

TOPIC 5: THE INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: PSYCHOLOGICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, AND NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL APPROACHES

This section reviews some of the varied ways that the study of religious experience can be approached, considering later responses to the theories of the early key figures discussed in Section II, as well as recent developments. A recurring theme here is the ‘constructivist’ argument: that religious experience is not a reflection of a transcendent reality, but rather a cultural/sociological/psychological/ neurophysiological ‘construction’. This does not necessarily rule out the possibility of a ‘common core’, but rather defines it in reductionist terms.

Essentially, the question is whether we *make* experiences religious, or if we *have* religious experiences.

PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Psychology is an important discipline for the study of religions and religious experience. Of course, as a psychologist William James began with a psychological approach to the subject, and you should therefore have some foundation in this area by now. In fact, James was, in part, responding to Freud and his projectionist and reductionist approach when he emphasised the fruits of experiences rather than their alleged sociological or psychological roots (see below).

Like most disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, psychology is not one monolithic entity but a cluster of approaches, with varying theories and methods. Psychological approaches to religious experience are often themselves interdisciplinary (the same, can in fact be said about most of the orientations discussed in this Section), beginning with James as has been seen.

Beit-Hallami & Argyle (1997: xi) summarise:

Our approach is eclectic in both argument and evidence.... We will look at the literature produced by psychologists, sociologists, historians, anthropologists and political scientists. The qualitative methods of ethnography and historical analysis will share our attention, together with a variety of quantitative data.

Psychology of religion is, by definition, empirical. It offers observations and explications of the phenomena of religion, using the terminology of psychological theories.... The main sources of ideas are social psychology, personality theories, developmental psychology, psychotherapy and evolutionary psychology (ibid.8).

Our perspective must be essentially and unavoidably multi-disciplinary; informed by research in all the human sciences. We can enjoy the overlap in interests and the crossing of boundaries into other disciplines (ibid. 9).

A key issue in psychological approaches is the relationship between cultural/individual background and religious experience. Spilka et al. (2003) see experience as a total way of reacting or being which cannot be reduced to its parts, such as emotions or feelings. Religious experience they identify as any experience that is identified within faith communities as religious, despite the fact that they do not even like the terms 'religion' or 'religious'. In line with the emphases of phenomenologists, they do however, state that whether an experience is religious or not depends upon the experient's interpretation of it. They further argue that there is hardly any experience that could fail to qualify as religious or spiritual under some framework.

They are critical of the work of William James, particularly the way he subsumed the infinite variety of religious experiences under a simple formula: discontent and its resolution; and the way he defined religion as essentially personal and solitary. They also comment that James over-generalises about religious experience as being positive and 'good', while taking less account of negative experiences. There are numerous such examples, in out-of-body and near-death experiences, as well as feelings or visions of menace and evil. Others might add that James' psychology in general is dated.

Spilka et al. also stress the variety within and between the different types of psychological approaches, in both their theoretical orientation and research methods. The approach normally taken in depth psychologies (including Freudian and Jungian) is to use clinical and/or literary case studies and apply their own interpretations. Experimental methods are used by those of developmental, affective, behavioural and cognitive, attachment and attribution theory orientations. There are variations on these methods, such as feminist theory which is related to correlational and interpretive method, and phenomenological theory with descriptive, introspective reports. Transpersonal psychology is an integration of depth psychology approaches and perennial philosophy theories. Spilka et. al. discuss of all these terms (see also sections III-V in Hood 1995, one of the core books for this course).

The topic of the psychological approaches to the study of religious experience overlaps with the issue of religious experience and mental illness, discussed in Section VI. The cognitive study of religion will be discussed later in this section, along with neurophysiological approaches.

PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES

As with psychological approaches, there is not a single philosophical approach to the study of religious experience. Indeed, the field of philosophy itself is more of a mode of enquiry than a particular orientation. James and Otto were both philosophers, and it is worth reviewing their ideas in relation to this Section.

As with psychologists and sociologists, it is often thought that philosophical perspectives are almost entirely critical of religious ideas and experiences as a basis for a worldview. We have already touched upon some philosophical ideas about religious experience; the ideas of a common core and of a genuine spiritual reality, for example, are philosophical as well as metaphysical issues. Another philosophical issue already encountered is the degree to which belief rests on experience, and experience on belief. That is, how far does experience depend upon (and conform to) expectation? Similarly, to what degree does one's worldview give *meaning* to a religious experience; and to what degree does the experience give meaning to one's worldview?

Ninian Smart (1969: 14-15; see Reading List 2) highlighted some of the concerns and orientations of philosophers, and about philosophers, in their approaches to religious issues:

In relation to religious truth, philosophy is ambiguous. It is at once a menace and an ally. It is a menace, because of the sense of wonder issues in the question 'Why should things be so?' More particularly why should revelation or ecclesiastical authority be accepted? How can anyone claim to know the mysteries of God? Perhaps the pretensions of faith all rest upon illusion. In such ways, philosophy is menacing to revelation and piety. For as soon as we ask questions of this kind, simple faith is seen to be inadequate....

It is really most odd, how men bow down and worship, how they perform bizarre rituals. It seems like a kind of madness to talk about God, to search for the unseen. The madness, though, may be the madness of genius, and the invisible reality may have an uncanny glory, once we penetrate beyond commonplace attitudes of piety. The philosophical spirit, by liberating us from a humdrum view of life, may bring depth to our understanding of faith. In such a way, for all its menace, it can be an ally.

But it would not be philosophical to predict in advance how things will turn out in pursuit of truth. Of course, there is room for hunches; maybe we feel at the outset that truth must be like this or that. Nevertheless, once we are committed by our intellectual destiny to asking certain sorts of questions, to asking the uncomfortable questions about

the truth of religion, then it would be wrong to tame the menace by laying it down that in the end everything will be all right.

It may be noted that I have not tried to define philosophy, though I have used the word several times. One reason is that, owing to the peculiar and changing nature of philosophical enquiry, a neat verbal definition would be both inadequate and misleading. It is better to understand what philosophy is by doing some philosophy, just as we learn about music by listening to it and by playing it. It is the process of thinking that is important, the process of question and answer and discussion.

Donovan (1979/1998) and Franks Davis (1989) are both essentially philosophical approaches to religious experience. They both deal with questions philosophers ask (chiefly, what is the *meaning* of such experiences) in a rigorous and constructive way. They also share a positive view of religious experience in philosophical contexts. These are interesting books to compare in terms of methodology as well as conclusions. Some areas to focus on are their definitions and categories of religious experience, what they count as admissible as evidence, if they are sufficiently cross-cultural to justify any generalisations made, and the degree to which they are interdisciplinary. Badham and Yao (2007) also has philosophical dimensions, and the same questions can be applied to that study in comparison to the others.

The issue of cultural/individual context overlaps with psychology. Peter Berger (1979: 34) agrees with Schleiermacher that ‘At the heart of the religious phenomenon is prereflective, pretheoretical experience’; and that religion is ‘a human attitude that conceives of the cosmos (including the supernatural) as a sacred order.’ He goes so far as to argue that it is from religious experience that *all* religions derive, to then be culturally expressed: ‘Religious experience...comes to be embodied in traditions, which mediate it to those who have not had it themselves and which institutionalize it for them as well as for those who had’ (ibid.: 43).

This contrasts to the orientation of Cupitt (1998) who emphasised the importance of linguistics, not only in accounts of these experiences but in their very ‘construction’. He argued that because of the way language gives outward form and meaning to experience, particularly through the use of metaphor (e.g. references to illumination, being lifted up, feelings of weightlessness), all experience is mediated and indirect. The experience and its reporting are discursive, and dependent upon words and symbols. While the mystic refers to immediate knowledge of and union with the Divine essence, Cupitt asks whether this union, this total lack of separation, goes so far beyond ordinary language-based knowledge that it cannot be compared with it.

Cupitt further suggests that Western mystical writings are rooted in Platonic and Neo-Platonic ideas. This is the case whether it asserts that the Divine nature with which the mystic is united is utterly incomprehensible to us, and can be known only by *unknowing* and in a state of total darkness; or conversely that the Divine is, in essence, readily knowable and universally known, and that that knowledge is the foundation and underpinning of all other knowledge. The difference can be summarised as ‘Nobody can really know the Divine’ versus ‘There can be no one who does not know the divine’.

While Cupitt raises some interesting and valid points, they are not without problems. One is that he seems to neglect the diversity of mysticism itself, and the fact that there are many mystical paths and goals. Another is that the examples he gives of language-construction, and the claims regarding mystical thought being rooted in Platonism/Neo-Platonism, do not apply to non-Western cultures (and indeed do nothing to explain the cross-cultural similarities of such experiences).

Hick (1989, especially chapter 10; reference in Reading List 3) also provides a good starting point for these approaches. His own philosophical perspective, as mentioned earlier, is in support of the common core hypothesis and a transcendent reality. For a critique of Hick’s views, see Davies’ (2003) chapter called ‘Experience and God’.

NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL APPROACHES

A relatively recent development in the study of religious experience has been the biological approach. There are various terms for this field, some of which reflect variations on theory or approach. They include ‘neurotheology’, ‘spiritual neuroscience’, and ‘cognitive religion’. All are based on the argument that religious and mystical experience is ‘all in the brain’ – that it is a physical rather than spiritual occurrence.

Cognitive religion differs somewhat in that it stresses the cognitive processes of the brain, as opposed to its physical and chemical processes, and perhaps takes more account of the individual’s cultural context. All are concerned with ways in which the brain functions and reacts to stimuli. This is often in order to construct arguments surrounding the origins of religions, and/or their similarities cross-culturally.

While this type of theory is not new, going at least as far back as the 19th century anthropologist Adolf Bastian, advances in the physical sciences (particularly in neurophysiology) have led to more advanced and comprehensive arguments.

In NDEs the main proponent of this type of theory has been Susan Blackmore. In religious experience in general, D'Aquili & Newberg (1999) are two of the most prominent names. In short, their argument is that religions and religious experience are similar across individuals and cultures because we all share the same biological structures, and therefore our brains produce the same types of cognitive and chemical activities. There is thus a 'common core' to experience and belief, though this is not due to some shared, genuinely spiritual perennial philosophy, but to our biological makeup.

For example, D'Aquili & Newberg have mapped the brain activity which occurs during meditative states, and argue that their model can be applied to other types of mystical and religious experiences as well. Because the brain activity can be identified with such precision, the brain (or 'mind/brain', a term sometimes used) is said to 'generate' such experiences. Seemingly paradoxically, the authors claim to be non-reductionist, and at one stage seem to suggest that such states are human *responses* to God or ultimate reality. Nevertheless, their reductionist arguments and language far outweigh any scope they may leave for the possibility of genuine transcendence. Indeed, there can be no doubt about their standpoint when they write that 'religions and their theologies necessarily arise from the machinery of the human brain operating within a social context' (p. 206). They further state:

We feel certain, however, that any specific theological idea may eventually be reducible to neuropsychological functions. Lest this idea be considered overreductionistic, we would point out that the overall models presented in this book suggest just such a reductionism. This reductionism applies not only to theology, but to ritual, religion, and mysticism, as well as to baseline reality.

However, they then add:

...we do not feel in any way that a neuropsychological analysis of theology or mysticism alters their true spiritual and possibly transcendent nature. It merely indicates how human beings *perceive* these phenomena.

Fenwick (2001) has pointed out that it is problematic to scientifically evaluate and explain subjective experience. This is a valid point, but as with many points in the study of religious experience, it give rise to another: in this context, what is the difference between 'subjective' and objective,' and indeed can there be such as thing as 'objective' religious experience? A major question here is: does the fact that distinct types of brain activity can be

measured during spiritual experiences prove that the brain is *generating* the experience? Is it instead possible that the experience is *causing* the brain to make such changes, that it is more like a receiver than a generator?

Some have argued that such experiences are '*mediated*', not generated, by the brain. This term was used by Beauregard and Paquette (2006) in their study of the brain activity of Carmelite nuns 'while they were subjectively in a state of union with God'. Their study has demonstrated that there is not a single 'god spot' in the brain as had been previously argued, but rather a complex neural network which is activated during mystical states. Beauregard concluded, however, that their findings do 'not diminish the meaning and value of such an experience and neither does it confirm or disconfirm the existence of God'.

Hick (2006) has highlighted the importance of this issue, stating that 'the living heart of religion is to be found in religious experience'. In perhaps the most comprehensive response to date from the metaphysical position, Hick criticises naturalistic theories as incomplete and based upon unproven assumptions about the nature of the mind (and its relationship to the brain) and consciousness. He points out that, like religious experience itself, the nature of mind and consciousness remain mysteries, irreducible to neurophysiologic explanations of brain malfunction or other types of epiphenomena. Without *a priori* adopting naturalistic science as a default, room is left open for the possibility of a genuine metaphysical reality.

Another potential problem for reductionist theories are the allegedly veridical observations made by those who have out-of-body, near-death, precognitive, and other 'anomalous' types of experiences. If such observations can be shown to be genuine (and many researchers have made such claims), this suggests mind-brain independence, and would be inconsistent with 'neurotheology' claims.