had been fasting. Although Swinburne gave these reasons for doubting the claimed experience, we can doubt the experience as being true but cannot know for sure.

Must we simply accept we can never know if a religious experience is true as we have no means of testing it? Swinburne believed if a person is trustworthy in every other sense and claims to have had a religious experience and we have no evidence contrary to this claim then we should believe them. He called this the principle of testimony. Swinburne also presents a second principle, the principle of credulity. How things seem to be is a good guide to how they are, therefore if a person claims to have had a

religious experience then it is reasonable to assume that this is what happened, providing there were no hallucinating drugs involved.

Again, these are just theories. They show no proof and are not a fool-proof guide for either proving or disproving the claimed experience. However there are arguments against this theory. Some argue that religious experience is not the same as other types of experience and so usual rules about when to accept an experience at face value do not apply, as this experience does not appeal to the five senses only. Swinburne needs to show evidence which supports the view that religious experiences should be treated in the same way as other ordinary types of experience for scholars to accept his proposition.

We must appreciate that if God is beyond the limited physical world of objects that are known through the senses then he cannot be experienced. Otto believed that religion must be derived from a separate being from this world. He believed religious experience was a personal experience of the numinous that brought feelings of awe-inspiring holiness. Otto thought that the numinous couldn't be successfully described using everyday human language as the experience is beyond ordinary experiences perceived by our senses. Words that are used tend to get close to experience but cannot pin it down.

Otto called the words used to describe the experience its schema, but believed this schema was only an attempt to find words that could begin to describe the experience although the idea is inexpressible. Otto was developing the ideas of Schleiermacher who believed the essence of religion

was based in personal experience. He thought that religious experience is 'self-authenticating' and requires no other testing to see if it is genuine. He believed experiences should have priority and statements of belief should be formatted to fit them. Also, James considered that religious experiences lie at the heart of all religion.

We have to consider whether religions would have been founded and held a belief so strong for so long unless they were based on significant experiences. Surely the answer to this question must be no, meaning the founders of the religion had what they believed to be a life changing significant religious experience. This makes perfect sense to me, as religion is nothing unless it is practiced in the world by people and these experiences occur in the real world, confirming to the person that their faith is real. If a person believes they experienced God, they need no validation to prove this to themselves, they simply know.

This is however a subjectivist point of view that religious experience is true for the believer. A subjectivist view would say that what is important about religious experiences is the effect on the believer. The meaning of a religious experience is the meaning given to it by the believer. It is sometimes argued however that subjectivist views 'dilute' religious experience so that it does not actually matter whether they are encounters with God or not. They may think they had a religious experience when in fact they just experienced a strong emotion.

This does not seem consistent with many reports of religious experience such as those contained within the bible which are described as vivid real

encounters. However I personally believe that religious experiences as described in the bible should not be taken literally as they are expressive ways of describing what the people felt to be happening to them personally. Nevertheless, I do believe these are genuine religious experiences and if a person truly believes they encountered God and speak with passion and genuine humble belief about this, this to me is not 'diluting' religious experience. Do we live in the same world as God?

If we humans and God belong to different worlds, it seems logical to believe that we cannot experience one another. We belong to 'this' world, the world Kant called the 'phenomenal' world. God is transcendent and beyond this world, therefore not part of it. Kant would say God belonged to the 'noumenal' world, therefore beyond what we can experience and therefore unknowable. I think Kant's view on religious experience is based on this reasoning, as he rejected all claims to religious experience because God belongs to the noumenal world, whereas we humans can only detect the phenomenal world through our senses.

James did not try to prove religious experiences true or false, but tried looking at them objectively. He believed that a religious experience doesn't have to be marked by dramatic supernatural events, but thought the real test of whether a religious experience actually took place was the long term change in the person; he was a pragmatist and believed the truth of something was determined by its practical effects. He felt that religious experience could have a power which takes over the individual's life, changing it forever.

Again, this is just a theory which cannot prove or disprove the experience as being an encounter with God. All of the theories discussed cannot overcome the problem which is the following; there is no tangible proof to prove God has been or can be experienced. Although one may think God spoke to them, this is a subjective opinion and not objective proof that is recognised by all. It is an interpretation of the senses and the account of the experience would vary if different people were to explain it because the understanding of what was experienced would vary greatly between person to person.

There is no way of evaluating the validity of these 'experiences', and all ways of trying to do this are only personal opinions, this being something which no theory can overcome. A strong argument against the idea that all experiences are illusions is the fact they have many features in common. Such features are a kind of light- 'an all encompassing light', 'light seemed to envelop me', also feelings of love- 'a strange access to love', and a feeling of oneness. The experiences occur unexpectedly during everyday activities and are sometimes brought on by music.

Some people even claim that their experience with God has left physical marks on their bodies, for example stigmata, which they arguably use as tangible evidence. Are these features coincidental or do they prove there is a real basis for religious experience? There are so many accounts from across the ages and the world which include common features that seems to suggest these universal experiences could have a real basis. The following are some of the religious experience accounts found in the bible from across the ages.

In Genesis 32, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious stranger who proclaims ' you have struggled with god'. Has Jacob ' seen God face to face'? The metaphor of light is continued here when the man worries ' daylight is coming'. In kings 19, Elijah speaks with God. Elijah is in a state of misery as he proclaims ' I am the only one left and they are trying to kill me'. Elijah is in a state of misery and about to give up-again this is a common trend for when religious experiences occur.

We can see the metaphor of light used again in the three accounts of the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus in Acts of the Apostles. Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him', 'a bright light from heaven flashed around me'. In Matthew 17, Jesus is transformed ' with dazzling light' and is seen with Moses and Elijah. A voice from a cloud then speaks to Peter. In II Corinthians 12 Paul gives accounts of visions and revelations from heaven. Would these all have been recorded if there were no real basis to them? However an argument in the favour that religious experiences are illusions is the idea that these ' experiences' may be caused by mind expanding drugs or a state of drunkenness.

The ' illusion' may appear to be very real at the time to the person, but it may be all in the mind and due to hallucination. For example, an imbalance of chemicals in the mind or the onset of blindness can cause the brain to ' see' memories, rather than what is actually being detected by the eyes. This is so, but I believe these to be the minority of cases and a true believer would acknowledge the source of the religious experience as being false and not sent by God. Categories and tests have been compiled to test whether

an experience was itself a religious experience or not; therefore simply an illusion.

In the 16th century, Teresa of Avila came up with a ' protocol' for identifying a religious experience as real, which would allow the experience to be taken seriously by Christians. The religious experience had to be within the traditions of the church, discussed with a spiritual advisor to decide whether the experience should be taken seriously and there should be some sort of change in the person's life for the experience to be true. This third view is in accordance with James's thinking as well as Otto's.

However, again these protocols and other tests' are still only an individual's personal view point of what it is that makes for a religious experience, and all people may not agree conclusions derived by these ' tests'. Would religious experiences as recorded in the bible pass these ' tests'? If we use Teresa of Avila's three points to prove religious experience we can apply these to Paul's conversion. Is the experience within the traditions of the church-yes the Christian church, but Paul was then a Jew and he was trying to persecute all those who worshipped the Lord Jesus Christ.

Would this qualify as a religious experience as Paul did not previously belong to the Christian church as there was no such thing? The experience was not discussed with a spiritual advisor, however Paul was sent to Damascus to meet with Ananias who told him all that the Lord had decided for him. The experience had an enormous life change for Paul, and his life was effectively never the same from this point as he would now dedicate his life to preaching Gods message, the opposite of what he was doing before. Teresa

of Avila would therefore believe Paul's conversion was a true religious experience with God.

An argument for religious experience is that if on any other grounds one believes in God, it would be reasonable and even logical to expect to experience that God somehow. However a weakness in this argument is that each religious experience is determined by the person's beliefs as well as cultural and religious background. For example, a Christian would experience a Christian God teaching Christian values and a Hindu would experience a Hindu God teaching Hindu values. If these experiences are all valid and truly real from the highest power that is God, would they not be constant?

Different religions present very different experiences and interpretations of religion however is this necessarily a problem? I believe it to be very logical that even though each religion has their varying experiences of different Gods and teachings, God may send all of these experiences. Perhaps he can only relate to people via their religion, therefore will teach them good values and give wisdom through these many different religions in order to do good and try to shape people to reflect ' the image of God'.

Perhaps God is teaching the same values and lessons but via the varying channels of religion each person belongs to. Jung agreed with Feuerbach and Freud that religious beliefs were the result of projection from the unconscious. The collective unconscious is Jung's term for the cluster of images which he called archetypes, in the unconscious mind, providing a source of religious images. This suggests that Jung would deny the idea of

God showing himself during a religious experience, believing the idea of God to be self induced.

The verification principle states that unless a statement is analytical or synthetic, it is meaningless. Seeing as a claim about religious experience does not have internal logic to provide it with meaning nor has empirical evidence to show that it is true, it is meaningless. Ayer was a logical positivist, and believed empirical evidence must be used to make a statement meaningful. Therefore religious statements cannot be meaningful as they cannot be verified. Again though, this theory is just an opinion.

R. M Hare put forward the notion of a ' blik'. This means that whatever belief a person holds in regard to religious experience, they are going to perceive everything in accordance to this blik, regardless of what is actually true. For example if it is true that God does not exist, then obviously there would be no experience of him, therefore all seeming experiences of him must be due to the person's idea or ' blik' that in fact God does exist and can be experienced.

In the same way, if there were a true religious experience, it would be open to non-religious interpretation and non-religious persons would see these experiences as being false, due to their blik. The logical positivists claim the idea of experiencing God is meaningless and he cannot be experienced, therefore they would interpret the accounts of experiencing God in another non-religious way, due to their blik.

In conclusion, it is my personal opinion that religious experiences are true insights to something beyond this world which we cannot perceive with our

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senses. I do not believe that world religions would ever have had or remain to have such a fundamental importance in the day to day lives of so many people if they were not founded on a belief that was so strong as a result of religious experience, this experience being the ultimate confirmation and assurance that their belief is truly valid and part of something indescribable. The fact has to be accepted that there will never be any objective proof to show that God has been or can be experienced. Therefore if someone will never be convinced otherwise unless they observe some tangible objective proof it is highly unlikely their view point or 'blik' towards religious experience will ever change.