

Examine and Comment on a philosophical analysis of religious experience

Religious experience appears to be a unique phenomenon. Despite other reported evidence for the existence of a transcendental reality, without human experience of such a force would such evidence ever have been appealed to? It appears that religious experience can be the basis for faith and a belief in God in a way that other arguments seek merely to validate and support. WILLIAM JAMES certainly thought so, and proposed that these experiences were the catalyst for the development of organised religion. But is such a position valid and compelling? Are religious experiences in themselves an a posteriori proof for the objective reality of the divine and should they be accepted as veridical? Difficulty arises in even defining religious experiences; it seems that there are a huge number of sometimes incompatible accounts. How does one begin to classify or categorise these?

RICHARD SWINBURNE considers 5 categories in to which religious experiences fall; two public, and three private. Public experiences are those which are available to all, but on which religious significance can be placed. For example, viewing a beautiful sunset is an experience which all people can enjoy, provided they have full use of their senses and a view of the sky, but the conclusions drawn can be very different. A private experience however is available to one person or a specific group, such as the Virgin Mary's vision of the Angel Gabriel. The implication with this category is that God has chosen to reveal himself specifically to these persons.

Although sorting religious experience into categories is useful, as it can help assess relative strengths of different types of experience (for instance an external experience may have more empirical value than an internal one as they are said to have effect on the world outside the mind and may be more widely witnessed), is this an overly simplistic way of viewing such events? As they are so deeply personal the imposition of external definition, although from an intellectual point of view appears a necessity, may be unrealistic. CAROLINE FRANKS DAVIES' attempt to define religious experience as "*something akin to a sensory experience... an intellectual intuition which is analogous to our intuition of other human persons... a roughly datable mental event which the subject is to some extent aware of*"¹ may help illustrate the immense

¹ The Puzzle of God by Peter Vardy, page 115

difficulty in providing a definition that does not appear hopelessly vague. The use of such catch-all phrases as “something akin to”, “analogous” and “roughly” may seem inadequate but is perhaps more realistic than attempting to define such ineffable events in concrete terms. This indefinability has led some to assert that religious experience can have no epistemological value. BERTRAND RUSSELL for instance asserted that “*from a scientific point of view, we can make no distinction between a man who eats little and sees heaven and the man who drinks much and sees snakes*”². Here, he is making the point, somewhat controversially, that the evidence and value religious experience seeks to provide is logically speaking a sensory justification for a belief in God or the divine, but if we are to use our senses as windows to what is ‘real’ then these experiences must be veridical and effable. This points to a flaw in the argument from religious experience in that it attempts to use empiricist reasoning (sensory experience implies objective reality) whilst not withstanding any of the usual methods for empirical verification.

JOHN WISDOM’s parable (which ANTHONY FLEW believed demonstrated the futility of appealing to such experience as a basis for faith) is an illustration of the differing nature of an attempt to prove or disprove God to that of events in the phenomenal world:

*"Two people return to their long neglected garden and find, among the weeds, that a few of the old plants are surprisingly vigorous. One says... 'It must be that a gardener has been coming and doing something about these weeds.' The other disagrees.... They ...set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. The believer wonders if there is an invisible gardener, so they patrol with bloodhounds but the bloodhounds never give a cry. Yet the believer... insists that the gardener is invisible, has no scent and gives no sound. The sceptic doesn't agree, and asks how a so-called invisible, intangible, elusive gardener differs from an imaginary gardener or even no gardener at all"*³

In what way can the believer profess to have ‘experienced’ a gardener if such a belief cannot be verified or even falsified? The sceptic’s frustration at the believer’s assertions suggests that as the experience itself does not differ, it is merely personal interpretation

² ▲n Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion by Brian Davies, page 125

³ ▲n Introduction to Philosophical ▲nalysis by John Hospers, page 240

and the projection of the desire for a gardener that has created such a being. For a posteriori reasoning to be valid it appears that it must entail the possibility of being analysed effectively and thereby be vulnerable to falsification. However, the fact that religious experience does not fulfil this criterion implies that its value holds only when used in conjunction with faith and an already established belief in God. KIERKEGAARD agreed, and considered intuition and risk vital aspects of the 'leap of faith' required to 'know' God. Although he viewed religious experiences as an important foundation of faith, the existence of such experiences is clearly not a watertight proof. How far our inability to provide an adequate description or definition or carry out tests invalidates the worth of religious experience is still debatable, although it does appear extremely damaging to an ability to analyse effectively. Conversion experiences, where an individual changes their belief system based on a single experience, are an interesting phenomenon, as they seem to suggest that such experiences may not simply confirm existing ways of viewing the world (or 'blik's' as R.M. HARE termed them) but can actually conflict with and affect them.

SWINBURNE, in contrast to FLEW's deduction from the gardener parable, considers the onus to be on the sceptic to disprove the validity of religious experience rather than the reverse, and asserts that the argument is a cumulative one; it seems that the sheer weight of accounts of religious experience undermine the sceptic's ability to dismiss all. After all, if religious belief the world over hinged on one account of religious experience there may well be grounds for questioning this as a philosophically verified belief, but as religious experiences appear almost universal to human societies, surely this constitutes a compelling proof.

SWINBURNE observes *"If there is a God, one might expect him to make his presence known to man, not merely through the overall pattern of the universe in which he has placed them, but by dealing more intimately and personally with them."*⁴

I would argue that if we accept SWINBURNE's proposed personal interventionist God, then we must subject 'Him' to harsh moral scrutiny. Swinburne seems to imply that God can choose to intervene in his creation at any time, and the God

⁴ The Existence of God, by Richard Swinburne, page 237

of the Judaeo-Christian tradition that Swinburne subscribes to is said to be omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that such a divine reality would not wish to see 'his' creation in pain. As MAURICE WILES argues: "*It seems strange that no miraculous intervention prevented Auschwitz or Hiroshima whilst the purposes apparently forwarded for some of the miracles acclaimed in the Christian tradition seem trivial by comparison*".⁵ Therefore, it could be said that by virtue of this immense and inescapable inconsistency, religious experiences that suggest God is acting in order to correct injustice should be disregarded. How could they logically occur, given the proposed nature of God? Surely this would be a grave injustice on God's part; he would effectively be selecting people to help, which contradicts the idea of unconditional, universal love.

RUDOLPH OTTO offers an altogether different way of viewing experience of the divine. He uses the idea of experiencing or somehow sensing the 'numinous'. This is defined as *'the mysterium tremendum et fascinans that leads in different cases to belief in deities, the supernatural, the sacred, the holy, and the transcendent'*.⁶ This ambiguous definition illustrates the difficulty of defining and analysing a more private experience of God. He described it as an experience of an awesome and powerful being which leaves one fearful and awestruck, and is at the same time wonderful and fascinating. There is clearly a marked difference between this type of experience and the role of God in the stories of the Old Testament, when he actually speaks to prophets and instructs them. Otto suggested that during a religious experience one feels a distance from God. One also appreciates that as God is transcendent and outside of time and space this will always be the case. It appears that difficulty arises in reconciling these two conflicting natures. Can it ever be done? Is it realistic, or just overly simplistic to talk of experiencing God in the same way that one would a physical being? On the other hand many feel that Otto's description of religious experience leaves little room for the personal relationship which many religious believers feel they have. At first glance the two ideas do seem quite distinct, and one has to confront the fact that

⁵ Religious Studies, by Sarah K Tyler and Gordon Reid, page 94

⁶ Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion 1900-2000, By Eugene Thomas Long, page 148

many religious experiences seem to be conflicting. In terms of a philosophical analysis this criticism does somewhat undermine the reliability of these experiences, and the fact that the definitions are so ambiguous does undermine the ability to effectively analyse the implications of such an experience.

This difficulty in using language to describe and define religious experience is well illustrated by mysticism. During a mystical experience, one feels a complete 'oneness' with the external world (as opposed to the distance that RUDOLPH OTTO felt) and all physical barriers break down. St Teresa, one of the most renowned mystics within the Christian faith described her experiences as the "prayer of quiet" and the "prayer of union." During such prayers she frequently went into a trance, and at times entered upon mystical flights in which she would feel as if her soul were lifted out of her body. She said ecstasy was like a "detachable death" and her soul became awake to God as never before as the faculties and senses are dead. According to WILLIAM JAMES there are four distinguishing features of mystical experiences. The first is "*ineffability*"⁷; they cannot be described using language. In the same way that it would be impossible to describe the colour orange to someone who had only ever seen black and white, it is impossible for a mystic experient to meaningfully describe their experience to others.

The second is a "*noetic quality*"⁸. This relates the way mystical states seem to convey a newfound knowledge of life and the true nature of reality. JAMES also postulates that in general "*transiency*"⁹ is common to religious experience, in that they are usually brief, not longer than half an hour. Mystical experiences are usually "*passive*"¹⁰. The mystic feels that (s)he is in the grip of some other power, and cannot control when or how the experience will come, other than putting themselves in the right conditions for being receptive to one.

⁷ William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, page 537

⁸ William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, page 537

⁹ William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, page 538

¹⁰ William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, page 538

Clearly to those who feel they have experienced such an event mysticism offers evidence that there is something beyond the material, and a sense of the divine. However, while it may be a genuine mental state, the origins of this state are extremely disputable. One could argue that a religious or spiritual interpretation is extremely subjective. For this reason it seems difficult to argue that these vague and indefinable experiences hold practical value to anyone other than the experient.

For instance, FREUD would interpret these as manifestations of wishful thinking and self-delusion: "*Religion is an illusion and it derives its strength from the fact that it falls in with our instinctual desires*"¹¹ MACKIE agreed and would claim that the mind is working to convince the experient that he or she really is experiencing God; maybe a religious individual subconsciously feels that their beliefs need verification, and thus offers it unwittingly to themselves.

Support for this view can be found in the reality of conflicting testimonies. That is, claims of religious experience seem to be a universal feature of human societies, yet many of these appear directly contradictory. Logically speaking this seems to entail that not all can be true. This brings into question SWINBURNE's Principle of Testimony:

*"In the absence of special considerations the experiences of others are (probably) as they report them ... In general there are no special considerations for doubting what subjects report about their religious experiences."*¹²

This principle examines the validity of dismissing a claim of religious experience when we ordinarily accept an individual's account of events unless there is strong counter-evidence (e.g. the individual has been taking drugs). It appears a logical incongruity to not extend this equally to religious experiences. Essentially, it is this, together with SWINBURNE's Principle of Credulity that the argument from religious experience hinges on. The Principle of Credulity "*is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present, then*

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis

¹² The Existence of God, by Richard Swinburne, page 322 (PRINCIPLE OF TESTIMONY)

probably x is present."¹³ SWINBURNE suggests that it is unreasonable to assume all experiences are delusional or simply created by the mind and this supports the Principle of Testimony in suggesting that there are genuine religious experiences.

These Principles do have prima facie appeal; it does indeed appear unjustifiably sceptical to dispute or question an individual's claims without the presence of extenuating circumstances, and such an attitude is surely impractical. DAVIS agrees and argues that *"if we do not work on the assumption that what seems to be so is sometimes so, then it is hard to see how we can establish anything at all"*¹⁴ However, while SWINBURNE questions our ability to dismiss claims, religious or otherwise, is this really as reasonable a stance as he wishes to suggest? The fact that the argument does rely on these principles means that one only has to undermine the rationality of these in order to dismiss an appeal to religious experience as a reasonable and logical basis for a belief in God.

For instance, SWINBURNE's principle does not answer the question of inconsistency; religions have been inspired by religious experiences, but the vast majority claim exclusivity. The existence of testimonies of conflicting experiences appears to undermine the reliability of *all* religious experiences. The fact that the majority of religions are based on religious experience yet most claim exclusivity means that the practical implications of accepting Swinburne's principles would lead to theological contradiction. This argument is supported by the observable phenomenon that religious experiences rarely if ever consist of a deity outside the social and religious conventions of an individual. By nature, religion demands KIERKEGAARD's 'leap of faith', as religious experiences cannot be subjected to the same methods of verification as material experiences. For example, St Bernadette testified that the Virgin Mary had spoken to her, whereas witnesses could only testify that she was speaking with an unseen 'someone'. How can her experience thus be distinguished from another's experience of Allah, Vishnu or Poseidon?

¹³ The Existence of God, by Richard Swinburne, page 303

¹⁴ Religious Studies, by Sarah K Tyler and Gordon Reid, page 68

An anti-realist stance could be taken in response to the above question. The anti-realist, a term popularised by MICHAEL DUMMETT, would claim that there is no experience that is objectively more valid, but that truth is not objective, and therefore if two people believe they have had conflicting religious experiences, then one or both are not wrong, because there is no one truth. Truth does not exist independently of the mind in the view of an anti-realist, but rather something becomes true for someone because they believe it to be so.

This is an interesting way of examining the argument. However, religious believers and advocates of religious experience might disagree, as such experiences are believed to confirm the unconceptualised objective reality of a divine being. An anti-realist response to using religious experience as evidence of this means we would be at a loss, as the guiding idea is that nothing can be proven or disproven, as nothing truly exists outside the mind. Therefore is it really practical to use this viewpoint when evaluating the intrinsic worth of religious experience?

Another way of dismissing this problem of conflicting testimonies is to argue that all experiences can be reduced to a common core, as JOHN HICK and NINIAN SMART have maintained. Hence, experiences do not conflict but doctrines do. It seems reasonable that God would appear in a form recognisable to the recipient of an experience. However, while this may be proposed as an argument for the existence of the concept of God, it appears to count against traditional monotheism. Many would maintain that God would never deliberately deceive a believer and appear in a form that was merely symbolic.

One could also claim that the likelihood of an experience occurring is relative to the likelihood of the object of that experience existing. Hence, if we argue the concept of God is a virtual impossibility on the grounds of the existence of evil in the world, we can reasonably hold any religious experience as impossible or at least highly unlikely. For example, there are many eye-witness accounts of the Loch Ness monster and alien abductions yet due to the absence of other reliable evidence these are held to be compelling for the experient only. This criticism also responds to SWINBURNE's Principles, explaining why they may not apply to religious experiences. However, DAVIS maintains that this is a subjective view and relies on accepting responses to the

problem of evil as invalid. She argues the question is still sufficiently open for religious experiences to be evidential rather than dismissed by their very nature.

It seems the question being asked is whether religious experiences have perennial value? Can they be accepted as proof of some metaphysical being which individuals gain access to, if only fleetingly; are they veridical? Their reliability is undermined by the contradictory nature of different experiences. For example, Mormons frequently appeal to a 'burning in the bosom' as a validation of their faith, yet Amos and Isaiah were told by God that the Jews were 'God's people'. Surely then, a believer who appeals to religious experience as a proof for their beliefs can be countered by an equally well verified account for a contradictory set of beliefs. Although this does not nullify the 'truth' of all religious experience, the very nature of such an experience in resisting corroboration by independent evidence makes it virtually impossible to distinguish 'genuine' experience from those which are 'delusional'. Even adequately describing a religious experience appears virtually impossible, and thus they are difficult to view as reliable evidence. However, clearly for experiencers they offer irrefutable evidence that something exists beyond the physical, an ultimate reality. But this is a deeply personal thing; as WILLIAM DOUGLAS said: "*Religious experiences which are as real as life to some may be incomprehensible to others*"¹⁵. In some ways this could be regarded as an anti-realist viewpoint, but it illustrates the difficulty in conveying a religious experience to others, and how this affects its worth for philosophers. If religious experience purportedly provides reason and evidence to support the concept of God then realistically the multitude of conflicting and equally unveridical experiences means that it would be a use of flawed reasoning to accept one view of God on this basis. Although DAVIS claims the argument is a cumulative one, one could equally assert that as a result of cumulative weaknesses such as our inability to effectively analyse or accept the reliability of such experiences, the concept fails to have academic and philosophical worth and becomes an article of faith rather than an intellectually valid and verified belief.

¹⁵ http://www.teachingaboutreligion.org/TeachingMaterials/snippet_b.htm