

Religious Experience

What does it say about experience? What does it say about God?

What does it mean to ‘experience’ something?

We get sensations, transmitted to the brain, form images and respond accordingly. That is a basic feature of all ‘sentient’ life; it distinguishes it from that is inanimate. Without experience, you’d die. You would know where there was something to eat. You would not know to run from a predator. Experience is therefore key to the relationship you have with the rest of the world.

BUT we divide up our experience. Things ‘exist’ if they ‘stand out’ against their background. We are conscious, but always conscious ‘of’ something. We experience things ‘as’ something. Therefore, when we speak about what we experience, we divide our sensations up into discrete bits and pieces and give each of them a name. That’s the start of language – the way of distinguish one thing from another and communicate to others what we experience.

Okay, but what about ‘religious’ experience

It is estimated that at least one in four people have an experience at some point in their lives which could be called ‘religious’, in the sense that we shall describe later in this chapter, even if they do not think of themselves as religious or are not practising members of a religion.

What makes an experience ‘religious’? Is it a matter of content or of the quality of the experience?

And is what makes an experience ‘religious’ something that can be discussed anyway? Or is that extra ‘religious’ something beyond description? We looked at religious language this morning – one option, the *via negativa*, was that there was nothing positive that could be said to describe God, for example, because he was always beyond the meaning of the words we use.

But that hasn’t stopped people talking...

There would be no religion if there were no religious experiences. Great religious leaders and founders of religions (e.g. Muhammad, Moses, Jesus, Buddha, Nanak, Isaiah) have all recorded powerful experiences which have shaped their lives, and which led them to teach and preach as they did.

The special experiences that people might have, experiences that may change their lives, have some common features which have been examined by William James and others. We shall examine these later.

But for most people, the 'religious experiences' that they have are far more routine. They are the experience gained from taking part in organised religion. It's what you get if you go into a church, temple or mosque – it's the total experience of being there, taking part in worship and so on.

If people did not find that the experience of taking part in religious ceremonies, or practising meditation, or praying, give them some new element in their lives, they would not continue to do so. The fact that religions exist at all means that they provide experiences that their followers find valuable. They take part in worship and feel 'uplifted' by it. They may feel inspired by readings from scripture, or ritual, or even the building in which the worship takes place.

People may also find that religion gives new depth to ordinary experiences - they may see something that is overwhelmingly beautiful, or they may be faced with the powerful moments of birth or death, they fall in love or fall ill. How they experience these moments may be influenced by their religious beliefs, that the experiences then reinforce those same beliefs.

In other words, as a result of some 'religious' experiences – perhaps in connection with an organised religion, people tend to interpret other experiences they have as religious. A religious person, in Western Christian terms, is someone who sees God as acting everywhere, and therefore someone who experiences everything religiously.

So what are the general features of 'religious' experience...

Mystical (Schleiermacher / William James)

In his book *On Religion: speeches to its cultured despisers* (1799), Schleiermacher described religious experience 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.'

A mystical experience is one in which a person may sense the underlying unity of everything, going beyond all conventional barriers between the individual self and the external world. It can produce a very deep sense of joy, of 'being at home', of being at one with nature and of seeing a truth that cannot be put into words.

In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James lists four qualities associated with religious experience, and particularly with mystical experiences:

1. Ineffability (they are quite different from ordinary experiences, and cannot be described using ordinary language)
2. Noetic quality (they do provide information of a kind – a knowledge that cannot be expressed fully, and may be called 'revelation')
3. Transiency (they don't last long)
4. Passivity (the person who has the experience feels that they are passive – they simply receive something that is offered – rather than actively bringing the experience about)

The Numinous (Otto)

In *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), Rudolph Otto introduced the idea that religious experience may be an encounter with something powerful, uncanny, weird, awesome, but also attractive and fascinating. Something like the 'creeping flesh' sensation or the shudder of fear at the prospect of encountering a ghost, whether real or on the page or screen.

Otto described the object of religious experience as **mysterium tremendum et fascinans** – a mystery that is both awesomeness and fascinating. He spoke of this as an encounter with 'the numinous'.

He also pointed out that it could not be described in ordinary language, since none of our words quite capture that special sense of something being 'holy'. However, the set of words that we use (e.g. good, loving, powerful) to attempt to describe the holy are its 'schema', and the process of grasping at words to express the holy is 'schematisation'. Religious language is just such a schema.

The Personal (Buber)

In *I and Thou* (1937) Martin Buber argued that we have two different kinds of relationships: I-It and I-Thou. I-It relationships are impersonal; I-Thou relationships are personal.

For Buber the relationship with God was an I-Thou relationship, in other words, it was more like getting to know another person, than getting to know scientific facts. He described God as 'the Eternal Thou', to be seen as present in every other 'Thou' that we encounter.

So religious experience tends to say that the approach of ordinary experience – dividing our sensations up into various bundles, each able to be described literally – may be superficial. There are other elements to experience: the mystical sense of oneness, the sense of personal encounter, the challenge of what is ultimately real – and these point to the depths of experience

But it's more than that, which is why we need to ask a second question 'What does it say about God?'

But the thing about the Philosophy of Religion is that it does not simply look at the facts, it probes and asks questions – it tries to tease out the truth of claims that are made. And so we should examine what religious experience can and cannot prove.

First major distinction:

Experience is a given fact; the interpretation of that experience may be examined and its conclusions debated.

If someone says 'I have had an experience of God.' What that means is 'I use the word 'God' to describe what I have experienced.

In other words, it may not be a simple matter of saying whether the experience is true or false, but it is more a matter of the nature of what is experience and the significance it has for the person concerned.

(After all, you can only confirm an experience if you have a separate way of knowing what has been experienced. i.e. you would say, 'I know God by some other means and therefore confirm that what you have experienced is God.'

Problem is – every experience is open to interpretation – there is no objective check.

There are two general approaches to interpreting religious experience – the 'experiential' and the 'propositional'. The first of these is concerned with the experience itself, and religious claims that arise from it are seen as filtered through the particular circumstances and understanding of the person who has that experience. By contrast, the 'propositional' approach is one that extracts from the experience certain definitive propositions, which are then claimed to be truths, backed by the authority of the original experience.

Tillich, two features of religious experience and language...

It is about 'being itself' – not individual beings

It is about 'ultimate concern'

What can this show?

If God is infinite, he cannot be located in a particular place, nor does he have boundaries. You cannot point to where God is not, if he is infinite. Yet all our experience is of particular things in particular places; they are known only because they have boundaries. Our senses divide reality up into segments to which we can give names: this is one thing; that is another.

So arguments about whether or not an experience is of God, require a prior knowledge of what God is. In other words, since **all** experience involves interpretation (we experience 'as'), our prior understanding of 'God' will be used to interpret whether this experience is an experience of God or not.

Therefore, in order for religious experience to be part of a logical argument about the existence of God, there needs to be an agreed definition of what is meant by the word 'God.' Otherwise, there will be no way of knowing how the person is interpreting their experience.

The argument from religious experience may therefore be interesting (in that it shows what people mean by 'God') and persuasive (particularly for the person who has the experience), but it is not a logically compelling argument.

But there are challenges to any positive interpretation of experience:

- Freud noted parallels between religious behaviour and those of his patients who had obsessional neuroses - e.g. those who were continually washing themselves, yet never felt clean. He called religion a 'universal obsessional neurosis'. In other words, religious phenomena can originate in subjective human needs and neuroses, rather than coming from a God who is perceived as existing objectively.

- On the other hand, it can be argued that just because religion may deal with the issue of guilt, for example, or the lack of a human father later in life, that it therefore has no objective basis.
- Sociologists like Durkheim and may point out the social function of religion. It may mark particular stages in life and acceptance of an individual into society. It may be a way of holding a society together and giving it an identity and sense of purpose.
- Similarly, political thinkers may take the Marxist view that religion is a social construct, devised by those with power to keep the working people in their place, with rules about obedience and promises of heaven after this life.

And remember the fundamental distinction between – ‘religion’ which is the set of beliefs, practices, ceremonies and so on. All these can be experienced in the most superficial way – as a kind of spectacle to be enjoyed, even as a set of emotions to be wallowed in. That’s organised religion – and it organises experiences in worship.

Most people want to say that some moments – whether in connection with religion or just as part of our everyday experience – are in some way special, speak to them of the depths of things, not superficially, challenging their self understanding, giving their life some new sense of purpose. Those are the experiences that tend to be called ‘religious’

Parallel, of course, to others – life falling in love, or finding that someone else has fallen in love with you. Or being suddenly moved by a work of art or piece of music. Such things open up the whole dimension that we can call ‘the transcendent’. And that is probably the best way of describing ‘religious’ experience – it is an experience of something that transcends, that goes beyond the physical moment or sight or sound, that speaks of something greater.

So ‘religious experience’ tends to show that all experience can be rather more profound than we might at first expect – and involves far more than just a literal sighting of certain phenomena.

It also shows that what we mean by ‘God’ is to be experienced – so on the one hand we know that (if we want to use the word ‘god’ to explain what we experience) we should not take the description of that experience literally. God is not literally experiences – because he is not physical. But it points to this intuition of something deeper.