

Assess the view that the different forms of religious experience are nothing more than fantasy. (45)

The term religious experience refers to an experience a person has which has religious qualities and significance. Many people have researched into the idea of religious experiences and it is surprising to find out that a third of people in Britain have said to of experienced some kind of religious experience. These experiences have been researched to discover what impact they have on people's lives and whether this impact has a positive or negative result. Many scientists research the theory of religious experience to either prove or disprove the existence of God.

There are four main forms of religious experience which can be considered when assessing this question that religious experiences are nothing more than fantasy. The first is Mysticism; this refers to an experience where people have had an intimate direct experience with God or some kind of heavenly spirit. William James was a philosopher who approached the idea of religious experiences he wrote a book called the varieties of religious experiences and came up with the idea that there are four main qualities that an experience should have for us to justify calling it mystical. The first is the experience should have a Noetic quality or a divine knowledge after the experience. The next is Transience the experience is only short and lasts only a small while. Passivity which is the lack of control you have when the person is having the religious experience. And the last quality is ineffability which is the fact that the experience is indescribable and cannot be explained.

Julian of Norwich was a famous English mystic who was born about 1342 and at some point during her adult life joined a religious order and became an anchoress living in complete solitude. She lived in a cell which was attached to a church in Norwich, and lived a complete ascetic lifestyle. Julian just before she died became seriously ill and on her deathbed she accounted for 16 visions she had experienced. These experiences are questioned though due to Julian's poor health and cannot be used as proof for religious mystical experiences due to this reason.

A second mystic is Margery Kemp she was 14th century English mystic who was from King's Lynn in Norfolk. Margery Kemp became seriously ill after the birth of her first child and suffered from severe guilt from a past sin which had committed during her youth. She was very disturbed going to such lengths as biting through her own veins in her wrist and she also tried to jump out of a window, until one day she looked up to see Jesus and he asked her "Daughter, why have you forsaken me when I never forsook thee?" From then on Margery seemed to calm and she devoted her life to serving Christ. She had many experiences of Christ and each time Margery was overwhelmed and was seen to be crying. Margery went on many pilgrimages and even at one point was seen being chased by a mob from the shrine of St Thomas Becket after she was crying profusely.

From these experiences of which many questions could be asked are very unreliable and couldn't be taken as proof for real religious experiences and meetings with a higher power.

The next form of religious experience would be Conversion experiences. These are experiences which change a person and the direction in which their life is going. They transform a person's life and their attitude. A good example of this would be Nicky Cruz and his evangelical conversion experience. Cruz is the author of Run Baby Run which he wrote recalling his life as the leader of a notorious gang the Mau Maus. Cruz was raised by spiritualist parents in Puerto Rico. During his childhood he experienced severe physical and mental abuse. His parents took part in strange and disturbing practises such as when they sacrificed a goat and drank its blood. At a very young age Cruz tried to commit suicide and at 15 he was sent to live with his older brother in New York. This is where he met the gang members and eventually became the leader. Nicky committed many awful crimes and seemed unreachable and unredeemable; this was until he met a street preacher David Wilkerson who told him that Jesus loved him. This is when he experienced a dramatic conversion experience after a Christian meeting. After this he trained as a preacher and set up an outreach programme and teen challenge to help disadvantaged children. And he also managed to convert his parents to Christianity.

Another conversion experience which was miraculous was the conversion of John Wesley who saw his conversion as a moment from academic acceptance to personal trust in Christ. At the young age of 6 he was almost killed in a great house fire at his home. From then on he decided to make religion his life and was ordained in 1725. At university he set up a group of people concerned with spiritual matters they nicknamed themselves the Methodists. Wesley became a missionary and travelled to Georgia to try and convert Indian settlers here. On the way back to England he was caught in a strong storm and he feared for his life until he noticed a group of Moravian Christians on board who were remaining calm because they felt so sure of their faith and they knew God would look out for them. And then at a Christian meeting he gained assurance that he was saved on that journey home from America. He stated that his heart felt strangely warmed and had accepted and now trusted Christ this again was an evangelical conversion experience.

These are miraculous conversions and could lead to evidence of real religious experiences due to the amazing transformation both these people had, and in both cases the experience had a positive effect on their lives.

Visions are also a type of religious experience. One of the most famous visions would be the visions which appeared to three young children. These children lived in Fatima Portugal. Lucia Santos was sent to live as a shepherdess she worked with her cousin Francisco and her 6 year old sister Jacinta. On the same hillside the children saw three visions these were called the three secrets of Fatima. The first vision was a vision of hell which was shown to the children as a great sea of fire with demons and souls in human form. The second secret that was predicted was that Russia would one day return to Christianity. And the last secret was a vision of a man dressed in white falling to the ground apparently dead. This is said to be the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II. The vision was recalled and Lucia accounted exactly what happened to the pope just before he was shot at. The lady asked the children to do penance and make sacrifices to save sinners. The children wore tight ropes around their waists and deprived themselves of water and food. The lady who had appeared to them also asked them to pray

the rosary everyday. The last and most incredible thing about the predictions of the lady was that she predicted the time and date of the death of two of the children. The lady had told them when and the exact hour the children would die and that they would be saved and be with her if they followed her instructions of praying the rosary and giving penance. One thing in which makes these visions different from all the other religious experiences is the fact thousands of people experienced one of the miracles brought by the lady. The children were asked to visit the lady on the 13<sup>th</sup> October and the news of the visions had become common knowledge therefore the children were followed by great crowds of people who wanted to experience a vision of the lady. At the site where the lady appeared to the children the sun began to dance in the sky and the whole crowd witnessed it.

Many visions are recorded in the Bible such as Moses and the burning bush, which recalls the time God spoke to Moses via a burning bush and told him his plans for the Hebrews who had been enslaved in Egypt by the Pharaoh.

These visions still have many unreliable qualities it could be said that they are more convincing than the previous religious experiences mentioned. This is because for these visions many of the predictions came true and were also seen by many others.

The final form of religious experience is Revelation or divine self disclosure. Revelation can be defined as the communication of some truth by God to a rational creature. Hildegard of Bingen lived in Germany and from the age of eight she claimed that she felt God overshadowing her life. Hildegard recorded the visions she had experienced during her lifetime and she described the fact she felt she had had an insight from God about future events.

From these findings of religious experiences, and the many different forms in which they can take, has aided me in answering the question about religious experiences being only fantasy. In many of these cases the individual has been in poor health and has had some kind of traumatic experience in their past. Although some of the explanations and descriptions of the religious experience have been very realistic especially those with more

than one witness to them. Many of the experiences have been very miraculous and if they did occur, this could have been blamed on many factors such as ill health or poor diet, or even guilt and their mind was playing tricks on the person.