

# Religious Experience

Well, it *feels* real ...

# 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.”

# 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 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.

# 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?

BY [NICOLA MENZIE](#), CHRISTIAN POST REPORTER

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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)

# William Alston

- 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.

- 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 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

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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.”
- (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

$H_2$  : psychological cause hypothesis

- 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 nonveridical.
- If a religious experience has a bad effect on one—for example, if a 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.

- Further, it would hardly be surprising on the psychological hypothesis (H<sub>2</sub>) 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 H<sub>2</sub>.)

- 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 ( $H_1'$ ).

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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?