

Religious Experience

Well, it *feels* real ...



Caravaggio's *Conversion of St. Paul*

Report: ISIS Fighter Who 'Enjoyed' Killing Christians Wants to Follow Jesus After Dreaming of Man in White Who Told Him 'You Are Killing My People'

Is God Using 'Jesus Dreams' to Reach Islamic State Militants and Convince Them to Follow Christ?

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(PHOTO: REUTERS/SOCIAL MEDIA WEBSITE VIA REUTERS TV)

An Islamic State militant holds a gun while standing behind Ethiopian Christians in Wilayat Fazzan, in this still image from an undated video made available on a social media website on April 19, 2015.

“One of our YWAM workers in the Middle East was contacted by a friend earlier this year and they met up and he was introduced to an ISIS fighter who had killed many Christians already. ...

He told this YWAM leader that he had begun having dreams of this man in white who came to him and said, ‘You are killing my people.’ And he started to feel really sick and uneasy about what he was doing...

Christians have been skeptical of Muslims’ claims that “Jesus dreams” have led them to Christianity, but longtime Southern Baptist missionary David Garrison also affirms that many Muslims have been inspired through these dreams to believe in Jesus as more than a prophet, as he is acknowledged in Islam. ”

(Christian Post, June 3, 2015)

St. Teresa of Avila/Jesus



- 1515-1582

Non-visual experience

“I was at prayer on a festival of the glorious Saint Peter when I saw Christ at my side—or, to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for neither with the eyes of the body nor with those of the soul did I see anything”

“my confessor ... asked me how I knew it was Christ. I told him that I did not know how, but that I could not help realizing that he was beside me ...”

(pp. 41-42)

“Eyes of the soul” experience

“...when I was at Mass, I saw a complete representation of this most sacred Humanity, just as in a picture of His resurrection body, in very great beauty and majesty ...

...the eyes of the soul see the excellence and the beauty and the glory of the most holy Humanity. And in the other way which has been described it is revealed to us how He is God, and that He is powerful, and can do all things, and commands all things, and rules all things, and fills all things with His love.”

- “... they told me ... that I was being deceived by the devil and that it was all the work of my imagination.”
- (One confessor was so sure that the visions were from the devil that he told her to make an obscene gesture called “the fig” every time she had a vision of Jesus. She cringed but did as she was ordered, all the time apologizing to Jesus. Fortunately, Jesus didn’t seem upset but told her that she was right to obey her confessor.)

“the fig”



“Since the visions were increasing [a stand-in for my confessor] began to say that **it was clearly the devil**. He ordered that, since I didn’t have the means to resist the visions, **I should always bless myself when I saw one and make the gesture of scorn called the fig**; ... Following this advice was very painful to me. Since I couldn’t believe but that the vision was from God, it was a terrible thing for me to have to do what I was commanded; and neither could I desire, as I said, that the vision be taken away. But, finally, **I did all they ordered me to do....**

Making the fig at this vision of the Lord caused me the greatest pain. When I saw Him present, I couldn’t have believed it was the devil if they broke me in pieces; thus it was a kind of severe penance for me. ... **He told me not to worry and that I did well in obeying**, but that He would make the truth known. When they forbade me to practice prayer, it seemed to me He was annoyed. He told me to tell them that now what they were doing was tyranny. He gave me signs for knowing that the vision was not from the devil.”

- *Teresa, The Book of Her Life, Chapter 29.*

A product of her imagination?

- Of all impossibilities, the most impossible is that these true visions should be the work of the imagination. There is no way in which this could be so: by the mere beauty and whiteness of a single one of the hands which we are shown the imagination is completely transcended. ...
- (Similar to Descartes' self-validating idea of God!)

Teresa's "jewels"

- Teresa also argued that these experiences left her with "jewels" – a much improved character.
- I could not possibly believe that this was delusion, even if I wanted to. And, I said, I could show them these jewels—for all who knew me were well aware how my soul had changed: my confessor himself testified to this, for the difference was very great in every respect, and no fancy, but such as all could clearly see.

Models of religious experience

- During ordinary sense perception, many philosophers argue that we form beliefs (e.g. *that's a tree*) that are:
 - (a) concerned with external objects, and
 - (b) warranted directly by the manner of production.

In other words, **the belief is directly justified by experience**, and doesn't require any argument.

Models of religious experience

- Beginning in the Enlightenment, however, **religious experiences are not treated as perception.**

“But in order to state the sort of evidentialism characteristic of Enlightenment thought, **it is stipulated that no beliefs asserting the content of religious or mystical experiences count as evidence.** For example, if Fatima had an experience that she would describe as of the presence of God she should not treat God’s presence to her as a piece of evidence. That does not prevent the claim that someone has had a religious experience with a certain content from counting as evidence. For example, **the fact that Fatima had an experience *as if* of God’s presence would be a piece of evidence.**”

(SEP, entry on “The Epistemology of Religion”)

- I.e. with ordinary sense perception, the evidence is “that’s a tree over there”
- But with religious experience, the evidence is not “that’s Jesus over there” but “that *seems* to be Jesus over there”, or “I have an experience *as if* of Jesus over there”
- To get from: “I have an experience *as if* of Jesus over there” to “that’s Jesus over there” requires an argument, and an extra premise.
 - What extra premise?

Double standard?

- (Is this an unfair double standard?)
- Alston thinks that religious experiences should be treated as cases of perception.
- Swinburne thinks the experiences should be taken as genuine, in the absence of contrary evidence.

Alston: Perceptual model

- William Alston advocates a “perceptual model” of religious experience.
- He acknowledges that this view *presupposes* that God exists, so he cannot *argue* that some mystical experiences are genuine perceptions of God.
- His aim is to show that there is nothing incoherent in the view that some religious experiences are perceptions of God, via sensory capacities beyond the usual 5 senses. (Such perception would be a source of warranted belief.)

- I pick out what I am calling “experience of God” by the fact that the subject takes the experience (or would take it if the question arose) to be a direct awareness of God. (p. 52)
- (N.B. Such experiences are not all genuine, says Alston.)
- E.g. “... at once I ... felt the presence of God—I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it—as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether.”

- Alston is here considering only cases where God is (or seems to be) *directly* experienced.

“I exclude cases in which one takes oneself to be aware of God through the beauties of nature, the words of the Bible or of a sermon ...”

... the thesis defended is that *if God exists*, then mystical experience is quite properly thought of as mystical perception.

Michael Martin

“Critique of Religious Experience”

- Although religious experiences have been used to justify religious belief, such as belief in the existence of God, it is sometimes maintained that this use does not constitute an *argument* for the existence of God because no inference is involved. Religious belief based on religious experience, it is said, is like a perceptual belief in chairs and tables ...” (p. 69)

- But, Martin says, even if perceptual beliefs are *produced* spontaneously, without inference, don't they need to be *justified* using inference? E.g.
 1. Spontaneous beliefs of a certain sort occurring under certain conditions are usually true
 2. My belief that there is a brown table in front of me is of this sort and occurs under these conditions

∴ My belief is probably true

- If this is the argument, then we need some premise like:

“(1’) Under certain conditions C_1 , religious beliefs of type K_1 —that is, beliefs generated by religious experience—are likely to be true.”

- “One general problem with the several types of experience considered above is that they are concerned with nonpublic objects.”
- (So, how do you establish that the object is even *real*?)

- The problem arising in relation to premise (1') is that there is a rival hypothesis. One might suppose that a person's religious experience is caused not by some external reality but by the workings of the person's own mind. On this theory, a religious experience would have an origin similar to that of delusion and delirium.

H_1 : external cause hypothesis (supernatural being)

H_2 : psychological cause hypothesis (e.g. temporal lobe seizure, being on drugs)

- Why do we think that experiences following drugs, etc. are not caused by real objects?
- The primary reason is that experiences induced by drugs, alcohol, sleep deprivation, and mental illness tell no uniform or coherent story of a supposed external reality that one can experience only in these extraordinary ways....
- Religious experiences are like those induced by drugs, alcohol, mental illness, and sleep deprivation: They tell no uniform or coherent story, and there is no plausible theory to account for discrepancies among them.

- Furthermore, religious experiences in one culture often conflict with those in another. One cannot accept all of them as veridical, yet there does not seem to be any way to separate the veridical experiences from the rest.

St. Teresa's criteria

- If the content of a religious experience is incompatible with Scripture, it should be considered non-veridical.
- If a religious experience has a bad effect on the person—for example, if the person becomes less humble, or loving, or fervent in faith after the experience—then the experience is deceptive.

- Unfortunately, these tests for separating deceptive from trustworthy religious experiences will not do. Since the test of scriptural compatibility already presumes that the Bible is the revealed word of God and therefore that the Christian God exists, it cannot be used to support an argument from religious experience for the existence of God. (Martin)

- Further, it would hardly be surprising on the psychological hypothesis (H₂) that people raised in the Christian tradition should tend to have religious experiences that are compatible with Christian Scripture.

“in general people raised in a certain religious tradition tend to have religious experiences compatible with the religious literature of this tradition.” (Predicted by H₂.)

- St. Teresa's test of conduct will not work either. ... there is no a priori reason why a person might not show moral improvement after an illusory religious experience.
- In addition to these problems, the test of conduct surely proves too much. Since religious experiences occur in the context of different religions, it would not be surprising to discover that, for example, Christian, Islamic, and Hindu religious experiences have all resulted in improved conduct. However, since they seem to be incompatible, it can hardly be claimed that all these experiences are trustworthy.

What about mystical (vaguely spiritual) experiences?

1. All mystical experiences are basically the same.
(Stace's view)
2. This similarity is better explained in terms of the external cause hypothesis (H_1) than of the psychological hypothesis (H_2).
3. The most adequate version of (H_1) is that God causes the mystical experience (H_1').

Therefore, mystical experiences provide inductive support for (H_1'). (p. 73)

- According to Stace, all mystical experiences “involve the apprehension of an *ultimate nonsensuous unity of all things*, a oneness or a One to which neither the senses or the reason can penetrate.”
- Critics disagree, Martin notes. But even if Stace is right, the argument still fails. (How?)
 - Since mystics are all *human*, the similarity of the experiences may be due to some psychological condition that humans are prone to.

Swinburne: Principle of credulity

- This principle allows one to infer from the fact that it *seems* to a person that something is present, to the probability that it is present.
- (This applies to experiences generally, Swinburne says, and is needed to avoid scepticism about even material objects – a “skeptical bog”.)

- Martin suggests that, if Swinburne's PC is valid, then a *negative* principle of credulity should also be valid.

(NPC) If it seems (epistemically) to a subject S that x is absent, then probably x is absent.

Could people who have *tried* to experience God (and *failed*) use NPC to argue that God doesn't exist?