

The suggestion that it
is pointless to
analyse religious
experiences



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A religious experience is defined as a non-empirical event in which the individual(s) concerned makes direct contact with 'a higher entity' (in relation to or associated with God), and experiences a sense of wonder, insight, holiness and profundity. To this end, the individual may interpret the experience by following an experimental or a prepositional approach: the former allows the experience to speak for itself, without trying to define exactly what happened, whilst the latter extracts from the experience certain definitive propositions, which are then claimed to be religious truths. As a result, when we come to examine such events, we must therefore consider whether it leads to an exclusivist or inclusivist interpretation. For example, if an individual claims that the particular experience, such as Muhammad hearing and reciting the words of the Qur'an offers a unique and infallible truth - the words of the Qur'an are believed to be the words of Allah - then they will have a corresponding authority.

However, alternatively, an inclusivist might be willing to accept that the Qur'an contains valid religious truth, but not that it can claim absolute truth. In view of this, it is significant to acknowledge that there are various forms of religious experiences, including prayer; revelation (Martin Luther discovering that 'salvation comes by faith alone'); conversion (St. Paul on the road to Damascus) and mysticism (St. Teresa of Avila and the events described from Medjugorje in Bosnia).

In order to examine and consider the value of such experiences it is important to make reference to Friedrich Schliermacher, who argued that religious awareness was a profound and essential element in human life and culture - in 'On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers', he described <https://assignbuster.com/the-suggestion-that-it-is-pointless-to-analyse-religious-experiences/>

such events in this way: "The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal". William James, in 'The Varieties of Religious Experience', also provides support for this view, by referring to the unification of the self and the sense of there being a higher controlling power during such experiences: he describes these events as a process of moving from 'tenseness, self-responsibility and worry' towards 'equanimity, receptivity and peace'. Further support for the view that such events are meaningful is also evident in Rudolph Otto's, 'The Idea of the Holy', in which he puts forward the idea that religious experience could be explained as being an encounter with something awesome and fascinating: he described the object of such events as 'mysterium tremendum et fascinas', and spoke of this as an encounter with the 'numinous', a term used to indicate a particular quality of awe-inspiring holiness. Additional support for the importance attributed to religious experience is also expressed by Martin Buber, who argued, in 'I and Thou', that we have two different forms of relationships: I-It (which are impersonal) and I-Thou (which are personal).

For Buber, the relationship with God was 'I-Thou', in which God represented the 'Eternal Thou', and was therefore seen as present in every other 'Thou' that we encounter (a similar view to Soren Kierkegaard). However, there have also been various challenges to the view that religious experiences are meaningful and illustrate contact with a 'higher entity'. In 'Philosophy of Religion', John Hick stated: "In short, any special event or experience which can be constituted as manifesting the divine can also be constituted in other

ways (and accordingly cannot carry the weight of a proof of God's existence)". Immanuel Kant (In a ' Critique of Practical Reason') also dismissed the validity of religious experiences on the grounds " that it is impossible to speculate about anything (originating from) beyond the limits of time and space (i. e. a spirit) when we are confined to them", whilst Ludwig Wittgenstein also expressed a very similar view, in which he famously declared in the final sentence of his work, Tractatus, " whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent".

Furthermore, it is also important to make reference to the belief advocated by Sigmund Freud, who ' In the Future of an Illusion', argued that religion (and religious events) was essentially a projection of unconscious need (an illusion) and therefore a universal obsessional neurosis: as a result, he argued that science was the only source of knowledge and that a healthy well-balanced person would not require such false comfort. Karl Marx also criticised religion (as a whole), and claimed that it was a social construct, devised by those with power, as a means to exploit the ' working class' and prevent them from possible rebellion - dialectical materialism: he argued that it was a tool of repression and thus, the ' opium of the people'. A final criticism is also noted by Maurice Wiles, who argues that if God is seen as acting in particular situations (using miracles to overcome suffering) then his action in the world can be seen as imbalanced and discriminatory. This in turn can lead to the ' problem of evil', on the grounds that not only did God create a world in which evil exists, but also, if he is omniscient and omnipotent, why does he choose to help certain people whilst ' neglecting' others - for example not preventing the Holocaust.

During the course of this essay, it has become increasingly clear that the central issue of this argument concerns the interpretation of such experiences: for example, if a theist and an atheist both witnessed the same (religious) event, it would be likely that the former would claim it was a revelation/experience of God, whilst the latter would claim that there was some other logically necessary explanation. This example brings to a head the issue and illustrates the difficulties associated with trying to convey an experience to another individual. As a result, this also directly encompasses an element of 'religious language', which is integral in describing such spiritual events. To this end, it is significant to make reference to the verification principle advocated by A. J. Ayer, which examines whether religious claims can be shown to be true, and the falsification principle (closely associated with Anthony Flew), which considers whether such statements can be shown to be false.

In conclusion, it is clearly apparent that although there are various forms of religious experience, there are also contrasting decisions between many philosophers and psychologists as to whether such events can be considered of any significance and hold any true meaning. My personal view is that such events are undoubtedly 'meaningful' for the individual who experiences them, and are therefore an important element in a believer's faith. I can also appreciate the views of Jung and Durkheim, who are not concerned with proving the validity of religious experiences (or God), but are more interested in the positive role religion has in society. However, this does not detract from the various problems associated with such events including the fact that religious experience cannot be authenticated by means of

intellectual or scientific proof (a factor which is relied upon ever more so in the modern 'scientific' era) and that each event is open to one's interpretation.