

# Don't Narrow the Scope

Gwen Griffith-Dickson spoke about the breadth and variety of religious experiences and warned against any kind of reductionism – scientific or religious.

## Pantyhose Woman

A woman temporarily admitted to a psychiatric hospital in the USA told us that God had just spoken to her that day, through an advertisement for tights on the television she had seen in the patients' day-room. Apparently, these tights 'stay with you' throughout the day; no matter where you go, how you twist and turn, they stay close to you and don't bag and come away from you at the knees and ankles. She added that, as a modern urban woman, parables about fishermen and sheep didn't communicate anything to her about God, but 'she really knew about pantyhose.' She asserted that God was speaking to her through this advertisement, in order to reassure her and console her in her present period of distress. The psychiatrists felt confirmed in their diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia, for it is a classic symptom of a such a condition that one feels that God or some other 'voice' is speaking to one personally through the television, radio, electric sockets, wires allegedly planted in the brain, etc. I felt uncomfortably aware that, had the woman been speaking to a different audience in a different room, the reaction could have been very different. Had she spoken in a prayer meeting she would probably have received a positive reaction; her words would have been accepted as mediating a religious insight, perhaps indeed as a 'word from the Lord'.

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**one feels that God is speaking to one personally through the television, radio, electric sockets...**

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What does this story show? What someone claims as a religious experience – the parting of waves, miracles, thunderclaps from heaven – is not necessarily overtly 'supernatural' but a completely ordinary experience interpreted in a certain way. The first thing I would want to say is: 'Don't

narrow the scope!' Don't narrow the scope of the very different kinds of experiences; the scope of cultures and systems; the scope of interpretations and explanatory frameworks. 'Religious' experiences can include meaningful experiences of nature, ordinary events with a particular significance, dramatic visions and auditory experiences, healings or miracles, 'supernatural' occurrences; they also have a broad emotional range, from quiet serenity, peace, joy, overpowering positive emotions, to terrifying emotions and a sense of evil.

## The Breadth and Variety of Religious Experiences

It's very Western to say '*an* experience' – rather than the way the whole of life is experienced. Other traditions and cultures are also interested in the problem of interpreting religious experience; but often they want to see it in a different light. It is not about focusing on specific, dramatic, colourful, out-of-the-ordinary experiences. It is about a whole way of life, probed for its meaning and its messages and lessons. Broadly speaking, psychological accounts of religious experience attempt to explain it in three ways: by the physiological generation of experiences, the artificial induction of experiences, or the motivation of experiences by desire or need.

### *The physiological generation of experiences*

Because there can be similar features (or perceived similar features) between religious experiences and pathological experiences, some have tended to conflate the two and explain religious experience as psychiatric disorders. Literally hundreds of studies have sought a correlation or lack of correlation between religion and mental illness, or between religion and mental health. Some telling research showed that whether one found a positive, negative, or no relation between mental health and religion depended on the criteria for mental health used. Equally one can examine both and find features that are different: superficial similarities, such as the sense of a loss of control, or a dissolution of the ego, are not alike on

examination, and are welcomed by the mystic while feared by the psychotic. Religious experiences are 'life-enhancing' while psychotic experiences are not. Finally, the mystic's freedom from the material world and the psychotic anxiety to escape the real world are radically different. So although there can be similarities, 'non-psychotic' religious experiences and schizophrenic experiences do not appear to be identical.

### ***The artificial induction of experiences***

Similarly because of the oddness of some reported experiences, one can find similarities with the sort of bizarre experiences that one can have under the influence of drugs. A famous study by Pahnke, called the 'Good Friday Study', involved the administration of a hallucinogenic drug to experimental subjects (all of them theology students), followed by placing them in a religious service.<sup>1</sup> Most of them obliged by having a religious experience. Unfortunately this doesn't get us very far with explaining those experiences that *don't* happen under the influence of drugs. But there are other ways one could induce an experience – intense social pressure, suggestibility, and so on. The latter are less helpful than you might imagine. Psychologists such as Sargant have looked into the influence of intense pressure, e.g. at revivalist meetings. In one major study of 249 subjects of mystical experience only 38 were found to be more than usually suggestible.

### ***Needs and wishes as generating the experiences***

Whether forms of psychoanalysis or more recent attachment theory, the way in which we experience our early attachments might colour our notions about a relationship with God. Psychoanalytic accounts will describe people as being more neurotic for these reasons, and therefore suggest that this makes them more likely to generate the religious experience or feelings as a form of wish fulfilment. It is odd to suggest that

because something is a need, therefore its satisfaction is false; what you have to argue here is that people can meet their needs in an inauthentic way by experiencing something that doesn't exist. This would be the heart of Freud's account.

In different ways, thinkers as different as Jung and Maslow have a different angle, which is to articulate in a more positive way the psychological needs that are being met. Humanistic thinkers, such as Abraham Maslow, focus on the happy and healthy individual rather than the unhappy and



Peak Experience  
*Wanderer above the Mists: C. D. Friedrich*

unwell, on the theory that the end product of growth is perhaps the best way to learn about the growth process.<sup>2</sup> 'Basic needs and self-actualisation do not contradict each other any more than do childhood and maturity.'<sup>3</sup> This growth and self-actualisation are punctuated by 'peak experiences', a moment when 'the powers of a person come together in a particularly efficient and intensely enjoyable way, and in which he is more ... fully-functioning ... more truly himself.'<sup>4</sup> These experiences Maslow often describes as 'transcendent' but is adamant that they are natural phenomena. They are our moments of greatest maturity,

of individuation, they are both the means and results of true growth. Peak experiences constituted the private revelation or ecstasy of the founders of the great religions, and hence are the essence of every religion. This transcendent, ecstatic core of religion is later objectified in ritual, regulated and institutionalised by 'ecclesiastical non-peakers', and the original revelation or peak experience made into sacred objects and activities.<sup>5</sup> There is insufficient support, then, for the suggestion that having religious experiences is by itself a sign of neurosis. On the other hand, it can easily be argued that spirituality meets various psychological needs.

### **Do causal explanations 'explain away'?**

Here is the list (probably not complete) of what has been suggested as the explanation of religious experience: intense social pressure, like

brainwashing, mass hysteria, or parental pressure; repressed sexuality, a projected parent complex, the psyche's process of individuation; the effects of emotional stress or a personal crisis, an overwhelming sense of guilt or perhaps hyper-suggestibility, hypnotic suggestion and indeed auto-suggestion; the effects of culture or social structures, education and upbringing, and expectation; psychological disease or disorder, and psychological well-being; or physiological factors like disease, or the ingestion of hallucinogenic substances. Can you think of many moments in your own life when at least one of these factors *didn't* apply?

The existence of a physiological state is a given. Every moment in our lives will show something interesting firing away in our brain, including moments of conducting scientific or academic research. That alone isn't enough to warrant inferences about truth value. Scientific accounts, e.g. psychological or physiological accounts, can be seen as doing one of two things. They can be *describing* what happens when this happens. They can also be seen as providing the explanation for *why* this happens. We can give a neurological account of what's going on in the nervous system when I feel intense pain. That is not the same as providing the diagnosis of what's causing the pain. The same goes for religious or spiritual experiences.

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## can all beliefs be explained in purely naturalistic terms?

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Interestingly, during the past ten years a number of neurophysiologists (such as Ramachandran), using modern brain-scanning techniques, believe they have identified a physiological correlate of spiritual awareness in the brain. As David Hay puts it: 'If these people are right, then spiritual awareness has a ... structural precursor. It is not a mere cultural choice that we can take up or discard according to personal preference. It is not a plaything of language that can be deconstructed out of existence. It is there in everybody, including both religious people and those who think religion is nonsense... The biological precursors of human competences always of necessity express themselves in some cultural form such as a specific language, musical tradition, scientific,

religious, humanistic or political belief. From this perspective spiritual awareness is the human predisposition that, amongst other things, permits the possibility of religious belief. Traditionally, spirituality expresses itself through the language of a specific religious culture such as Christianity or Islam. But this is not the only form it takes. Indeed it goes beyond religion in general for it has to include the experiences of people who reject religion.'<sup>6</sup>

So can all mental experience, all beliefs be explained in purely naturalistic terms? Does one prove the falsity of a belief with an explanation in purely naturalistic terms of why it is believed? If one answers 'yes' to both these questions, this viewpoint itself is self-refuting (false): as a belief, it too can be accounted for in purely naturalistic terms, no less than 'religion' can. So if the reductive explainer does not wish to have his own science explained away, he must allow that his explanatory framework does not preclude the truth of a belief – in which case a religious belief about experience might be true, even if his scientific explanation is also true.

One problem I've noticed with 'I've explained it' tendencies in psychological research is that they have only focused on a single type of experience and taken that as the whole. Researchers who equate religious experience with psychotic or pathological experience stress dramatic, quasi-sensory religious experiences such as visions and voices, experiences of demons or other entities – the kinds of religious experience that most resemble psychotic experiences, in fact – but the majority of reported experiences are not like that. Meanwhile, investigators who attribute religious experiences to suggestion or hysteria tend to focus on spectacular emotional experiences such as those that happen at revivalist meetings, prayer meetings with a strong emphasis on conversion and being saved, or on public instantaneous healings. So I repeat: 'Don't narrow the scope!' 'Reductionist' impulses are moving in the wrong direction. What is often misguided about 'reductionist' explanations is the reduction to a *narrower* frame of reference than can provide an adequate and profound understanding of the phenomenon.

When we feel someone is misguided in their understanding of their own experience, we often feel that way because their range of possible explanations is too narrow: they only consider one possible meaning or interpretation. Someone who is depressed and lonely has a dramatic emotional

experience with a friendly group, and thinks this must mean that all their religious claims are true and he must join this new religious movement and break off contact with his family and former friends. If we feel that they have misjudged their experience and drawn a false inference, we would do better to *widen* their interpretative horizons, not reduce them to a different explanatory context which is even narrower. Naturalistic explanations need not conflict with religious interpretations,

however. Scientific accounts might 'reduce' the supernatural to purely natural factors, but if a religious point of view insists that God alone is responsible and no consideration of human involvement is valid, we might consider this a form of 'religious reductionism'. A theological account can be given which does not see God as an *alternative explanation to natural phenomena*, but

rather as *present in natural phenomena* or working through them. So a believer might see God as working through the phenomena of the natural world to reveal Himself in human experience.

Nevertheless, in mystical traditions, a sceptical attitude is often taken to florid experiences, as in this story. A monk in Thailand sat down to meditate, as he usually did, for an hour or so in the afternoon. This time though it seemed that he travelled down a long dark tunnel and found at the end someone who took him on a tour, guiding him with his hand. The monk never saw the rest of this person, only the hand on his arm, and heard a voice explain the various bloody and horrific tortures which he saw. This was a vision of a hell-realm. The voice explained what different karmas had brought on the various forms of intense suffering. The tour was long, the place immense and the monk emerged from his experience only when the dark night sky was full of stars... When he told his Teacher about it, the

Teacher's comment was, 'Why didn't you find out *who* took you on the tour before you followed?'

Interpretation is interactive – within ourselves, between ourselves, but also within families, wider culture, traditions, communities, world; history. Experience is multi-layered. For example in a Hawaiian song, the layer of meaning known as the *mana* and that known as the *kaona* may be self-sufficient, coherent, *related* to the others, and still irreducibly different. 'Making sense' of our

experience is always going on, with everything. Perception itself is already 'interpreted', whether you're a Kantian or you talk in terms of pattern-matching in the brain. Much of this is 'unconscious', whether you're a Freudian or talking in a very different way about consciousness and its limits. We contribute a lot to what we perceive, but we are not constantly hallucinating.



Gabby Pahinui, Hawaiian musician

1. W. N. Pahnke, 'Drugs and Mysticism: an analysis of the relationship between psychedelic drugs and the mystical consciousness'. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1963.
2. See Abraham Maslow, *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences* (Ohio State University Press, 1964) and *Towards a Psychology of Being* (Litton Educational Publishing, 1968). On the question of the relation between science and religion, see *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*, Ch. 2, 'Dichotomised Science and Dichotomised Religion'.
3. A. Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, op. cit., p. 24.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
5. *Ibid.*, Ch. 3.
6. David Hay, 'The Spirituality of Adults in Britain – Recent Research'. *Scottish Journal of Healthcare Chaplaincy* Vol. 5 No 1, 2002, pdf pp. 5-6.

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