

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLANATION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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There is no generally accepted explanation of religious experiences. If we suppose that they are »true«, some explanation is still needed of why some people have them and others do not, or why they occur under certain special conditions. A major obstacle is that they take a variety of forms. There is a tradition of emphasising the universal features of religious experiences, but there are also many studies distinguishing different types and dimensions. Hardy (1979) found 44 types and others have found 2-4- dimensions.

Let us start with a survey carried out in Britain by Gallup in 1985 (Hay and Heald, 1987). Respondents were asked »Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday life?«

Table 1. *Religious experience in Britain*

<i>Type of Experience</i>	<i>(1) % reporting this</i>	<i>(2) % interpreting religiously</i>	<i>% religious experience (1 × 2)</i>
Awareness of an presence of God	27	80	21.6
Awareness of receiving help in answer to prayer	25	79	19.8
Awareness of a guiding presence not called God	22	58	12.8
Awareness of a sacred presence in nature	16	61	9.8
Awareness of patterning in synchronicity	29	32	9.3
Awareness of the presence of someone who has died	18	35	6.3
Awareness of an evil presence	12	38	4.6
Experiencing that alle things are one	5	55	2.75

(Hay and Heald, 1987)

Similar studies have been carried out in the U.S.A. e.g. by Back and Bourque (1979). The American results are similar in finding that about 34% of

people report religious experiences. In the American study they were asked »Would you say that you have ever had a 'religious or mystical experience' – that is a moment of sudden religious insight or awakening?«. The experiences were most common in lower class, black females, whereas in the British sample it was educated, middle class women who were most likely to report them. In the British sample 61% of experiences occurred when people were alone; it seems likely that the American experiences often took place at church services.

I think that some of these studies have underestimated the extent of religious experience in communal setting. I shall discuss two examples of these later – church services with music and conversion experiences. There are others such as speaking with tongues, religious healing and public visions like those at Fatima and elsewhere.

I will leave for the time being the question of the common core, and examine possible psychological explanations for some common forms of experience.

### *1. Awareness of a sacred presence in nature*

This reflects the impact of the European romantic tradition, in which poets like Wordsworth and painters like Turner, in the eighteenth century »discovered« the beauty of the natural world of mountains, lakes and other features of the landscape. Before that time people thought that mountains for example were simply a nuisance (Clark, 1969). Research into the causes of joy has found that experience of nature, and sunny days, are common sources of this emotion (Argyle, 1987). Research in the psychology of religion has found that mountains, deserts, and wilderness are sources of religious experience (Rosegrant, 1976). Environmental psychologists have pinpointed the precise features which evoke positive (though not necessarily religious) reactions. These are settings which are green with grass or trees, where there is water, and depth of view (Altman and Wohlwill, 1983). These features, together with sunshine, are obviously of biological importance, suggesting that there may be a biological basis for these reactions.

### *(2) Music*

Music is not mentioned in Table 1, since it occurs in group rather than solitary settings. Music is one of the main methods used to generate emotions in the lab, it has been described as »the language of emotion«, and it plays a central part in most religious services. In the lab, it has been used to produce elation and depression but it can produce more complex emotions than this: the second part of Beethoven's Eroica symphony was described by subjects as sadness, despair or grief« (Hampton, 1945), and the same composer's Pastoral Sonata »the joyful uplifting of the oppressed soul that finds itself released from depths of anguish« (Valentine, 1962). Susanna Langer (1942) suggested that music and emotional experience have the

same temporal structure; both have periods of »motion and rest, attention and release, of agreement and disagreement, preparation, fulfilment, exaltation and sudden change«. In Europe there has been a long tradition of church music, of which Bach's is the most renowned. While music can generate any emotion, religious music has a special quality, a kind of deep joy, triumph over tragedy.

Religious ideas are often expressed in music and other non-verbal ways, perhaps because religion is more a matter of emotion, to which words cannot do justice. Common non-verbal symbols here are architecture (soaring to heaven), posture (submission), bells (announcing the holy presence), dark blue stained glass (sombre mood), impressive costumes (the status of the priest), touch (laying in loving hands), and water (cleansing in baptism). Ritual acts are used which symbolise important facts of life, such as birth and death, relations with parents, the seasons, and to influence other people as in healing, rites of passage, funerals, or the deity as in sacrifice. Research has revealed the operation of two different kinds of thinking. People with dominant left hemispheres engage primarily in rational and verbal thinking, those with dominant right hemispheres prefer metaphor and are concerned with music and the arts, and other non-rational activities (Bakan, 1971).

Religious music is usually sung by numbers of people, and this amplifies the emotional impact. Hay (1980) describes this as »social effervescence«, and relates it to Durkheim's theory that religious experience is derived from such group emotion, and that the entity which the individual encounters in religious experience is the collective assembly.

### *(3) Mystical experience – »all is one«.*

This is the classic mystical experience, often regarded as archetypal, though as Table 1 shows it is actually quite rare – only 2.75% of people report it. It is however more typical of Eastern pantheistic mysticism. Hood (1975) factor analysed statements representing the 8 aspects of religious experience described by Stace. The main factor consisted of the items about unity, transcendence of time and space, ego loss and related topics.

This classic type of experience, though rare, can be produced by means of drugs. Pahnke (1966) reports an experiment in which theological students were given the drug psilocybin, and others a placebo. Those who had the drug reported what appears to be the classic mystical experience, of unity, timelessness, and the rest (Table 2).

This experiment has been criticised on the grounds that the subjects realised whether they were in the experimental or control groups, and that the only categories which they were given to describe their experiences were mystical ones. Nevertheless it is impressive that six months later the psilocybin subjects reported strong benefits, such as feelings of strengthened commitment to the religious life (Batson and Ventis, 1982).

Table 2. *The effects of psilocybin on mystical experience*

Category	Percentage of maximum possible score for 10 Ss		
	Exp.	Control	<i>p</i> *
1. Unity	62	7	0.001
(a) Internal	70	8	0.001
(b) External	38	2	0.008
2. Transcendence of time and space	84	6	0.001
3. Deeply felt positive mood	57	23	0.020
(a) Joy, blessedness and peace	51	13	0.020
(b) Love	57	33	0.055
4. Sacredness	53	28	0.020
5. Objectivity and reality	63	18	0.011
6. Paradoxicality	61	13	0.001
7. Alleged ineffability	66	18	0.001
8. Transiency	79	8	0.001
9. Persisting positive changes in attitude and behaviour	51	8	0.001
(a) towards self	57	3	0.001
(b) towards others	40	20	0.002
(c) towards life	54	6	0.011
(d) towards the experience	57	31	0.055

\* Probability if the difference between experimental and control scores is due to chance. Source: Pahnke (1966).

However not all experiments with drugs have been so successful, and mescaline and LSD have simply produced strange and unpleasant experiences for many. The percentage who report a religious experience is far higher (75-90%) for those individuals with a strong religious background.

The explanation for this variability may lie in the two factor theory of emotion. This says that to experience an emotion requires the combination of physiological arousal and cognitions which suggest a particular emotion (Schachter, 1959). In the case of mystical experience a special kind of physiological arousal may be needed, such as is provided by hallucinogenic drugs, and religious beliefs and setting.

But why should certain drugs produce these experiences. This is far from clear. Of course the drugs do occur in nature, and some Mexican Indians chew peyote for religious purposes, not realising that it contains mescaline. Perhaps similar bodily states can be achieved in other ways, such as by fasting, loss of sleep, and other monastic practices.

#### *(4) Experiences of God and others*

In mystical experiences the individual feels merged into a larger whole. We now turn to encounters with God as a separate entity. Table 1 shows that this is much more common - awareness of the presence of God (22%), of receiving help or answer to prayer (20%), or of another guiding presence (10%).

These experiences may be unexpected or they may be worked for. Meditation of various kinds involves concentrating the mind, in silence, in one of a number of ways, imported from India. Meditation on a vase for 15 minute periods. Prayer can also produce powerful physiological and experiential effects. In American surveys many religious experiences were reported which had taken place during prayer, but for some reason the proportion is much lower in Britain (Hay, 1985).

There is a psychological explanation for hearing voices and receiving guidance. Small children can sometimes be heard talking to themselves in the voice of a parent, saying things like »don't touch«, »naughty«, etc. Often repeated interaction sequences result in the child learning how the parent responds in a number of situations. God's voice could be learned in two ways. If people often address God in prayer, the typical human responses could be activated. The Freudian theory is that God is an internalisation of parent images (jvf. artiklen »Psykologien og det hellige«, side 184 i dette nr.). There is some support for this view from the finding that images of God and parents are very similar, as are attitudes to each, especially to the preferred or the opposite sex parent, though this has been criticised on the ground that this could simply reflect general positive attitudes. Buber (1936) described the encounter with God as an »I-Thou relationship«, in which He is known as in prayer as we know real persons. This must consist of a kind of dialogue, mainly one-sided, but where the responses of the other are included.

There are similar encounters and relationships with the Virgin Mary, Jesus, the Saints, and with the dead. This happens in bereavement, and could be because of the often-repeated interaction sequences in the home, where the reactions of the other are very familiar and so become aroused in fantasy after their death.

Another version of this theory has been put forward by Sunden (1959). He suggests that religious people become familiar with Biblical events, with the roles involved (God included), and the pattern of interaction between them. They then see analogies between their own life situations and those of Biblical characters and have expectations of how the others will respond. This theory has received some support from case studies of John Wesley and others (Kallstad, 1987). A quite different explanation of hearing religious voices is due to Jaynes (1976), who suggested that the Greeks at the time of Homer, and the Jews in Old Testament times, had a »bicameral mind). The right cerebral hemisphere may have been responsible for auditory hallucinations which the left hemisphere interpreted as the voices of the Gods. Hearing such voices is less common now, and Jaynes argues that the bicameral mind broke down between 2000 and 1000 B.C., as a result of increased training with other peoples and the discovery that different gods said different things. In terms of this theory some present-day religious experiences would therefore be interpreted as a remnant of past traditions

and modes of awareness, that is now discouraged by common socialisation practices.

### *(5) Conversion*

This accounts for a small percentage of religious experiences in studies like the one reported in Table 1. In other populations however large numbers of people are involved, such as the 120,000 who made »decisions for Christ« at Billy Graham's meetings in England in 1954-5, about 5% of those present at the larger meetings (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, 1975). This was a common experience for adolescents, especially in the U.S.A. early in this century, when the typical age of conversion was 15-17.

Sargant (1957) put forward a theory of conversion and similar phenomena like religious healing. He argued that states of high arousal are generated, partly by social pressure, and that in this condition people are very suggestible. A further element can be added by recognising the state that many people are in before they are converted, typically of depression, anxiety and guilt. These feelings were often enhanced by evangelical preachers who emphasise the dangers of hell fire. Billy Graham recently warned his (mainly teen-age) congregation »in ten years, a quarter of you will be dead«.

After conversion people feel in a greatly improved emotional state, together with positive commitment and optimism about the future (Clark, 1929). Hay (1982) found that 50% of his subjects had been »distressed or ill-at-ease« beforehand. This negative-to-positive sequence is a feature of most religious experiences, and it has recently been suggested that it is a universal feature (Ahern, 1989). Heirich (1977) found that 83% of people converted to a Pentecostal group had experienced a lot of stress beforehand. Brown et al (1978) studied 192 Christians who had reported mystical experiences; there was a correlation between self-dissatisfaction and experiences of unity, enlightenment and new knowledge. Batson and Ventis (1982) interpret these and other studies in terms of personal re-creation and creative problem-solving.

### **Is religious experience beneficial?**

Some have argued that religious experiences are a kind of aberration, like mental disorder, others that they are part of man's biological nature. It is relevant therefore to consider whether the effects are beneficial or otherwise.

### *(1) Health*

There have been many studies of religion and health. Comstock and Partidge (1972) found much lower rates of heart disease, emphysema, T.B.,

cirrhosis, and cancer of the cervix, among frequent church attenders. A recent study by Spilka (cited by Gorsuch 1989) found that these results held up after the lower rates of smoking and drinking among religious people had been allowed for. These results do not of course show the causal effects of religious experience, though regular attenders are much more likely to have them.

### (2) *Subjective well-being*

Chamberlain (1988) carried out a meta-analysis of 28 studies, and found an overall correlation of .15 to .25 between church membership or attendance and self-reported well-being. Hay (1982) found that people who reported religious experiences said that these »confirmed or intensified my beliefs« (24%), »made me more optimistic« (22%), or »encourage moral behaviour« (10%). Ahern (1989) from analysing a sample of 60 accounts of religious experiences concluded that there is a common core – an intense and positive mood, and shift from negative to positive state. The Pahnke study reported in Table 2 showed clear benefits from drug-induced experiences six months later.

### (3) *A sense of inner meaning*

Several classical psychological and sociological theories of religion have proposed that the main function of religion is to provide a sense of inner meaning and purpose. Religious experiences can evidently do this. Hay (1982) found that 16% of people who reported these experiences said that they had been »given insight into life«. The kind of creativity and problem-solving described above in connection with conversion and personal crises is another example of the provision of enhanced meaning and purpose. Freedman (1978) describes the lack of this condition for a number of prosperous and otherwise successful individuals who had sought therapy, and asked themselves »why am I doing all this?, or »what is the point of it all?«. Indeed the extent of this condition in certain parts of the USA has led to the development of new forms of existential therapy. Perhaps they should go to church instead.

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