

Candidate 8

Secular Perspectives have discredited Religious Experience. To what extent is this accurate?

Throughout the course of human history, religious experience – and the principles based on it – have permeated society in a way that nothing else has. A lot of the practices and behaviour associated with this have helped build society and established personhood for many individuals. The religious experiences of many influential people such as David Koresh and Malcom X have shaped the world that we live in today. Since this has been some a major part of human existence, religion has naturally been subject to intense study, and often scrutiny. One of the main things that has been closely looked into in this area is religious experience. This describes a life changing event, where a person feels that they have had an experience that cannot be explained by science or reasonable logic. Whether it be considered an indefinable wonder or a psychological or biological survival mechanism, it is something which will always be worth studying. This task, however, is problematic as defining religion and religious experiences is something which is separate from our sense of ordinary objects. Although many see trying to define religious experience as using everyday language for something which is entirely ineffable, many psychologists and sociologists have attempted to explain why some people feel that they have had religious experiences, and often discredit them altogether.

Psychologists tend to be cynical about certain terms that are used in connection with religious experiences such as spiritual and numinous, as they seem to suggest that there are different types of reality which cannot be explained by science. One of the reasons that this causes difficulty is because science is thought of to be pragmatic, meaning that it works by undertaking experiments. However, experiments can not be taken out upon a soul or spirit, which causes psychologists to doubt the validity of these experiences. Contrary to this, not all psychologists have secular beliefs, meaning that they don't all have a concern for this world only. The psychology of religion can sometimes be a threat in some religious quarters. This is because the obvious devices which are responsible for experiences such as conversion and mysticism may then be used to disprove these experiences without recourse to a trans-empirical reality. Peter Connolly says, "*psychological studies of religious phenomena have the potential for profound influence upon the beliefs and practices of religious people.*"¹ However, many religious people would counter argue that one cannot come up with a cause based on its effect. An example of a psychologist who studied religious experience is Sigmund Freud, a Viennese doctor who was around between 1856 and 1939. He believed that religion is purely an illusion based on human wishes, almost like wishful thinking, a person may hope so

¹ Psychological Approaches to the Study of Religion – Peter Connolly (1999)

strongly that there is a higher power or something more than what we see every day. He also believed that religious experiences, like genuine experiences, were nothing more than wish fulfilment, which can often be the resolution of inner psychological conflict. His colleague, Carl Gustav Jung, disagreed with his 'negative' estimation of religion. However, they both agree that religious experience is a normal phenomenon, but Freud thought it was for the worst, and Jung thought it was for the best. Although, both did suggest psychological mechanisms to explain these experiences.

Freud started to find parallels between religion and what he referred to as 'abnormal' psychological conditions. He saw that religious people had rituals that they had to perform every day in the same way that people with obsessive compulsive disorder do. If a ritual or habit is not completed every day, often in the same way and at the same time, then the person can start to feel uncomfortable, and a fear develops that if they fail to achieve this in some way that everything will go wrong. The person then develops a neurosis, and are almost obsessed with performing these acts and traditions. Looking at Freud's paper on the subject, 'Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices, 1907'² you can see how he describes such obsessive practices, such as turning a light switch on and off a certain number of times before they sleep, as a 'sacred act', in the same way as a religious ritual like praying before you eat a meal. He also said in his paper that *"in view of these similarities and analogies one might venture to regard occasional neurosis as a pathological counterpart to the formation of a religion, and to describe that neurosis as an individual religiosity, and religion as a universal obsessional neurosis."*³ He looks at religious experience as a fixation that amounts to nothing other than neurotic behaviour, or psychotic delusions. This paper, as well as all of his later work, gives a negative outlook on religion, as it portrays it as a mental disorder and something that has no positive outcome. This could be criticised, as for many religious people, religious practice is something which helps them throughout their day and gives them a structure. Freud's explanation of religion as a type of obsessive compulsive disorder creates a feeling that acts of worship are pointless habits, but for many people these rituals are a centre point in their life that feels safe or peaceful. On the other hand, he says this because often people feel uncomfortable if they don't perform these rituals. All his work is also based upon assumptions, which are neither confirmed or tested. Throughout creating this work, Freud wanted to be a key contributor to the progression of the intellectual evolution of the human species in distinct and apparent stages. The first stage that he hoped for was theological development, where the world was understood in terms of Gods and spirits. The second was metaphysical, where the world would be conquered by philosophical ideas of essence

² Obsessive Acts and Practices – Sigmund Freud (1907)

³ Ibid.

and element. After this stage, the world would be entering the third and final stage, where everything would be understood and explained in terms of scientific ideologies. His general theory of human behaviour is what is referred to as a psycho-dynamic theory. Meaning that instead of the human mind being a whole, it is composed of separate elements or subsystems. Freud sees these elements as being in a dynamic relationship or in conflict with each other and believes that the conflict of these two elements is the cause of behaviour. Again, he has three main aspects of his theory around this. The first is the conscious. This refers to one that is aware of basic things such as the time of day and what that means and so on. The second is the preconscious, this is one that can be made conscience by will – like how you can remember somebody's address when someone asks you. You are not actively aware of these things at all times, but most we wouldn't think of most things unless we are told to. Finally, there is the subconscious. This is often repressed from awareness and not usually available to it. Freud sees the subconscious as in conflict with the conscious and believes it creates a semi-autonomous life of its own.

In terms of conversion experiences, Freud thought it was important to first look into why a person would be religious, and why a lot of people aren't. He believed that religion was "*born from humanity's need to make his helplessness tolerable*"⁴. Thus, when we are confronted by the intimidating forces of nature, we personify them into a dreadful yet caring god and attempt to build a relationship with them. He thinks that when a person is feeling hopeless and thinks that the world is unkind to them, they can resort to strategies which have worked for them in the past, and such a stratagem is submission to a male authority figure. He considers the impulse of religious experience to be the same as this. Having studied mostly evangelical Christian groups, he sees that conversion can be a way of resolving inner conflict and neurosis by following rules and rituals required by a god who demands that you must be born again. So, when a person feels they have had a religious experience, Freud would consider this to be a universal neurosis which has temporarily slipped into a hallucinatory psychosis. When studying mysticism, he considered the 'loss of self' experience which he called the 'oceanic feeling'.⁵ He feels that this is nothing more than a regression to childhood, or an acting out in a fantasy of the desire to get away from the stress, or sometimes the boredom, of their everyday lives. These are sometimes linked, in his opinion, to a father figure, which is connected to his Oedipus theory. It is unclear what his opinions might be on the religious experiences of people such as St Teresa of Avila, as she was a woman – and his theories tend to be based around men. St Teresa's mystical experiences do, however, fit in with Freud's descriptions of

⁴ Op Cit. 2

⁵ Letter to Sigmund Freud written by Romain Rolland – December 5 1927

the 'loss of self' and 'oceanic feeling'. Teresa of Avila is known for having mystical experiences such as alternating between a heavenly blissful feeling and a hellish fire-like glow, and feeling as though her body was lifted from the ground (many believe that it literally levitated) and she would then awaken from this trance in tears.⁶ She believed that God was the cause of these sensory experiences, but Freud would have argued that this was a subconscious attempt to escape from real life and to live out a fantasy. St Teresa's mystical experiences tended to be based around Jesus, the son, rather than God, the Father, but Freud entirely rejects the idea that religious experience has anything to do with the existence of a higher being, although he understands that he is an outsider to religious experience, having not had one himself. To evaluate, Freud did not understand why it was that so many people still held religious beliefs. He held the opinion that religion was usually something that people wished to be true to make their life feel more purposeful and to give them a feeling of security and safety. However, he thought that in the age he was in, religion was outdated, and people should be looking to science to find proven answers about life, rather than living in hope of something that could not be proven. He believed that people did have many of the experiences that they believed to have had, whether it be a mystical experience like an overwhelming rush of sensation that is out of a person's control or understanding, or a sudden conversion. This does not mean to say that he thought these experiences had anything to do with religion, and they can be explained much more accurately. Religious experience can never be fully rejected, not can it be explained or proven.

Another psychologist who has considered religious experience is Carl Gustav Jung, who was originally one of Freud's students, until a disagreement over the importance of sexuality and spirituality to psychological development. Another area of disagreement between the two was the causes of religious experiences and the way that they can be explained or discredited. Although Freud viewed it as a neurotic illness like obsessive compulsive disorder⁷, Jung had a more positive view on the idea of religious experience. He accepted it as a phenomenon which was overall beneficial. Jung believed that although these experiences had nothing to do with God, but they could have a positive impact on people's lives. However, they both agreed that religious experience was a psychological experience which had a lot to do with the unconscious part of the personality. Both were concerned with the relationship amongst the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind. Jung refers to the conscious as *"everything of which I know but of which I cannot at the moments think; everything of which I was once conscious but now have forgotten; everything perceived by my senses but not noted by my conscious mind; everything which involuntarily and*

⁶ The Incredible Life of St Teresa of Avila – The Mystical Humanity of Christ

⁷ Op cit. 2

without paying attention to it, I feel, think, remember, want, and do; all future things are taking shape in me and will some time come to consciousness. All this is the content of the unconscious.”⁸

He proposed two kinds of unconscious: personal unconscious, and collective unconscious. The personal unconscious includes those things about us that we would like to forget, like embarrassing or upsetting memories. The collective unconscious tends to refer to events that we all share by having a communal inheritance as members of humankind. These things are the same for everyone and do not change based on the individual experiences of the person. This is a natural thing that runs through us all and it provides us with similar images. An example of these natural images that we all have is the fact that most people, who are entirely unrelated and have never met each other, at some point experience having dreams about falling from a great height or turning up to school or work naked. He calls these ‘image generators’ that he refers ‘archetypes’, but it is important to understand that the prehistoric image that everyone has such as dreams are different to these archetypes. Carl Jung sees this archetype as related to the unconscious and believes that the unconscious is ‘the only accessible source of religious experience’. He believes that people’s ideas of God and other holy things such as angels as the same type of subconscious as people’s dreams; a sort of fantasy. And in the same way as the common dreams that we all seem to have, we all share a common idea of what God is like without ever seeing it. However, this is not a good assessment as dreams are a natural subconscious phenomenon that we all experience from birth. Therefore, one can not compare this to the idea of God, as that is something that we are taught, and it does not come naturally. Another criticism about the idea of a God Archetype is the fact that different major religions throughout the world have very differing ideas of what God is. For example, Hindu’s believe that although there is one main power in the world, Brahman, but Brahman is split into 33 million separate Gods. This is very different from the beliefs of the mainstream Christian belief where there is one main God.

In his book ‘Psychology of Religion (1938)’⁹ he draws a distinction between God as He is commonly understood in dogma and creeds, and God as an archetype. He said, *“It is the fault of the everlasting contamination of object and image that people can make no conceptual distinction between ‘God’ and ‘God-Archetype’ and therefore think that when one speaks of the ‘God-Archetype’ one is speaking of God and offering theological explanations. It is not for psychology, as a science, to demand a hypostatisation of the God image... It is equally clear that the God image corresponds to a definite complex of psychological facts, and is thus a quantity which we can operate with; but what*

⁸ Jung’s writing on the personal unconscious

⁹ Psychology of Religion – Carl Jung (1938)

*God is in himself remains a question outside the competence of all psychology.*¹⁰ In Jung's opinion, experience was the most important thing, so whether or not religious experiences did happen, the impact which it had on the person would always be more important. Jung was labelled as agnostic, or even an atheist because he had no interest in discussing metaphysical questions. He believes that the only way God exists is through the general idea of him which we all have. For this reason, although Jung does believe that people could have 'religious experiences' but he does discredit the believe that there is any religion involved in this at all. He has similar beliefs to Freud, in the sense that he believes such occurrences are a trick that the brain plays to try and improve a person's state of mind, but he sees this as a positive thing. However, in 1952 he wrote a letter to a young Christian minister in which he said "I find that all my thoughts circle around God like the planets around the sun, and are irresistibly attracted by Him. I would feel it to be the grossest sin if I were to oppose any resistance to this force." Compared to Freud, Jung seems to have more of an obsession with God, and although he is not religious himself, he seems to believe in the power of the God Archetype and understands that this can play a positive part in a person's life. Visiting Samye Ling, a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in Scotland, I saw monks practicing prayers and chants as well as meditation multiple times throughout the day. This was something that they had to do, and if they didn't do this, they would feel uncomfortable, as it became a habit. The monks felt that this greatly improved their wellbeing. This was also a time where they could relax, and they also may feel a numinous feeling or an intense rush of emotion. This adds to what Jung says about religion and religious experience being positive, as well as Freud's comparisons of religion and obsessive compulsive disorder.

Where psychology is mainly focused on the mind, sociology focuses more on groups within society. Many sociologists have approached religion as a kind of collective delusion. In ways this is like how psychologists view religion, as they claim to not only explain it, but to also disprove it. They often hold the idea that religion serves a purpose so humans, as it allows them to have beliefs outside of the world they are living in and works as a sort of escapism. But sociologists can also sometimes have negative opinions on religion, as they often believe that it is a negative thing in society which leads to war, terrorism and inequality. As well as this, most sociologists tend not to believe in God, as they believe more in the power of individuals and society. There are three main approaches to the study of religious experience from a sociological perspective. The first is an ideology that religion exists so that an elite can dominate the masses. The second approach looks at the world from the point of view of the person who has had a religious experience. This helps explain the belief that the

¹⁰ Ibid.

outcome of the experience is more important than the cause of the experience whether it be religious or due to science. A third method is to assume that religion has a degree of truth, but that sociology can aid understanding of the consequences of religious belief. One sociologist who has investigated religious experience is Emile Durkheim. He was the founder of the sociology of religion. Durkheim wrote *'a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them'*.¹¹ This contrasts with the views of other sociologists such as William James, as Durkheim was not concerned with the variety of religions experience, but the shared events and bonds of religious experience on individuals. In a well-known summary, Durkheim's theories have been put into four main functions. The first is Disciplinary, meaning that religious rituals prepare people for social life by imposing self-discipline and a strong moral code. The second is Cohesive, and means that religious ceremonies bring people together and serve to reaffirm their common bonds. The next function is called Vitalising which means that religion maintains social heritage and transmits values to future generations. And the last is Euphoric, meaning it counteracts feelings of frustration and loss, and re-establishes a sense of wellbeing. All say in some way that religion serves society by giving meaning to humanity's essential predicaments by tying the individual to values outside themselves.

Although Durkheim proposed that his arguments could be used to understand religion in society at his time, a problem with his arguments is that there are so many religions in western society, and therefore it is almost impossible to narrow down the reasons for how society is to just one thing. Durkheim sees the phenomenon of religious experience as an 'effervescence'. This means that in ways, society acts as a certain 'God' for people, as it is all-powerful and superior to the individual. He says that society has a sort of 'collective consciousness', meaning that sometimes the whole of society has one mind and acts in the same way when lead by others. Although most of Durkheim's work and ideas is now seen as outdated, the emphasis he puts on religious gatherings is still relevant to modern day psychologists. This idea of a religion being a social 'effervescence' seems to echo Sigmund Freud's idea that religion is *'the universal obsessional neurosis of humanity'*.¹² An example of this is the aboriginal clan in Australia. Support for aboriginals is demonstrated by initiation into a totemic cult hysteria. This is related to the pressure that is put on people in society to conform so that they fit in and 'belong', and Durkheim believes that this creates and generates religious beliefs. In a more modern example, this relates to the fact that many Christian people start to talk in tongues. When one person starts this, more and more people start doing the same thing, and this

¹¹ The Elementary forms of Human Life – Emile Durkheim (1912)

¹² Op Cit. 2

could possibly be linked back to a deep need within us to feel like we're a part of something. This could also be criticized, as he claims that religion is something which unites society, rather than something which can be divisive, and he does not seem to mention the fact that there are many different religions with very differing beliefs.

Dr Bryan Wilson is another sociologist who has looked deeply into the causes of the phenomenon many perceive as religious experience. He specifically looked at 19th century revivalism, and how revivalists became professional. The idea then became more popular that waiting for the holy spirit was not necessary and that revival could be organised systematically and induced. Although this was a planned event, people still felt a strong sense of holiness and it was credited as being an objective supernatural force. Wilson draws attention to writing by Mrs Trollope who observed 19th century revivals. She described an exhortation by the preachers as *"Hysterical sobbings, conclusive groans, shrieks and screams the most appalling bust forth on all sides."* And said that *"on the word being given 'Let us pray' they all fell on their knees."* From this, Wilson took that often spiritual experiences can be induced and that the response to this can also be learned, although it is still a religious experience. This links to what Durkheim says about religion being a way to conform in society and to feel like you fit in. This can also be a valid explanation for many religious experiences that can happen when a large group of people are together. Often people subconsciously begin to act a certain way because others are doing so, like the way that seeing someone yawn makes us yawn ourselves. In January 1994 in the Toronto Airport Vineyard Church, members of the church were worshipping and suddenly started speaking in tongues and shaking uncontrollably. People were rolling on the floor and barking like dogs. There have been no genuine explanations for this phenomenon, and it is seen as a religious experience as those involved felt the power of God was controlling them. This feeds in to Durkheim's theory of social effervescence. It is possible that although all of these individuals believed that they were being controlled by a higher power, they were subconsciously being controlled by the hive mind of the group of people. This is a significant argument in discrediting religious experience, as it gives a good explanation to why many people experience similar things at the same time. In conclusion, many of the studies that have been done by very influential psychologists and sociologists throughout the course of over a century can be successful in discrediting religious experiences. Although these secular perspectives do not imply that such numinous feelings do not occur, they simply disrepute the idea that these unusual happenings have anything to do with a God or with religion. Sociology and Psychology will always be the more trustworthy ways to explain things about the world.

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