Religious Experience

William James was a nineteenth-century theologian who was specifically interested in the religious experience and mystical experiences. He developed the following terms:

Ineffability: the nature of religious experience which is beyond human words

Noetic quality: being beyond the knowledge of normality

Transiency: the short-lived nature of a religious experience (but it may nonetheless effect great change in the person having it).

Passivity: a religious experience as being sourced from outside the individual and having an impact on them.

Rudolph Otto was a Christian Protestant theologian who examined the nature of religious experience. He believed that a religious experience was defined by being numinous, which means the presence of the divine – an experience of what is considered wholly 'other' to the ordinary, experience of human beings.

He developed the following terms: Mysterium: the mystery of religious experience Tremendum: sense of swe at religious

experiences

Fascions: fascination with the divine

Mystical experiences are a subsection of religious experiences. These are specifically defined as experiences of the numinous – the beyond.

Walter Stace believes that a mystical experience should be understood as a non-sensuous and non-intellectual union with the divine. During this experience the self will cease to be. The self is usurped by 'pure consciousness'. On this basis, he would not consider a vision to be a mystical experience, as visions are sensory (i.e. vision).

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Religious Experience

Religious experiences can be divided into two different categories:

Religious experience

A religious experience is an

experience of some Unimote

Reality – an all-powerful, ineffable being.

- Direct religious experience (contact with God / an ultimate reality); for example, the conversion of Paul to Christianity and the giving of the Qur'an to Muhammad.
- Indirect religious experience (an internal sense of something other than this world); for example, the many mystical experiences of St Teresa of Avila in which she felt God's presence.

Prayer

Prayer

Types of fieligious
Experience

Meditation

Experience

Conversion

Corporate

There are different kinds of visions within religious experience – such as corporeal, imaginative and intellectual. These are defined as follows:

Corporeal - a vision which is external to the body

Imaginative - a vision which takes place within the mind

Intellectual - a vision which gives only knowledge/ understanding/revelation

Verifying Religious Experience (1)

Richard Swinburne developed two principles which he held gave weight to the likelihood that religious experiences are as experiencers glaim.

- Principle of verification: that unless there is evidence against a claim, we should believe the testimony of individuals.
- Principle of credulity: that unless there is evidence against a claim. we should believe that things are as they appear to be

However, things are often not as they seem - for example, when hallucinations are involved!

Swinburne is making an almost common-sense appeal that we should not instantly assume people who have had a religious experience are lying or mounderstood what they saw. While good principles for life, are these strong enough as an argument for God's existence?

Richard Swinburne's Principles of Testiments and Credulity

drugs

Verifying Religious Experience (1)

Hallucinogenic

Signund Freud

TIE

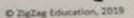
This is a condition which affects the temporal lobe of the brain. Those afflicted with TLE are reported to have had experiences which can be compared almost directly to religious experiences. Therefore, this can be seen as an explanation for religious experiences without the need for God. It has been suggested that perhaps those who have been traditionally viewed as having experienced pivotal religious visions (e.g. St Paul) may have suffered from this condition.

Many have pointed out that religious experiences could be explained by the consumption of drugs which might have caused the individual to hallucinate. For example, some drugs, such as LSD, are known to cause halfucinations. They have been known to stimulate certain regions of the brain, such as the temporal lobes and the frontal lobes. These parts of the brain are known to be connected to the experience of religious experiences due to scientific experiments such as the God Helmet by Michael Persinger.

> The observation of the effect that stimulation of the brain by drugs, the God Helmet or a preexisting condition such as TLE, can cause experiences which are very similar to religious experiences is considered evidence in science that religious experiences come from the brain, not from God. These ideas are supported by scientific investigation and findings.

Freud was an Austrian psychoanalyst, He viewed religion, and religious experience by extension, as being the result of the mind's need to give meaning and structure to existence. For example, by believing in God, individuals are comforted that there is more to life than their experiences, and that death is not the end. it helps us manage our fear of what we do not know and cannot control. However, Freud argues that such fears are themselves childish and misguided. He argues that this want to believe in something bigger than ourselves drives. people to have religious experiences in order to validate their neurosis.

Scientific Challenges



Firstly, a religious individual might critique Freud's ideas about religious experiences by pointing out that Freud's argument is not based on any scientific evidence whatsoever. It appears to only express an opinion, albeit an opinion based on his theory of psychoanalysis. The issue they might point to is that Freud's theory, while well known, is known to be one which is critiqued for lack of scientific development and effort to back up his claim. They would argue that this viewpoint regarding religious experience is little different from his theories on conscience.

Another religious response to this is that the scientific theories regarding TLE and the use of hallucinogenic drugs do not disprove the existence of God in religious experiences; they merely show us how our brains process them. Theoretically, all these scientific emdeavours show is which areas of the brain are stimulated when a religious experience occurs – and, of course, if you stimulate them artificially, then you will experience a similar feeling. To find the part of the brain which processes light is not to state that light does not exist. Therefore, the same cannot be said for religious experience.

William James himself does not specify a specific way to achieve a mystical experience – theoretically, according to his definition it could be sought, such as through the use of halfutinogenic drugs. The argument follows that the God of religions such as Christianity is both personal and creative – indeed, he is believed to have created human beings. Therefore, if such a God could be considered to be relational, then it makes a lot of sense for human brains to contain a part which enables them to experience a mystical experience. It is a way for God to interact with human beings. God in such religions is seen as personal, and, therefore, followers of those religions would not consider such scientific challenges to be challenges at all!

Religious Responses to Scientific challenges

Verifying Religious Experience (2)

The two main religious responses to the issue of the temporal lobes of the brain are represented in the diagrams below:

The Interactive Model

Represents the idea that God or the divine can be approached by the believer and the believer can interact with this higher power through religious experiences. These can be interpreted through the brain and potentially achieved through stimulation.



The Top-down Model

Represents the idea that God or the divine gives religious experiences, which are interpreted through the brain.

