

How can we verify religious experiences?

INTRODUCTION

This session asks students to think about how and whether it is possible to verify that a religious experience has actually happened. This session leads on from the sessions on what is real and true as well as whether religious experiences prove God. This session covers ways in which we may verify miracles and mystical experiences. It asks students to think of their own verification criteria, to assess the criteria of other philosophers and to reflect on why it is so hard to verify religious experiences.

Warning: the section on near death experiences may contain upsetting themes for students. The suitability of this section session will be left to the judgement of the session leader.

Part One: Miracle Detectives

ACTIVITY

Ask students to make a list of things they know are real and not real. After this, ask them to justify how they actually know this.

Explain that in this session students will be investigating the events that have taken place at Lourdes in France. The Virgin Mary is said to have appeared there to 14 year old Bernadette Soubirous on a total of eighteen occasions in 1858. Since then Lourdes has become a place of Christian (mainly Roman Catholic) pilgrimage and of miraculous healings. Students will have the opportunity in this session to decide what might count as a real and true miraculous healing and what might not.

ACTIVITY

Ask students to imagine they are miracle detectives and to come up with two or more criteria that would make a miraculous healing a 'real' event. What would need to happen to call this a true miracle healing in their opinion?

Play the following clip that explains recent miracles at Lourdes and how they verify that it really is a miraculous healing:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgVnjJLarwk

Explain the following criteria that the Catholic Church uses to verify a miracle. Criteria One: the sickness of a person is judged incurable, however complete recovery is noticed or the reconstitution of vital organs or broken bones are healed. Criteria Two: recovery from an illness may happen instantaneously.

Ask the students to respond to such questions as:

- *How similar are these criteria to your own?*
- *If a healing event was to satisfy all of your criteria would you believe that a miracle had really taken place?*

Part Two: Near Death Experiences

Explain what a 'near death' experience is. These are sometimes referred to as a *mystical experiences* in that some people who have been close to death have recovered or been saved and have reported a sudden awareness of God that they could not easily explain or articulate.

Provide students with the following views on how we might verify whether someone has actually had a near death mystical experience.

William James (philosopher and psychologist)

The experience appears to include:

- **Passivity:** a strong sense of being taken over.
- **Ineffability:** a state of experience unlike anything else and the experience is too difficult to describe.
- **Noetic quality:** experiences reveal insights that are beyond human reason and understanding.
- **Transience:** experiences don't last long and are sometimes imperfectly remembered.

Paul Tillich (philosopher and theologian)

The experience appears to include:

- An objective event / encounter followed by a special understanding of that event, revealing its religious significance.
- Sense of a divine union with God.
- Loss of self-awareness.
- A sense of ecstasy in being with God.

ACTIVITY

Ask students to watch the first seven minutes of the following clip made by an American Christian Broadcasting company and apply James' and Tillich's criteria. Do they judge that the experience being described would count as a 'mystical' experience according to the criteria?

Warning: the following clip details a car crash scene. Judge the suitability of this video for your students:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9xDY2M0Qwo

An alternative description of a near death experience can be found as part of a discussion at the New York Academy of Sciences in December 2013: <http://www.nourfoundation.com/media-gallery/videos.html> - play from 20' to 29'. [There is fascinating discussion following this about possible physiological causes of 'out-of-body' experiences – or is there a 'fifth dimension' that 'consciousness' can access in altered states of mind?]

Ask the students to respond to such questions as:

- *Is this a near death mystical experience according to Tillich and James?*
- *Do you think this is a genuine experience of God's intervention?*
- *Can you think of an alternative explanation for what has happened here?*
- *Is the experience as documented the most convincing and plausible explanation for this event in your opinion?*

CONCLUSION

Show students the NDERF (Near Death Experience Research Foundation) website: www.nderf.org which collects people's stories of near death experiences and has the sub-title 'Welcome to the wondrous spiritual journey' and has a mission 'to research and study consciousness experiences and to spread the message of love, unity and peace around the world.'

Linking back to the overall question of this session, ask them to reflect on the following questions:

- *Will the NDERF ever gain a full understanding of near death experiences?*
- *Can we with certainty verify a religious experience?*
- *Do you think there is a reason that religious experiences are hard to verify?*
- *Are some things supposed to remain a mystery?*
- *Why do people want to verify religious experiences?*
- *Should people bother trying to verify religious and mystical experiences?*