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Religious experience

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Countless individuals claim to have had a religious experience of one sort or another. One study indicates that at least thirty percent of the global population has had such an experience.¹ For some, these experiences provide first-hand evidence or proof for the reality of what the experiencer (the one having the experience) believes in and perhaps even for his or her religion as a whole. For others, they are illusions or delusions, psychological experiences brought on by a number of different but purely natural factors. In this chapter we will explore the meaning and diversity of religious experience. We will examine arguments which claim that religious experience provides justification for religious beliefs and rebuttals to those arguments. We will also look at attempts to offer purely naturalistic explanations of religious experience.

THE NATURE AND DIVERSITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Everyone has experiences, and each of these experiences is unique to the one having it, for I cannot experience your experiences and you cannot experience my experiences. Some of my experiences are similar to yours, however, and vice versa. For example, I am now having the experience of grasping the meaning of the words in this sentence. And so are you. But chances are we have each had experiences completely unlike what the other has had. There are also those who have had experiences that you and I cannot even fathom – some religious, some not. In this chapter we are focusing on religious experience. So what is a religious experience?

What is a religious experience?

In a broad sense religious experience refers to any experience of the sacred within a religious context, including religious feelings, visions, and mystical and numinous experiences.² A religious experience is intensely personal, and it often occurs in the midst of such religious practices as prayer, meditation, worship, chanting, or the performance of other religious ritual. Many times such experiences occur in a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, monastery, or other holy place. But religious experiences have been recorded in any number of circumstances and locations. There are three general features which are common to the phenomenon of religious experience:³

- 1 **Universality:** religious experience is a universal phenomenon. Studies and surveys demonstrate that a significant proportion of the human population, past and recent, including within highly secularized societies, have had religious experiences.
- 2 **Diversity:** there is a wide diversity of religious experiences, and each experience is in some sense unique to the individual who has it. While there are similarities among the religious experiences of adherents of the various religious traditions,

there are also differences, and this adds to the richness and variety of the experiences across the religious spectrum.

- 3 **Importance:** religious experience is important in unique and momentous ways, often resulting in a transformed or reoriented life, a re-evaluation of the way one thinks or lives, or even a change of world views.

Categories of religious experience

Different schemas have been offered to describe and classify the diverse types of religious experience. Here we will utilize a classification which distinguishes three categories of experience: regenerative, charismatic, and mystical.⁴

A *regenerative religious experience* is one in which the experiencer undergoes a life transformation – a conversion, if you will. In Evangelical Christian circles this is often referred to as being “born again” or being “born from above” (based on the Book of John in the New Testament in which Jesus says “... no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” [John 3:3]). Elsewhere this kind of experience is expressed as “experiencing religion,” “experiencing salvation,” or being “delivered from evil.”⁵ Through such experiences, individuals often find their lives to be changed, filled with meaning and newness, and full of love, joy, and hope.

John Hick (1922–), one of the most influential philosophers of religion of recent times, describes his own religious conversion experience:

As a law student at University College, Hull, at the age of eighteen, I underwent a powerful evangelical conversion under the impact of the New Testament figure of Jesus. For several days I was in a state of intense mental and emotional turmoil, during which I became increasingly aware of a higher truth and greater reality pressing in upon me and claiming my recognition and response. At first this was highly unwelcome, a disturbing and challenging demand for nothing less than a revolution in personal identity. But then the disturbing claim became a liberating invitation. The reality that was pressing in upon me was not only awesomely demanding but also irresistibly attractive and I entered with great joy and excitement into the world of Christian faith... . An experience of this kind which I cannot forget, even though it happened forty-two years ago ... occurred – of all places, on the top deck of a bus in the middle of the city of Hull.... As everyone will be very conscious who can themselves remember such a moment, all descriptions are inadequate. But it was as though the skies opened up and light poured down and filled me with a sense of overflowing joy, in response to an immense transcendent goodness and love. I remember that I couldn't help smiling broadly – smiling back, as it were, at God – though if any other passengers were looking they must have thought that I was a lunatic, grinning at nothing.⁶

William James (1842–1910) was an American philosopher and psychologist and one of the founders of Pragmatism. He engaged in the psychological examination of religion and wrote influential works on religious experience and mysticism. His major works include *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, *The Will to Believe* and *Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, and *Pragmatism*.

Along with conversion and salvation, another facet of the regenerative experience is moral transformation. In this case, prior to the experience, the individual may feel a sense of sin, guilt, or the inability to do what he or she knows to be morally appropriate. Upon having the regenerative religious experience, she senses that sin and guilt have been removed and a new vision of goodness is seen and sought after; a new or renewed emphasis on moral duties ensues in one's life. In William James's influential work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he includes a study on regenerative experience.

In this study, he is not focused on conversion from one set of religious beliefs to another, but on moral transformation; specifically a transformation in which "one aim grows so stable as to expel definitively its previous rivals from the individual's life."⁷ We can find such transformational experiences in all of the major religious traditions. The Old Testament, for example, contains a number of accounts of personal (and national) moral regeneration.⁸ More recently, an Islamic convert describes his transformational experience this way:

In the blessed pages of the Holy Qur'an I found solution to all my problems, satisfaction to all my needs, explication for all my doubts. Allah attracted me to His light with irresistible strength, and I gladly yielded to Him. Everything seemed clear now, everything made sense to me, and I began to understand myself, the Universe and Allah. I was bitterly aware that I had been deceived by my dearest teachers, and that their words were only cruel lies, whether they were aware of it or not. My whole world was shattered in one instant; all concepts had to be revised. But the bitterness in my heart was amply superseded by the ineffable joy of having found my Lord at last, and I was filled with love and gratitude to Him. I still humbly praise and bless Him for His Mercy with me; without His help, I would have remained in darkness and stupidity forever.⁹

A second category of religious experience is *charismatic experience*. This is a type of experience in which special abilities, gifts, or blessings are manifested. One of the fastest growing elements in the Christian religion is Pentecostalism and the related charismatic movements.¹⁰ According to recent studies, at least a quarter of

Pentecostals are Christians who belong to Pentecostal denominations and churches, including the Assemblies of God and the Church of God in Christ. Pentecostal-type revivals began in the 1800s in places such as England, India, and Russia, and then migrated to the United States in the early 1900s (most notably to the Azusa Street Mission in Los Angeles, California). Charismatics are Christians who either describe themselves as "charismatic Christians" (but do not belong to Pentecostal denominations) or who manifest any or all of the so-called charismatic gifts.

the world's two billion Christians are thought to be members of this facet of Christian faith which emphasizes such "gifts of the Holy Spirit" as healing, speaking in tongues, prophesying, and dreams and visions.¹¹ These charismatic gifts are described in the New Testament in I Corinthians and in the Acts of the Apostles (which also include references to the Old Testament where charismatic gifts are prophesied), but are not limited to the more spectacular ones noted above; they also include supernatural infusions of wisdom, knowledge, and faith, for example.¹²

Charismatic experiences are not limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition, however. In Buddhism, for example, the monk is often understood to be a charismatic and holy figure – not one who has received a gift from God, but rather one who has experienced the blessings of the *Dharma* (teachings of the Buddha and the fundamental constituents of the world).¹³ Hinduism too has its *gurus* and *sadhus*, and Islam has its *sheiks* and *walis*. These spiritual leaders are often taken to have charismatic qualities, gifts, and powers.¹⁴

One of the most famous visionary experiences in the Christian tradition is that described by Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–1582):

Our Lord was pleased that I should sometimes see a vision of this kind. Beside me, on the left hand, appeared an angel in bodily form, such as I am not in the habit of seeing except very rarely. Though I often have visions of angels, I do not see them... In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul then content with anything but God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it.¹⁵

Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–1582; also known as Saint Teresa of Jesus) was a Spanish mystic and Carmelite nun. She had frequent visions and ecstatic religious experiences. She became the first woman to be named a Doctor of the Catholic Church in 1970, and is one of only three women to be so honored. Her writings include her autobiography, *Interior Castle*, and *The Way of Perfection*.

What constitutes an authentic or inauthentic charismatic experience, and who is authorized to have such experiences or to authenticate them, is not always easy to discern as different religious traditions and sects have their own interpretations and evaluations of charismatic phenomena. What one person or group takes to be an authentic charismatic experience may be taken by others in or outside the group as inauthentic – as demon possession, the work of the devil, or merely psychological hocus pocus. Nevertheless, charismatic experiences have been widely accepted throughout the religious traditions both historically and in recent times.¹⁶

A third category is *mystical experience* which, as described by James, includes four distinct characteristics:¹⁷

- **Ineffability:** the experience cannot be adequately described, if at all.
- **Noetic quality:** the experienter believes that she has learned something important from the experience.
- **Transiency:** the experience is temporary and the experienter soon returns to a “normal” state of mind.
- **Passivity:** the experience occurs without conscious decision or control and it cannot be brought to happen at will.

Mystical experiences take different forms, but a common theme among many of them is identity or union with God in Western religion, or with Absolute Reality – Brahman or *nirvana* or the *dao* – in Eastern religion. A description of a mystical experience within the Advaita Vedānta school of Hinduism is given by Shankara (c. 788–c. 820):

When the mind is completely absorbed in the supreme Being – the *Atman*, the Brahman, the Absolute – then the world of appearances vanishes. Its existence is no more than an empty word. ... There is neither seer nor seeing nor seen. There is but one Reality – changeless, formless, and absolute. ... The universe no longer exists after we have awakened into the highest consciousness in the eternal *Atman*, which is Brahman, devoid of any distinction or division. ... Even though his mind is dissolved in Brahman, he is fully awake, free from the ignorance of waking life. He is fully conscious, but free from any craving.¹⁸

It is here in mystical experience that the monism of some Eastern religions is also experienced in Western theistic religions. We find monistic mystical experiences described in Judaism (e.g. *The Zohar*¹⁹), Christianity (e.g. Meister Eckhart and Saint John of the Cross²⁰), and Islam (e.g. Sufi school of Ibn al-‘Arabi²¹). While the three Western religions are broadly theistic, they have developed within them monistic streams of thought. Regarding union with the divine, for example, Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (1260–1327) says, “If I am to know God directly, I must become completely He and He I; so that this He and this I become and are one I.”²² Given such bold monistic language, it is not surprising that there has been lively debate within the theistic traditions about whether these mystics and mystical streams should be understood as heretical.

There is a wide range of experiences which are classified as mystical. Besides the union with God/Absolute Reality experiences noted above, another kind of mystical experience is nature mysticism. In this sense, even an atheist can have a mystical “religious” experience:

Although my “cosmic experience” was irrational in terms of our accustomed view of the world, I am not satisfied that it was simply an illusion, or delusion. It affected me in a very real way, reoriented my outlook and enriched and enlarged my consciousness in many ways. But it did pose a riddle – the kind of riddle one cannot attempt to solve without becoming keenly aware of the ultimate mystery of creation. In this sense, I would call my experience “religious.”²³

The Buddhist experiences of *sunyata*, or emptiness, developed in the Madhyamika (Middle Way) school of Buddhism, and *satori*, or enlightenment, developed in the Zen tradition, are also considered by many to be mystical experiences. D. T. Suzuki (1870–1966) describes the essence of Zen as involving *satori*, a way of “looking into the nature of things” and understanding reality (*satori* literally means “to understand”), which provides a “fresher, deeper, more satisfying aspect” of life. It is not easily attained, however, and it cannot be reached through logical reasoning or cognitive explanation; it must be directly experienced.²⁴

Yet another kind of mystical experience is numinous experience. Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) describes numinous experience in the Latin as *mysterium tremendum*

Daisetz Teitaro (D. T.) Suzuki (1870–1966) was Professor of Buddhist philosophy at Otani University, Kyoto, and taught at American universities, including Columbia and Harvard. He was a leading proponent of Zen Buddhism in the West. His major works include *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, and *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist*.

et fascinans (an overpowering, mysterious, luring experience).²⁵ He notes that it sometimes comes “sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship.” It may also “burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy.” It has both its “wild and demonic forms” and its “hushed, trembling” manifestations. During numinous experiences the individual may be “overwhelmed” and feel an “absolute overpoweringness” or a sense of “fear” and “dread.” But he may also feel an alluring “awe” which is “beautiful and pure and glorious.”²⁶

Furthermore, numinous experiences may be focused on some particular individual, such as Jesus or Krishna; or on some object, such as an icon or stone; or there may be no identified object whatsoever in the experience. But they commonly reflect an encounter with an “Other” – a separate self or will or power which forces itself upon the consciousness of the experiencer, unexpectedly and profoundly.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND JUSTIFICATION

We have seen that there is a wide variety and diversity of religious experiences, and they have been reported and detailed by numerous religious adherents across the religious spectrum and throughout the ages. But despite their being a common feature of the religious traditions, there remains a problem. Religious experience is typically a private matter. Someone claims to have an experience in which she senses that she is one with the divine, say. Or someone else claims to experience God or an angel speaking to him. What are we to make of such claims? Or what if we had a religious experience ourselves? Is a person justified in inferring from a religious experience (either one's own or that of another) knowledge of an objective reality which is the object of that experience? As William James asks, “Do mystical states establish the truth of those theological affections in which the saintly life has its root?”²⁷

Furthermore, can one be mistaken about such experiences? And how would he know? Some philosophers of religion reject religious experience as a ground for religious belief. This is not to say that they necessarily deny that individuals have had authentic religious experiences. Rather, they deny that one can properly infer from such experiences that their cause was God, or *nirvana*, or Ultimate Reality, etc., or that what the experience was about (if it contained cognitive content) is true or actually exists. With reference to religious experience providing support for the belief in God, C. B. Martin (1924–) makes the following claim: “There are no tests agreed upon to establish genuine experience of God and distinguish it decisively from the un genuine.”²⁸ So, he concludes, a religious experience cannot establish the objective reality of the perceptual object of the experience; all it can provide is evidence for the reality of specific psychological states. But is this in fact all that can be derived from

religious experience? Furthermore, since virtually everyone agrees that at least some religious experiences are illusory, how are we to assess which ones are veridical and which are not?

William Wainwright (1935–) offers an argument from analogy for the justification of religious experience based on sense perception which runs as follows. I experience a tree, and I believe that a tree exists. I experience God, and I believe that God exists. Even though there are dissimilarities between tree experiences and God experiences, there are enough relevant similarities to warrant belief in God if we are warranted in having tree beliefs. Both of the experiences are *noetic* (that is, they both have to do with the content of the mind, including beliefs, desires, values, etc). They both have a perceptual object, he maintains, and they both include states of affairs which can be checked or verified in some sense.²⁹

However, whether religious experiences do include a perceptual object is a debatable point. Mystical experiences, for example, are often taken by mystics to be ineffable. An ineffable experience by definition contains no expressible cognitive content. So, arguably, in that case it could not be used to ground a particular religious belief. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the procedures for verifying a sensory experience are similar at all to those of a religious experience. We will look more carefully at this objection below.

William Alston (1921–) has further developed Wainwright's line of argument.³⁰ He introduces doxastic practice (*doxa* is a Greek term which means belief) – the practice of forming beliefs which are based on experience – and points out that religious experience and sense perception are both doxastic practices. He grants that arguments for justifying religious experience are (non-viciously) circular. However, he notes that arguments for justifying the reliability of sense perception are afflicted with the same circularity problem. How can I verify that the tree I experience in front of me really is a tree? By using other sensory input (either my own or someone else's). How do I know that sensory perceptions in general provide reliable information? By checking them with other sensory perceptions (either my own or someone else's). But despite the circularity, the reliability of sensory perceptions is rarely questioned. Alston contends that if religious experiences relevantly resemble other perceptual experiences, such as sensory perceptions (and sometimes they do, he argues), then religious experiences should be no more suspect than other perceptual experiences.

In an attempt to address the issue from a different direction and to shift the burden of proof to the skeptic of the veridicality of religious experience, Richard Swinburne (1934–) has introduced a principle of rationality which he dubs the Principle of Credulity. According to this principle, when it seems (epistemically) to someone that something is the case, then in the absence of special considerations it probably is.³¹ When I'm walking through the forest and see a squirrel in a tree just ahead of me, for example, I am justified in believing that it is, in fact, a squirrel in the tree just ahead of me; unless, that is, I have special reasons to doubt my belief in this case. So too

Richard Swinburne (1934–) is Emeritus Nolloth Professor of the Philosophy of the Christian Religion, University of Oxford, and Fellow of the British Academy. He is a leading philosopher of religion and a member of the Eastern Orthodox Church. His major works include *The Existence of God, Faith and Reason*, and *The Evolution of the Soul*.

with religious experience. One could be mistaken in believing that something is the way it appears, but unless there is good reason to disbelieve it, we should not do so. Swinburne claims that rejecting this principle will land one in a “skeptical bog” in which a person must doubt everything that cannot be proven deductively.³²

Not everyone is satisfied with Swinburne’s principle. Michael Martin (1932–), for example, argues for a negative principle of credulity: if it seems (epistemically) to someone that something is not the case, then it probably is not the case.³³ There are plenty of individuals who have never had a religious experience, even though they have tried, so why should the burden of proof be shifted to the skeptic who doubts their veracity? He notes that while in ordinary life the experience of a chair is a good ground for believing in a chair, so too the experience of the absence of a chair is a good ground for believing that the chair is absent.³⁴

In a move similar to Swinburne’s Principle of Credulity, Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman attempts to demonstrate the evidential value of religious experience through a principle he calls BEE (Best Explanation of Experience) which has a corresponding STING (Strength in Number Greatness).³⁵ BEE is expressed this way:

If a person, S, has an experience, E, which seems (phenomenally) to be of a particular object, O, (or of an object of kind, K), then *everything else being equal* the best explanation of S’s having E is that S has experienced O (or an object of kind, K), rather than something else or nothing at all.³⁶

As with Swinburne’s Principle of Credulity, BEE is taken to be a fundamental principle of rationality which governs everyday rational discourse and which connects one’s experience to reality. As such, its rationality is independent of further argumentation; it needs no further proof.

STING is then expressed as follows:

If a person, S, has an experience, E, which seems (phenomenally) to be of a particular object, O, (or of an object of kind, K), then our belief that S’s having experienced O (or an object of kind K) is the best explanation (everything else being equal) of E, is strengthened in proportion to the number of experiences of O there are and in proportion to the variability of circumstances in which such experiences occur.³⁷

In other words, the more people have a particular kind of religious experience, the stronger the case for its being veridical. Utilizing BEE STING, Gellman argues that the large number of experiences of God provides warrant for holding certain beliefs about God (such as that God is loving).

In the next section we will examine several challenges to religious experience as justification for religious beliefs. At this point it is worth mentioning that some view the attempt to seek justification for religious beliefs from religious experience as inappropriately emphasizing the cognitive aspect of such experience. Consider Buddhism. For the Buddhist adherent, a primary goal is to be released from a state of craving and suffering and to attain *nirvana*, no-self or emptiness. The Buddhist does not ultimately seek knowledge about, or evidence or proof for, the existence of God or Ultimate Reality or *nirvana*. Rather, she is seeking the extinction of self and its attending cognitive processes. This is not to say that Buddhists cannot use individual or cumulative religious experiences within their tradition to validate their religious beliefs, but that such experiences are primarily directed toward liberation, not cognition.³⁸

CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AS JUSTIFICATION FOR RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

So it can be argued that religious experience provides justification for religious beliefs. But there are also arguments challenging this point. We will first look at three of these arguments and then hone in on naturalistic explanations of religious experience.

Lack of verifiability

One argument against the claim that religious experience provides justification for religious beliefs is that such experiences are not verifiable (they are not checkable as are other kinds of experiences). Compare a religious experience with some other perceptual experience – seeing a black swan, for example. If someone claims to see a black swan in their backyard, it’s easy enough to check. Other perceptions can be used to verify whether the claim is true or not: others can see it, they can catch it, or perhaps they can be bitten by it. But what about when someone claims to have a religious experience? How can this kind of claim be verified? It seems that it cannot. So, it is argued that religious experience cannot provide justification for religious beliefs.⁴⁰

In this discussion, a distinction is sometimes made between first-person psychological reports such as “I seem to see a black swan” with perceptual experiences such as “I see a black swan.” With the latter kind of experiences a person can be

The claim of any particular religion or sect to have complete or final truth of these subjects [of the veridicality of religious experience] seems to me to be too ridiculous to be worth a moment's consideration. But the opposite extreme of holding that the whole religious experience of mankind is a gigantic system of pure delusion seems to me to be almost (though not quite) as farfetched.

C.D. Broad³⁹

mistaken. I thought it was a black swan, but it turned out to be a brown Canada goose. With the former kind of experience a person cannot be mistaken. Even though it turned out to be a brown Canada goose, the claim that "I seem to see a black swan" is nonetheless true. These sorts of first-person, private reports are about the goings on of one's own mind and are referred to as *incorrigible* experiences – while I might be mistaken in what I *see*, I cannot be mistaken that I *seem to see* what I do.

The question then becomes whether religious experiences are corrigible or incorrigible. If they are incorrigible, as some critics claim, then the experiencer cannot be mistaken about them. However, in that case, they are merely subjective private experiences and so do not provide objective evidence or justification for their being about a reality outside the mind of the one having the experience.

Conflicting claims within the variety of religious experience

Another objection is that religious experiences are widely divergent, conflicting, and even contradictory. As we noted above, throughout the centuries religious believers have had various types of religious experiences, and many of them are clearly inconsistent with one another. The Advaita Vedāntin experience that all reality is one and undifferentiated, for example, contradicts the Islamic experience that Allah is the one true God, a divine reality who exists as a separate being from the person having the experience. Doesn't this inconsistency count against the reliability of the experiences? Don't these experiences invalidate or cancel one another out?⁴¹

In reply, it's important to distinguish between one's having and describing a religious experience on the one hand with one's explanation of that experience on the other. A person may be justified in her claim that she had an experience of what seemed to be God's love and forgiveness, say. This may indeed be a veridical, perceptual experience. But to then go on and explain the experience by invoking God's existence might well be an invalid step – an ill-founded inference from the subjective experience to the objective reality of the presentational object.

An analogy may help at this point. Suppose in witnessing a traffic accident I claim to have seen a red car hit the pedestrian while another observer claims to have seen

a brown truck hit the person. We both had perceptual experiences of the accident. However, if I go on to explain the death of the individual who was hit by invoking the reality of the red car, I could be mistaken. So too with the person invoking the existence of the brown truck. The point is this: even though we may both be mistaken with respect to our descriptions of the cause of the individual's death (suppose it was actually a blue mini-van that hit the pedestrian), that doesn't necessarily count against the reality of the fundamental content of the experiences. In this case there was a vehicle which was involved in the accident, even though the two observers were mistaken in their descriptions of the object experienced.

This may be all well and good. But what about experiences which are entirely contradictory, such as those of the Advaita Vedāntin and Muslim described above? Aren't they so inconsistent as to cancel each other out? Furthermore, isn't it the case that religious adherents have experiences which tend to conform to their own religious outlooks? Muslims have experiences of Allah; Christians have experiences of Jesus; Buddhists have experiences of no-self; and so on? This leads to the next objection.

The circularity objection

A third objection to the claim that religious experience provides justification for religious belief is that such justification is circular: it depends on assumptions which are not self-evident to everyone and yet are then utilized as controls or limitations on the experience. Thus it seems that most religious experiences reflect the beliefs and values germane to the religion, or worldview, of the experiencer. A polytheistic Hindu living in Kolkata believes that there are many gods who watch over and protect those who are devoted to them, and so when his friend claims to have experienced the presence and love of Lord Vishnu (or when he has such an experience himself), he takes it to be veridical and to reflect the true nature of things. So too with experiences in other religions: the experiencers are having experiences in line with what they already believe.

In reply, religious or worldview constraints may not be as binding on individuals as some claim. There are, for example, various reports of adherents of one religion having religious experiences which are foreign to the individuals' own religious beliefs and yet which are not uncommon among those of another religion. Sometimes such experiences can even be the cause of one changing her religious beliefs and identity.⁴²

But maybe there is a better way of understanding and explaining religious experience. Perhaps there is a scientific account which demonstrates that religious experiences are not veridical at all but rather illusions or even delusions. We look next at two such explanations.

SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATIONS OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Some hold the view that scientific explanations of religious experiences discredit them or demonstrate that they are non-veridical or even delusional. But does this follow? There are two kinds of natural, scientific explanations of religious experience we will consider. The first one, introduced by Sigmund Freud, is a psychological explanation.

A psychological understanding of religious experience

There are many different psychological explanations of religious experience. One of the most well known was offered by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Freud argued that feelings of helplessness and fear in childhood foster a desire for fatherly, loving protection. This desire, or wish, for a protective figure carries on into adulthood and demands a greater, more powerful being than a human father. Two further desires are prominent as well: the substantiation of universal justice and a continuation of our own existence after death. These combined wishes are satisfied through the illusion of divine providence.⁴³

Freud's wish fulfillment hypothesis of religious experience (and religion in general) was primarily directed toward theistic religion in which a heavenly father replaced an earthly one as provider and sustainer. But it can apply to all religions and religious experience: they are psychological projections which fulfill certain fundamental human needs and longings – nothing more.

A reply to this conclusion of a psychological hypothesis or explanation of religious experience is that it may well be true that one has a religious experience (or belief) which is caused by certain needs and desires. *But so what?* This does not disprove the content of the experience (or belief). Suppose, for example, that one believes in the existence of a personal and powerful God because of a deep-seated need for a heavenly Father. Does that prove that a personal and powerful God does not exist? Certainly not. Furthermore, it could be that such a personal and powerful God utilizes the familial relationship as a pedagogical tool for teaching people about God's nature. In fact, this is precisely what many Jews, Christians, and Muslims actually believe and how they interpret passages in their sacred scriptures which refer to God

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was an Austrian neurologist, psychologist, and the father of psychoanalysis. He is often considered one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century. His major works include *The Future of an Illusion*, *Totem and Taboo*, and *Moses and Monotheism*.

as Father, friend, etc. A similar kind of reply could be developed with respect to the other religions as well.

A neuroscientific understanding of religious experience

Recent advances in neuroscience have given rise to the view that religious experience may be the result of purely neurophysiological causes and thus are ultimately delusory. John Hick delineates five examples derived from recent research which cover the gamut of religious experience types:

- 1 Epileptic seizures and frontal lobe stimulation by the "Persinger helmet" [a transcranial magnetic stimulator] cause religious visions.
- 2 Psychotropic drugs cause various forms of religious experience.
- 3 "Pure" consciousness, consciousness of the Void, Emptiness, *sunyata*, is caused by consciousness continuing after the cutting off of all perceptual input.
- 4 The sense of unity with all reality is caused by closing down the awareness of the bodily boundaries of the individual.
- 5 The sense of the presence of God or of other supernatural beings is caused by a splitting of the "self-system" into two, one half seeing the other half as a distinct entity.⁴⁴

The research currently being done on the human brain demonstrates that it may be possible to identify neural correlates of religious experience – perhaps all types of religious experiences. Some draw the conclusion that this proves that the content of the experience is false, or that what the experience is about does not exist. But even if it can be shown that there are neuroscientific (or other natural) explanations for religious experiences, can we draw these conclusions? It seems not. William Wainwright explains why:

Many philosophers think that an experience of *x* is veridical only if *x* is one of its causes. Thus, a visual experience of my desk is a perception of my desk only if the desk causes my experience. Suppose, then, that a scientifically adequate natural explanation of religious experience is discovered. Would it follow that (1) God or some other supernatural entity isn't its cause or, at least, that (2) there is no reason for thinking that a supernatural entity is its cause? It would not.

Classical theists believe that scientifically adequate explanations can be provided for most natural phenomena. But they also believe that these phenomena are immediately grounded in God's causal activity. Hence, an adequate scientific explanation of religious experience wouldn't show that God isn't its cause. Nor would it show that God's causal activity isn't necessary for its occurrence.⁴⁵

Furthermore, if one approaches the question of whether religious experience can justify religious belief from a naturalistic (atheistic) worldview, the range of possible answers is going to be quite different from the person who approaches it from a religious worldview. As Ninian Smart noted:

Of course, if one has already made up one's mind that the universe has no transcendent source and no transcendent side to it, that the only reality is the observable cosmos, then no doubt it will be easier to think that religion [and religious experience] arises out of psychological and other urges.⁴⁶

Finally, there may be independent reasons for believing in the existence of God or Absolute Reality and for believing that this reality is the grounding cause of religious experience.

SUMMARY

Whatever their cause, religious experiences have been a part of the fabric of the religious traditions from their earliest developments. They come in all variety of forms, yet they have several common features: they are universal, diverse, and momentous in the life of the experiencer, often resulting in a morally or spiritually transformed life.

One important question which arises from religious experience is whether this kind of phenomenon can provide justification for religious beliefs. A number of attempts have been made to demonstrate that it can, and we examined several of them: two arguments from analogy based on sense perception, the Principle of Credulity, and BEE STING.

There are also important challenges to the claim that religious experience can provide justification for religious belief, and we examined three of these. First, it can be argued that religious experiences are not verifiable, or checkable, as are other types of experiences. Second, the conflicting claims of the various experiences (conflicts both within and without the religious traditions) may cancel each other out. And third was the circularity objection in which it is argued that justification for religious belief depends on presuppositions which are not self-evident to everyone and yet which are then utilized as controls or limitations on the experience.

Next, we looked at two scientific explanations of religious experience: psychological and neuroscientific. According to Freud's psychological view, certain feelings for protection are satisfied through the illusion of divine Providence: a person projects the existence of God or Absolute Reality. More recently, neuroscientific advancements have demonstrated that religious experience may be the result of neurophysiological causes. As such, some conclude that religious experiences are ultimately delusory.

From whatever perspective they are studied or experienced, perhaps because of their unusual and sometimes outlandish manifestations, religious experiences continue to capture the attention of religious believers and skeptics alike, and they are likely to do so for a very long time.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW/DISCUSSION

1. Briefly explain the three categories of religious experience described in this chapter. Do you think the variety of religious experiences fall neatly within them? Is there overlap?
2. Do you personally know anyone who has had a religious experience, or have you had one yourself? If so, how did they (or how would you) describe it? Does any sort of justification of religious belief follow from it?
3. Search the literature for examples of nature mysticism and monistic mystical experience. Do you find there to be a close similarity, or even identity, between them? Reflect on your findings.
4. In what ways are Eastern religious experiences different from Western ones? In what ways are they similar? What are some possible reasons for their differences and similarities?
5. How might a person having religious experiences differentiate between real experiences of the divine or the Absolute on the one hand and delusion or hallucination on the other?
6. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James points out that certain intoxicants, such as alcohol, can induce a kind of mystical consciousness. If mystical states can be induced in this manner, what does this imply about *religious* mystical states, if anything?
7. As noted in the text, Michael Martin responds to the Principle of Credulity by arguing for a negative principle and notes that not experiencing a chair is good reason for believing that a chair is not present. How might a theist reply to this response?
8. Do you agree with the objection that religious experience is circular and so does not provide justification for religious belief? Why or why not?
9. Many individuals, throughout the centuries and from differing religious traditions, have had intense religious experiences. Given that many of the different religious traditions are contradictory in their views of the divine/ultimate reality, does this affect the veracity of the religious experiences? Explain.
10. If correlations between brain events and religious experience can be demonstrated in most types of religious experience, does this prove that the content of the experience is false, or that what the experience is about does not exist? If so, how? If not, what does it prove?

FURTHER READING

- Alston, William (1991) *Perceiving God*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (A widely recognized work on the epistemology of religious experience.)
- Davis, Caroline Franks (1989) *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. (Examines the nature of religious experiences from different religious traditions and their use as evidence for religious beliefs; includes a study of the role of models and metaphors in descriptions of religious experience.)
- Dupré, Louis (1976) *Transcendent Selfhood: The Rediscovery of the Inner Life*. New York: Seabury. (Chapter 8 offers an important discussion of the nature of the self as informed by mysticism.)
- Freud, Sigmund ([1927] 1989) *The Future of an Illusion*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton and Norton. (A classic work on religion by one of the most important thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.)
- Gellman, Jerome I. (1997) *Experience of God and the Rationality of Religious Belief*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (Argues that mystical experiences can provide a rational basis for belief in God's existence; also examines reductionist explanations of apparent experiences of God and finds them insufficient.)
- Griffith-Dickson, Gwen (2000) *Human and Divine: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religious Experience*. London: Duckworth. (Analyzes religious experience among the world's religions and philosophical traditions.)
- Gutting, Gary (1982) *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. (A contemporary discussion of religious experience.)
- Hood, Ralph W., Jr. (1995) *Handbook of Religious Experience*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press. (Examines religious experience from many facets such as religious experience in different faith traditions, depth psychologies, psychological orientations, and specialty concerns, including feminist theory.)
- James, William (1902) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York: Modern Library. (A classic study on religious experience – perhaps the definitive work.)
- Jantzen, Grace (1995) *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (Focuses on how men of power defined and controlled the identity and role of the mystic.)
- Katz, Steven T., ed. (1978) *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (An important collection of articles by Steven Katz, Ninian Smart, Peter Moore, George Mavrodes, and others.)
- Katz, Steven T., ed. (1983) *Mysticism and Religious Traditions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Includes studies of Jewish, Islamic, Christian, Hindu, Confucian, and Taoist mysticism.)
- Katz, Steven T., ed. (2000) *Mysticism and Sacred Scripture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Explores the neglected topic of how the mystics and mystical traditions use and interpret sacred scriptures.)
- Martin, C. B. (1959) *Religious Belief*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. (Examines religious belief, including mystical experience, and offers an unsympathetic appraisal.)
- Martin, Michael (1990) *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. (Chapter 6 contains a critique of the view that religious experience offers evidence or justification for religious beliefs.)
- Momen, Moojan (1999) *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach*. Oxford: Oneworld. (A rich and informative work on the phenomenon of religion which includes an emphasis on religious experience.)

- Otto, Rudolf (1923) *The Idea of the Holy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (A classic work on religious thought and experience; Otto explores the idea of God as transcendent and "wholly other.")
- Proudfoot, Wayne (1985) *Religious Experience*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. (Argues that all religious experience is filtered through ones' own concepts, beliefs, and linguistic practices.)
- Shankara ([eighth century] 1947) *Shankara's Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*. Trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press. (The classic eighth-century Advaita text about the path to true understanding of Brahman and *Atman*; includes descriptions of the Advaita Vedāntin experience of one's unity with Brahman.)
- Smart, Ninian (1991) *The Religious Experience*. 4th edition. London: Macmillan. (A comprehensive history of religious experience.)
- Strong, John S. (1995) *The Experience of Buddhism*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. (Anthology which offers translations of Buddhist texts of philosophy and doctrine as well as accounts of Buddhist practices, rituals, and experiences.)
- Underhill, Evelyn ([1911] 1993) *Mysticism*. Oxford: Oneworld. (A classic exploration of the mystical experience.)
- Wainwright, William (1981) *Mysticism: A Study of Its Nature, Cognitive Value, and Moral Implications*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. (A comprehensive study on mysticism from a sympathetic analytic philosopher.)
- Yandell, Keith (1993) *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (An analytic philosopher argues against the view that religious experience is ineffable and for the view that strong numinous experience provides evidence that God exists; a rather technical treatment of the topic, but well worth a careful read.)
- Zeahner, R. C. (1967) *Mysticism: Sacred and Profane*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Analyzes religious and religious-type experiences from drug-induced experiences to the religious experiences of Christians, Muslims, and Hindus.)
- Zeahner, R. C. (1994) *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism*. Oxford: Oneworld. (Traces the development of mystical thought within the formative periods of the Hindu and Muslim traditions.)

WEBSITES

- <http://www.lamp.ac.uk/aht/Research/research.html>
Religious Experience Research Centre. Located at the University of Wales, Lampeter, this center is focused on the study of contemporary spiritual and religious experience. Includes fascinating personal stories of religious experience.
- <http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/theism/experience.html>
Infidels.org website. This link focuses on religious experience from a critical, skeptical perspective and includes essays and further links on the subject.
- <http://www.religiousworlds.com/mystic/index.html>
Mysticism Resources Page. A website which provides information on traditional and modern spiritualities, including various forms of mysticism.
- <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JamVari.html>
William James's classic *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in electronic text form; Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library.