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Challenging Religious Issues

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Psychology of Religion
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Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

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The Objectivity of Religious Experience: Philosophical Arguments

Jeff Astley

The article outlines and critiques two approaches to the problem of the objectivity of religious experience.

Specification links: RS4 HE: Studies in Religion and Human Experience, Religious experience [in philosophy of religion]; also WJEC RS1/2 PHIL: Introduction to Philosophy of Religion (AS), 4. An introduction to religious experience.

Introduction

The word *experience* is used to label some event or state of affairs, of which we are conscious, that happens to us – something that we live through or undergo. The term *religious experience* is ambiguous (see Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach & Basinger, 2013, pp. 37-47). It may refer to various emotions or feelings-states characteristically associated with a religious context: 'subjective' experiences of joy, longing, confidence, guilt, acceptance, worth, trust, absolute dependence, and so on. Or the phrase may denote experiences that are claimed to be of 'cognitive significance', as 'experiences of some (supernatural) entity. These are apparently 'objective' experiences: experiences that are 'veridical' (truthful or accurate, 'coinciding with reality').

Scholars like William Alston try to avoid the ambiguity of the term 'religious

experience' by writing of *mystical perception* or 'mystical experience', which he defines as 'any experience that is taken by the subject to be an experience of God', and as a 'putative [reputed, supposed] direct experiential awareness of God'. Alston is here using a wide sense of the term 'mystical', as opposed to the narrow sense that applies only to experiences of *union* with God, Ultimate Reality or Nature through absorption of the mystic's individuality (Alston, 1991, pp. 35-36; 2005, pp. 199-200; cf. Gellman, 2005, pp. 138-141).

Philosophers are primarily interested in religious experience as a seemingly objective rather than a purely subjective matter. The epistemological claim (claim about knowledge) that it gives rise to may take one of *two forms*.

(1) Religious experience is an 'external experience', in the sense of a reliable,

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direct 'experience of an externally existing object' (Gaskin, 1984, p. 80).

- (2) Religious experience constitutes good grounds from which we can reason to the existence of God as the best explanation of such phenomena.

It is helpful to distinguish clearly between this second '*argument* from religious experience', and the first view 'that certain experiences constitute veridical perceptions of God' (Alston, 1991, p. 3).

Religious experience as perception of God

Religious believers, like those (most of us!) who believe that trees and people really exist, often speak of *directly experiencing* the object of their belief.

John Cook Wilson writes:

If we think of the existence of our friends; it is the 'direct knowledge' which we want: merely inferential knowledge seems a poor affair. . . . We don't want merely inferred friends. Could we possibly be satisfied with an inferred God? (Wilson, 1926, p. 853)

Alston has produced the fullest defence of the claim that experience of God is, in this way, a genuine experience – a form of perception. He argues that 'any supposition that one perceives something to be the case . . . is *prima facie* [at first sight, 'on the face of it'] justified . . . unless there are strong enough reasons to the contrary' (called 'overriders'). *Any beliefs based on experience 'possess an initial credibility' because of this origin: 'they are innocent until proven guilty.'* This view, 'widely advocated for sense perception', is 'the only alternative to a thoroughgoing scepticism about experience' (Alston, 1998, p. 67).

He argues that there is more than one sort of justifiable, socially-established, persistent *doxastic practice* (his name for a way of forming beliefs and evaluating them; the Greek word *doxa* being understood here as 'opinion' or 'belief'). Sense perception, introspection (awareness of one's own conscious states), memory and various forms of reasoning are some examples. Religious experience is another. In all such cases we cannot help trusting the practices. We cannot, however, *justify* the practice without circularity: by relying on it we build up evidence of its reliability (e.g. that our sense experience varies with changes in its objects). In fact, 'there is no rational alternative' to engaging in doxastic practices, and their outputs are not discredited by the results of the other practices. Religious experience may therefore also be regarded as socially-established, and should not be disqualified from rational acceptance (Alston, 1991, pp. 149-153, 168-170, 194). He accuses the critics of religious experience of the *epistemic imperialism* of 'subjecting the outputs of one belief-forming practice to the requirements of another'; and points out that other socially-established, persistent doxastic practices such as introspection are also quite different from sense experience (Alston, 1998, p. 69).

Although Richard Swinburne casts his own (much briefer) discussion in terms of an explanatory argument, much of it is actually a defence of religious experience as perception. Where Alston provides a 'more social' analysis of religious experience, as a whole doxastic practice, Swinburne concentrates on the rationality of *individual* beliefs based on religious experience.

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Swinburne defines a religious experience as 'an experience that seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God'.¹ Such an experience is *really* an experience of God if and only if its seeming to a person 'that God is present is in fact caused by God being present' (Swinburne, 2004, pp. 295-296). And as a God who keeps everything in existence will always be among the causes of my experience, even 'naturalistic' or 'psychological' explanations of religious experience need not defeat its claim to objectivity. (The difficulty remains, however, that there cannot be perceptions of the *absence* of God.)

But how do we know that religious experience is not an *illusion*? The main criticism of the claim to objectivity for religious experience is that, unlike sense experience, the usual *criteria of testing* for objectivity are absent. These would include checks against other senses and under different 'lighting conditions', the fulfilment of empirical predictions, consistency with other experiences and agreement with other perceivers (which Alston calls 'effective intersubjective tests for accuracy').

However, three factors may make these normal tests for sense experience inapplicable to religious experience.

- *The nature of religious experience* as a unitary and distinctive 'sense' (unlike the five senses of sense experience), the 'faculty' of which is not possessed by everyone.
- *The nature of God* as a reality:
 - ◇ that is not perceivable by sense experience;
 - ◇ whose general activity relates to the whole world (and may not therefore imply any particular empirical claims that can be disproved); and

- ◇ who is free to give or to withhold particular revelations (Cf. Alston 2005, P.213-218.)

- *The nature of human beings* :
 - ◇ as fallible, sinful receivers and interpreters of religious experience,
 - ◇ who may need to be in some particular spiritual condition before they can properly experience God.

Swinburne argues for two fundamental principles of rationality. The first, the *Principle of Credulity*, is essentially the same as Alston's claim about the initial credibility of beliefs based on experience. Swinburne's rather stronger version states that 'What one seems to perceive is probably so' (in the sense of more probable than not), but only *in the absence of special conditions*, such as:

- (i) the conditions of the experience, or the person having it, have been found in the past to be unreliable;
- (ii) similar perceptual claims have been proved false;
- (iii) on background evidence, the object of the experience was probably not present;
- (iv) the supposed object of the experience was probably not its cause. (Swinburne, 2004, pp. 303-322; cf. Davis, 1989, chs 4 and 5.)

Swinburne claims that these conditions do not normally apply to religious experience, and concludes that 'a religious experience apparently of God ought to be taken as veridical unless it can be shown on other grounds significantly more probable than not that God does not exist' (Swinburne, 2004, p. 321).

¹ By this epistemic sense of 'seems', Swinburne is referring to 'what the subject is inclined to believe' on the basis of his/her present experience.

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Swinburne's *Principle of Testimony* complements the Principle of Credulity, in claiming that '(in the absence of special considerations) the experiences of others are (probably) as they report them' (p. 322). These *special considerations* would include evidence of lying, exaggeration or misremembering. If these do not apply, a person has good reason to trust other people's experiences, although not as good a reason as she has to trust her own – although 'in so far as a number of others give similar reports, that greatly increases their credibility' (p. 323). Without such a principle, our knowledge would be very limited indeed, and it should be extended to embrace religious experience. Alston argues in a similar, but rather weaker, way that there is no 'sound reason' for our not accepting other people's testimony in the case of religious experience, as we do in sense experience, provided that we think that their doxastic practice of religious experience is 'reliable or rational' (Alston, 1991, pp. 279-284).

It may be that further checks are called for. But it is often claimed that the practice of religious experience has its own '*checking procedures*' and '*tests of spiritual receptivity*' (cf. Alston, 1991, pp. 209-225). According to Gary Gutting, if religious experience of God is objective, we might expect that:

(1) those who have had such experiences once would be likely to have them again; (2) other individuals will be found to have had similar experiences; (3) those having such experiences will find themselves aided in their endeavors to lead morally better lives. All these expectations follow from the nature of the experienced being and its concern for

us. . . . [And] for some religious experiences, all these expectations are fulfilled to a very high degree. (Gutting, 1982, p. 152; cf. O'Hear, 1984, pp. 45-49)

Criticisms

(Cf. Alston, 2005, pp. 208-213; Davis, 1989, ch. 5; Gellman, 2005, pp 155-162.)

1. We have already encountered criticisms of claims to the objectivity of religious experience based on its difference from sense experience. Religious experience is not universal, continuous or unavoidable; it is also less detailed and more obscure. But why should all experience be just like sense experience?
2. Many incompatible beliefs have been based on religious experience. But these could be genuine experiences of different aspects of a transcendent reality; or some of them may be misperceptions (if religious experience is not infallible).
3. Some naturalistic explanations seem to 'explain away' religious experiences as the effect of psychological or neurological states. But this may only be evidence for correlation, not causation; and God could cause religious experiences by affecting our brain and psychological states. (See also Mark Fox's article in this issue of the journal.)

God as the best explanation for religious experience

The existence of God has also been treated as the *best explanation* for the phenomenon of religious experience, in the way that the 'real' existence of a tree may be thought of as the best explanation of my sense data (my sensings of the tree; my 'seeming' to see, feel or smell

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the tree). Many scholars therefore treat religious experience as something that demands to be interpreted and explained by the belief-system of theism. Donovan, (1979, p. 91) writes:

- (a) If God (as described in belief-system S) exists, then experiences open to interpretation under S will be likely to occur. (For example, if S is Christianity, there are likely to be experiences of prophetic revelation, a holy or numinous presence, answered prayers, the sense of forgiveness after confession of sins, renewed lives following acts of faith, and so on.)
- (b) Experiences interpreted under S do occur.
- (c) No better ways of explaining the occurrence of those particular experiences are known.
- (d) Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that God exists.

Donovan argues that 'the truth or falsity of an interpretation is not to be found by looking merely at the experience involved. It is necessary as well to examine the whole theological system in terms of which the interpretation of that experience is made' (p. 35); and 'one's estimate of the value of any particular experience will depend on how one evaluates the total belief system in terms of which that experience is thought to be significant' (p. 72).

If this is the case, then the inferential argument would seem to develop into a third position:

The both-and position

Basil Mitchell reasons that the choice between (a) God as an uncertain, inferred, explanatory hypothesis, and (b) God as an experienced reality of which

we can be certain, is not an exclusive one. He offers an analogy. A sailor's claim to see a lighthouse through a storm can only be judged in the light of other reports, the calculations of map positions, and so on. We cannot decide about the objectivity of his seeming to see the lighthouse *simply on his report alone*.

The question whether there was a lighthouse there and the question whether the officer of the watch saw it or saw something else, or just imagined that he saw it, can only be answered in relation to some overall appraisal of the situation.

Nevertheless, this does not make the lighthouse 'merely an inferred entity and not an experienced reality'. It is rather that *direct experience often needs the support of indirect reasoning* in order to justify a claim to knowledge by observation (Mitchell, 1974, p. 113; cf. Davis, 1989, p. 144 and chapter 6). 'To allow this background of related experience in sensory perception but not in religious experience constitutes a double standard' (Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach & Basinger, 2013, p. 50). Mitchell continues:

It is assumed that claims to direct awareness of God must be either self-authenticating [i.e. their occurrence is alone sufficient to establish the truth of the claims based on them] or disguised inferences. Since they are clearly not self-authenticating they must be disguised inferences. I suggest a third possibility: that they are what they purport to be, cases of direct awareness, but that the claim that this is what they are relies upon there being a theory or conceptual scheme in terms of which the claim

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can be adequately defended. (Mitchell, 1974, p. 115)

In the case of claims about the existence of God, therefore, whether 'seeming to experience God' is sufficient for supposing that one *does* experience God will depend in part on just how probable or improbable is the existence of God, as judged by background evidence and argument. In

other words, on this view, religious experience can never be sufficient on its own. The claims that people make that they have had an experience of God needs to be supported by a coherent framework of defensible beliefs (a worldview that includes a coherent, plausible theology). Claims to religious experience cannot stand alone.

Glossary

Epistemic means concerned with knowledge.

Links

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religious-experience/> (Mark Webb, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*)

Discussion points

1. How might the special conditions that limit the Principle of Credulity apply to other unusual claims: e.g. seeming to see a leprechaun in your sock drawer or a ghost in the bathroom? And how far might they apply to sensing God's presence in worship or prayer?
2. In what ways are religious experiences (a) like and (b) unlike sense experiences?
3. Is John Hick correct to claim that people 'who do not experience religiously in any degree whatever' possess 'no good grounds for religious belief'?

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All in the Mind? Psychology of Religion and Religious Experience

Mark Fox

This article seeks to explore some of the most significant contributions to the understanding of religious experience that have emerged from within psychology of religion – and specifically neurotheology – and to assess their effectiveness, together with the assumptions that underlie them.

Specification links: WJEC RS1/2 Introduction to Philosophy of Religion (AS), 4. Introduction to religious experience; WJEC RS4 HE: Studies in Religion and Human Experience (A2), religious experience.

Extraordinary encounters

In the most ordinary of circumstances, a 22-year-old woman had a most extraordinary experience. She was sitting at her dressing table in her bedroom doing 'something quite ordinary' when:

I was suddenly overwhelmed by the presence of God. I was absolutely astounded. I hadn't known there was a God at all. Having rejected [the religion] of my childhood while still in my teens, I was pretty much an agnostic and had no interest in religion. I had no such thoughts at the time, however. I was just shattered, shaken to the roots of my being. My initial reaction was that man wasn't supposed to know this and I must surely be going to die, and I stumbled over to the bed, got in and pulled the

bedclothes up over me like a terrified child; it wasn't an attempt to escape – which would have been ridiculous, as God was manifestly within me – it was more a gesture to hold together, absorb the shock and not actually shatter.

Whilst she did not appear to see anything, writing of her experience that it was 'not a vision; no lights, no voices', her experience nonetheless left her with a powerful conviction of the reality of God. Reflecting 36 years later on what she had learned from her unforgettable encounter, she asserted confidently that 'God is a personal being to whom we can relate, not that I dared to address Him' (Maxwell & Tschudin, 1990, pp. 84-85).

What are we to make of experiences like this? They are more common than might be supposed. The Alister Hardy

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Trust currently sponsors two Religious Experience Research Centres, one at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and the other at Glyndŵr University. The archive of religious experiences currently contains over 6,000 letters and testimonies collected since its inception in 1969. Each one contains one or more descriptions of experiences that bear close – sometimes very close – resemblance to the one with which this article began. Elsewhere, journals and magazines such as *De Numine*, *The Christian Parapsychologist*, *Fortean Times* and *Kindred Spirit* frequently devote significant space to readers' own unusual experiences of the spiritual and the sacred.

Recent years have seen a blossoming of interest in explaining such things from the perspective of psychology, and specifically from within *neuroscience*: perhaps because of the unusual content of such accounts, together with the fact that they so often contain descriptions of experiences that are *felt* rather than apprehended through the senses. Thus, as our awareness of the frequency of religious experiences has grown, so too have attempts to explain them *naturalistically*: that is, in purely materialistic, 'this-worldly' terms that seek to explain their origin and characteristics in brain processes that can be isolated, examined and measured. The rapid development of neuroscience during the last few decades has aided this process considerably, and the term *neurotheology* was coined approximately twenty years ago as a label for an emerging scientific 'sub-discipline' that sought to prove beyond doubt that unusual religious and spiritual experiences, striking as they may seem

to their often grateful recipients, are nonetheless 'all in the mind'. This article will seek to examine some of the leading theories within this area that seek to explain religious experiences in such ways.

Exploring the brain

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, neuroscientific techniques for scanning and mapping the brain had developed to the point where it was becoming possible for researchers to isolate which parts of the brain might be responsible for certain reported 'types' of religious experience. Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili (1991) were particularly excited by the possibilities of using these techniques to attempt to show which brain areas might be implicated in the production of *mystical* experience. This kind of religious experience is well-represented in the literature and is typically said to take two forms. *Introvertive* mysticism – following terminology first set out by W.T Stace – is a highly unusual state in which the mystic finds himself or herself suddenly at one with God; an experience that led one experient to remark that 'for a few moments I really did feel at one with the Universe or the Creative Power we recognize. I know it was a feeling of oneness with something outside myself, and also within' (Happold, 1963, p. 138). *Extrovertive* mysticism, by contrast, is characterised by an equally unusual state in which the experient becomes one with the landscape, as in the following extract from an account given by a man sitting in a field waiting to take his turn at a sports game.

Suddenly, and without warning, something invisible seemed to be drawn across the sky, transforming

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the world about me into a kind of tent of concentrated and enhanced significance. What had been merely an outside became an inside. The objective was somehow transformed into a completely subjective fact, which was experienced as 'mine', but on a level where the word had no meaning; for 'I' was no longer the familiar ego. (Happold, 1963, p. 130)

What, wondered Newberg and D'Aquili, is happening in the brains of persons undergoing such experiences? The fact that mystical experiences tend to occur spontaneously causes obvious problems for any attempt to examine them experimentally, but Newberg and D'Aquili were aware that sometimes such experiences can be induced by specific forms of meditation and therefore advertised for volunteers who were able to induce mystical states in this way. Having found a small sample, they proceeded to set up an experiment. When entering the state of oneness, the volunteers were instructed to pull on a string, an action that provided a signal to the researchers to inject a radioactive tracer that would enable them to 'map' via a SPECT scan which parts of the meditators' brains were behaving unusually at that point: if, indeed, any were. In fact *two* were, and one of these – the Superior Parietal Lobe – was of particular interest to the researchers, given that this is the part of the brain that continually differentiates between self and world. Newberg and D'Aquili noted that during specific episodes where the meditators reported their experiences of oneness, there was decreased activity in this part of the brain, together with enhanced activity in other brain areas usually associated with the 'tagging' of experiences as deeply meaningful, and

specifically located within the limbic system. It was as if the act of meditation was enabling the volunteers to 'switch off' the very part of the brain that typically tells us where our boundaries are, whilst simultaneously they were being 'flooded' with sensations of deep meaningfulness. Given that mystical experiences are frequently characterised by this very obliteration of boundaries accompanied by feelings of a deeply spiritual nature, Newberg and D'Aquili considered their findings to be of significance as regards the isolation and location of the neurological 'triggers' and roots of a specific kind of religious experience. It would not be long before other researchers appeared to be drawing equally exciting brain-based conclusions with regard to other 'types' of religious experience.

The odyssey of Michael Persinger

As the opening years of the twenty-first century unfolded, Laurentian University researcher Michael Persinger emerged as one of the world's leading neurotheologians. Basing his findings on extensive research, Persinger claimed that small micro seizures in the brain's temporal lobes were the explanation for a wide range of unusual experiences, including religious experiences. Dubbing these seizures 'Temporal Lobe Transients' (TLTs), Persinger suggested that they were common in the majority of the population, were not accompanied by actual fits, and could give rise to a range of reported phenomena which he divided into 'soft' and 'hard' forms, or signs. Soft signs, he claimed, included the experience of vivid landscapes, unusual lights, *déjà vu* and senses of an invisible presence, whilst hard signs included a

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sense of being 'chosen' by God, extremely altered states of consciousness, and a temporary but extremely vivid sense of great personal importance. But what might cause TLTs? Persinger suggested a range of things, including episodes of personal crisis and modifications of normal brain function caused by temporary changes to oxygen levels.

Perhaps most remarkable of all, Persinger claimed to have developed a piece of apparatus – dubbed a Transcranial Magnetic Stimulator – which could actually generate and hence create such experiences, and in his laboratory at Laurentian University he proceeded to create them seemingly at will, firstly by producing an atmosphere of elevated 'spirituality' via the use of things such as religious icons and wind chimes, and then by firing small bursts of weak electromagnetic fields directly at his experimental subjects' temporal lobes. Extracts from volunteers' descriptions of their ensuing experiences do indeed appear to include episodes in which they sensed a presence, experienced unusual feelings and felt themselves temporarily 'detached' from their normal locations within their bodies. Some volunteers also reported the sudden 'return' of forgotten things, including episodes from childhood (Fox, 2008, pp. 184-91).

Evaluating neurotheology

While the bold undertakings of Newberg, D'Aquili and Persinger in no way represent the totality of neurotheology's contribution to the understanding and investigation of religious experience, they *do* represent some of the best examples of the work that has emerged from this exciting and relatively new sub-discipline.

There have, however, been those who have been critical of both the actual research done and the assumptions on which it is based. Critics have, for example, pointed to the very small sample sizes used by Newberg and D'Aquili and the rather crude elements of some of their research methods, such as the pulling on a string by the volunteers as a means of signalling the onset of their experiences.

Persinger, in particular, has received significant criticism. Specifically, it is alleged that while he has produced some unusual experiences during the course of his research, these are not the same as 'genuine' religious experiences, and an examination of some of his volunteers' reports appears to indicate that many grotesque and bizarre experiences were reported, including the temporary displacement of limbs and the 'feeling' of internal organs by unseen hands. In addition, versions of his Transcranial Magnetic Stimulator have been available for a number of years but have failed to produce the kinds of experiences that Persinger has claimed for it. Finally, critic Craig Aaen-Stockdale has drawn attention to the exceptionally weak field strength produced by this device, describing it as about 5000 times weaker than a fridge magnet and concluding that 'there is simply no way that his apparatus is having any meaningful effect on the brain' (Fox, 2014, p. 158). Some of Persinger's critics suggest that he has simply created a very spiritually suggestive atmosphere in his laboratory, and that his subjects are reporting experiences that arise from their heightened sense of expectation, rather than events that are being generated within the temporal lobe.

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Exploring assumptions

One major assumption that underlies all of the efforts of neurotheology is that mental states are either the same as brain states or are produced by them. Thus, in assuming at the outset that mind can be ontologically reduced to brain, the researchers appear to be seeking to produce (and hence discover) unusual alterations in mental functioning either by manipulating the brain or by studying those who can apparently – albeit temporarily – modify its functioning at will. Problematic here is the very real possibility that while changes in mental state might *correlate* with changes in brain state, they might not actually be *caused* by them, and that the actual causal root may lie elsewhere. More problematic still are the challenges to mind-brain identity theories that have emerged – and continue to emerge –

from within academic sub-disciplines such as the philosophy of mind. It is still far from certain that brain states simply *are* mental states, or that the latter can be unproblematically reduced to the former. This being said, we are currently living in the midst of something approaching a revolution in our understanding of the brain and its function, in no small part due to the development of new technologies that permit ever greater understandings of mind, brain, and the relationship between the two. It is to be hoped that one of the benefits arising from such a revolution might be a greater understanding of the roots of religious experience in the brain and its processes: if it should turn out to be the case that such roots can really be found there.

Glossary

Déjà vu is the subjective and transient sense that what is being experienced has been experienced, identically, before.

Extrovertive mysticism: a type of mystical experience characterised by the temporary sensation of becoming 'one' with everything.

Introvertive mysticism: a type of mystical experience characterised by the temporary sensation of becoming 'one' with God.

Neurotheology: a predominantly neuroscientifically-informed exploration of the possibility of locating the causes of religious experience within the brain.

Ontological reduction is the reduction of the 'being' of one entity to the 'being' of another (from the Greek *ontos*, 'being').

Discussion points

1. To what extent is it appropriate to attempt to explain religious experiences in naturalistic, 'this-worldly', ways?
2. Should we seek to assess the 'value' of religious experiences by examining where they might have come from, or in other ways such as what they might lead to?
3. Is an ontological reduction of mind to brain possible? What issues arise in attempts to do this?

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Identity and Belonging: A Perspective on Paul's Letter to the Galatians

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Identity and belonging are significant themes for both human meaning and religious discourse. This article considers the issue of identity in Paul's letter to the Galatians in the New Testament, exploring the arguments on both sides of what was a sharp debate. It demonstrates how early Christian belief was characterised by diversity in the forging of its emerging identity.

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Introduction

The Welsh poet-priest R. S. Thomas defines religion as 'the total response of the whole person to reality' (Thomas, 1963, p. 8). The purpose of this essay is to examine the debate about religious identity between Paul and his opponents (the *Judaisers*) and its significance in the context of Christian origins, of which Paul's letter to the Galatians offers a particular illustration.

Galatians has long lain at the heart of discussions about the meaning and purpose of the gospel in the Christian Church. C. K. Barrett provides a clear and succinct study of why this is so in addressing the theme of freedom and obligation in the letter (Barrett, 1985). Under the banner of justification by faith, Galatians has inspired and guided many in their political and spiritual conflicts, including Martin Luther and Dietrich

Bonhoeffer. Less represented in scholars' exegetical and theological work is the basic question about the particular significance of identity and belonging.

This is also bound up with the relationship between continuity and change. Any consideration of identity works with the tension between reception and adaptation. In contrast to our modern world, ancient society valued continuity. It was also suspicious of novelty. Innovations tended to be received to the extent that they resonated with what had gone before. The distinction between two Greek words for 'new', *neos* and *kainos*, illustrates this. The word *neos* signalled something that replaced the old, whereas *kainos* meant new in the deeper perspective of renewal. In the Greek New Testament it is *kainos* rather than *neos* that is used. This outlook shapes

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the Church's belief that God's work in Christ is both a new beginning and in continuity with the past.

Background

The letter centres on a sharp disagreement between Paul and his opponents about whether circumcision was required as a rite of entry for Gentile converts to the Church in addition to baptism (5:2; 6:12-13). Circumcision was so much part of Jewish identity that being Jewish and being called 'the circumcision' were synonymous (2:3). It is important, however, to remember that Paul's debate is with Jewish Christians rather than with Jews. This is not a debate *between* Christians and Jews but a conflict *within* the growing Church. We can say this because Paul assumes that 'the gospel of Christ' is a shared discourse (1:6-9). So at 1:7 and 2:4 Paul calls them 'false brothers' and 'troublemakers' (cf. 5:10 – the singular here may indicate a ringleader) (Barrett, 1985, p. 68; Dunn, 1993, pp. 277-278), and thus the Judaisers clearly thought of themselves as brothers and shared a status recognised by fellow Christians. It may be that these Judaisers were an organised group within the Church with a clear set of principles about identity and belonging forged within the Gentile missionary expansion of the Church. The description of 'false brothers' could, and likely was, applied equally to Paul and his followers by the Judaisers.

Although Paul had founded the Church, the subsequent arrival of the Judaisers caused a significant dispute in the congregation, itself evidence of the persuasiveness of their arguments (5:15). The robustness of the debate (5:12) indicates that there was no room for compromise, as both sides saw it. (This

also draws in the related issue of an attack on Paul's authority as an apostle (1:1), though there is not space to pursue this further. It does show, however, that questions about identity cannot be disentangled from issues to do with power and authority.)

The debate, as with all discussions about identity, draws on a shared narrative of the past and the question how and whether change sustains or fractures this story. Both sides agreed that this past is enshrined in the story of Abraham and the statement in Gen. 15:6 that 'Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness'. But given their different views about being Christian, the debate centres on how they each understood the significance of this text.

The Judaisers' position

From within Paul's own argument we can construct the Judaisers' view as having four interweaving claims:

- God entered into a covenant with Abraham, and turned him from being an idolater to a person of faith, based on monotheism. He responded to God's call through obedience to God, and in undertaking circumcision.
- Belonging to Abraham's family is to inherit the promises of God made to him and his seed. The only ways into this favoured covenant were by birth or as a proselyte.
- Those in the covenant were bound by the obligations of the Mosaic regulations (Gen.17:9-14), underpinned by the admonition of Deut. 27:26.
- Although Abraham was the father of another race (Ishmael), conceived with the slave woman Hagar, God had

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later intervened to give him Isaac, conceived with Sarah his wife and a free woman. According to the story in Gen. 21:10, 12, Isaac is thus confirmed 'as the true seed', and this means there is no room for anyone in the people of God other than those who are sons of Isaac.

The Judaisers share with Paul the belief that Christ is the fulfilment of God's purpose for his people. But this means that as the Gentiles respond and come to faith (as had Abraham) they are to be added in according to the identity marker of belonging (circumcision). The new work of God in Christ is grounded in the continuity of God's purpose, even as Abraham was obedient to God's will. Thus the new accords with the old.

Paul's position

How does Paul respond? He does so in effect by turning the whole thing round. If the Judaisers said that the new accords with the old, Paul argues that the old accords with the new. At the heart of Paul's argument is an understanding of God, namely that God in God's sovereign grace is free to do new things. This is what God indeed did, in raising Christ from the dead and in commissioning Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles (1:15-16; 2:8). But God's new work is not something novel, since the new shows how the past points forward to its fulfilment.

Paul also produces four interlocking arguments:

- Circumcision did not arise until Genesis chapter 17. When he believed at first, Abraham was in a state of uncircumcision. Thus the covenant was established on an essentially promissory basis and nothing could subsequently alter that.
- Turning to a general folkloric aphorism (cf. John 14:9) that children reflect the characteristics of their parents (as we might say 'like father like son'), Paul assumes (cf. 3:7 in the context of Gen. 15:6) the immediacy of the link between promise, children and faith. The idea of 'son of' (Abraham) in terms of sharing a characteristic (e.g. 'son of righteousness') helps Paul's perspective. Paul notably avoids the similar alternative phrase that he could have used (and which was important to the view of the Judaisers), 'seed of' (cf. Luke 1:55), since he wants to build an argument about offspring based on faith rather than ethnicity. Thus the followers of Christ reflect the essential characteristic of their father Abraham, which is faith. Abraham in the classic perspective is the father of Israel, and was regarded as the model of the devout Jew. That Abraham believed is the primary basis of relationship with God ('reckoned as righteousness'). For Paul, there is a direct correlation between Abraham's 'faith in God' and the believer's 'faith in Jesus Christ'.
- The Judaisers themselves accept that Judaism admits circumcised proselytes who have come to Judaism by faith. Thus faith has a valid claim in what it is to belong, as much as circumcision does.
- At Gen. 18:18 (cf. 12:3) the tradition says that it was always God's intention that the Gentiles would share in the blessing God promised to Abraham and his descendants. They do so as they come to faith in the message of the gospel.

There is, however, another text to be addressed (see the Judaisers' third argument, above). Deut. 27:26 (cf. Gal.

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3:10) says: 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all these things that are written in the book of the law so as to do them.' This surely makes the Judaisers' case conclusive? However, a brief comment on curse may be in order. Its meaning is the antithesis of blessing, i.e. it describes the loss of the privileges of the covenant. Both the Judaisers and Paul address the same key question: how can the blessing of Abraham encompass the Gentiles in light of the curse of non-observance, which is the exclusion of the Jew from the covenant? For the Judaisers this was achieved (and the curse avoided) by requiring the Gentiles to be circumcised, and so to become in effect observant Jews. (There was really no procedural difference here from the Jewish acceptance of proselytes.) In this way, the mission of God in Christ, incorporating the Gentiles into the covenant, was accomplished.

But Paul took a different path. He argued (cf. 3:10) that the Judaisers' concern for observance ('relying on the works of the law') was in effect denying that faith was the very foundation of the covenant to begin with. That is to say, observance of the law flowed from faith rather than defined faith. What should be a blessing was being turned into a quest for an identity (in Christ) that perpetuated an ethnicity. For Paul, the Judaisers, by turning the intention of the law (of an obedience that flows from faith) into a form of legalism, paradoxically incurred the curse by putting themselves outside its intention as blessing (see Dunn, 1993, pp. 169-173). Here Paul claimed the experience of his own mission as vindication, namely that the Gentiles accepted his message in faith and obedience. They were thus already being gathered within the covenant in their newfound identity in Christ. Setting the

condition of circumcision would be to make God's inclusive fulfilment in Christ (3:28) both insufficient and actually irrelevant (cf. 5:6).

The formational (moral) significance of faith also informs the perspectives of both Judaisers and Paul. For the Judaisers, circumcision was an identity marker that also ensured a moral life in keeping the law. Paul knows this in agreeing that circumcision commits one to keeping the whole law. But he presents the claim that a Spirit-led life in Christ is the fulfilling of the law, affirming what Judaism itself accepted that the whole of the law is summed up in love of God and of neighbour (5:14, cf. Rom. 13:8-10; Mark 12:28-31; James 2:8; Lev. 19:18; Tobit 4:15). Thus at 5:22-23, Paul provides an outline of the fruit of the Spirit. (Note that Paul speaks of 'fruit' not 'fruits'. This is a deliberate corporate singular, which conveys the diversity in harmony of the work of God.) Most prominent in the list of virtues here (as in 1 Cor. 13:13, cf. 1 Tim. 4:12 and 2 Peter 1:5-7) is love. Some have suggested that a character sketch of Jesus himself may be in mind, given Jesus' own characteristic teaching on this theme. (Note also how Paul says that those who bear this fruit are 'those in Christ Jesus'.) Pointedly and perhaps ironically Paul points out there is no law against this (5:23b), and thereby they do in fact fulfil the law of Christ (6:2).

Paul's sense of Christian identity, therefore, did not need or require any other underpinning. Of course he remained proud of his Jewish background. But he found in God's new work in Christ that which lay beyond the old divide of Jew and Gentile, a vision that was for him the reality of God's new creation that recognised a path for Jews and Gentiles into this reality without having Gentiles

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become Jews or Jews become Gentiles (6:16, a view endorsed by the Church in Jerusalem, see 2:6). He claims that faith working through love, embodied in God's new work in Christ, simply rises above the whole debate about the identity marker of circumcision (5:6). Paul believed that he had done nothing that was contrary to the spirit and character of his ancestral faith. The identity and belonging of sons (and daughters) of Abraham should find its fulfilment in the belonging of all together in Christ.

As the Church grew, the expansion of the Gentile mission meant that the

debate over circumcision waned, even though an attendant discussion about observance of dietary laws and the calendar (Acts 15:29; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:16) continued for a time. But it is worth pondering the views of the Judaisers and the significance of how continuity and change weigh in the discussion of Christian identity, perhaps also appreciating the significance of identity and belonging for perspectives on human nature and religious discourse more generally.

Discussion points

1. Assess the strengths and weaknesses on both sides of the argument between Paul and the Judaisers.
2. Can you find other examples of how the tension between continuity

and change contributes to the understanding of identity, in the New Testament or Christianity more generally, or in another world religion?

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The Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements

William K. Kay

The Pentecostal movement with roots in Methodism was triggered by revivals at the start of the twentieth century. It raced across the world forming many denominations, emphasising speaking with tongues and healing, and in the 1960s was joined by the charismatic movement which believed more or less the same things but functioned within existing mainline denominations. The charismatic movement itself then gave birth to the neo-charismatic movement which contained Churches that broke free of their traditional denominations. The neo-charismatics were sometimes called Third Wavers, with Pentecostals being the First Wave and Charismatics the Second Wave.

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Introduction

Over its 2000 year history, the Christian Church has been the home of all kinds of renewal movements. Such movements occur because leaders of various sections of the Church wish to move it in one direction or another, and to emphasise one doctrine or style more than another. Renewal movements usually emphasise inner spirituality but they may sometimes also be concerned with forms of liturgy or ritual.

The Pentecostal and charismatic movements that may be dated from the early 1900s can be seen as a renewal movement of wide-ranging scope. To give an historical framework to this, we may say that the Pentecostal movement begins around the year 1900 and the charismatic movement around the year

1960. After 1960 the two movements run alongside each other, each influencing the other.

Origins

The Pentecostal movement is usually seen as having its roots in the eighteenth century within Methodism, but it is also sometimes seen as being brought about by the desire of Christians to turn the clock back to the very beginning of Christianity and to recreate the conditions that existed in the Bible and particularly in the Book of Acts (Kay, 2011, pp. 1, 12 ; Robeck and Yong, 2014, p. 5). Seen in that light, the Pentecostal movement is essentially a *restoration* movement whereby the history of the Church is interpreted as having started at a high point with miracles, signs and wonders

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and the fresh vigour of hope in the return of Jesus and then, after about the year 250, went into decline and eventually turned into something quite different by becoming more institutional, rigid, hierarchical and ceremonial. According to this interpretation of Church history, there is a gradual recovery of the essence of the early Church. This begins, most notably, with the sixteenth century Reformation and Luther and Calvin's re-emphasis on justification by faith, and then moves through the Baptists who stress adult baptism by immersion and then the Methodists who stress street preaching and evangelism.

Or we may see the Pentecostal movement as growing out of Methodism in a much simpler way (Dayton, 1987). John Wesley (1703-91), the founder of Methodism, taught that human beings needed to be 'justified' or put into a right relationship with God by acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus and that, after this, they needed to be 'sanctified', by which he meant they needed to adjust their lifestyles to become more holy. So the pathway of the Christian was well mapped out: first justification and then sanctification and both these steps were dependent upon the Holy Spirit. Conversion was thus a religious experience of Jesus to be followed by the gradual reform of attitude and behaviour (e.g. giving up gambling and drunkenness) assisted by the Holy Spirit inwardly working in each believer.

John Fletcher (1729-85), a leading Methodist, argued that the event in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit fell on the waiting Church was actually their sudden sanctification. This moment, which occurred on the first New Testament day of Pentecost, is the source of the name 'Pentecostal'. It was also the occasion when everyone in the early Church

started speaking with tongues.

This identification of baptism in the Holy Spirit as the moment of sanctification was accepted by many Pentecostals who, when they formed Churches, argued that the normal pathway for Christians should now be conversion followed by baptism in the Spirit. It is true, however, that there was a Wesleyan line of Pentecostal Churches who argued for a three-stage process: conversion, sanctification and then baptism in the Spirit. The distinction between two-stage and three-stage Pentecostals continues to this day.¹

Two other factors complete the picture of the origins of Pentecostalism. First there was considerable interest among certain circles of Christians from the 1830s onwards in the fulfilment of biblical prophecy and the Second Coming, or return, of Jesus. In other words, particular groups of Christians believed that Jesus would soon return from heaven to earth and that normal human history would come to an abrupt climax. Many thought that this could only happen, however, after the Jewish people returned to the Holy Land.

Second, there was a desire to return gifts of healing to the Church so that the Church would become a place where human beings might be healed after prayer. Healing homes were set up in the nineteenth century and, later, Pentecostal preachers would hold evangelistic meetings in which they would urge people to put their trust in Christ but also ask them to come forward for prayer for healing and, in a number of well-documented cases, miracles then occurred (Darragh, 1932).

¹ The Assemblies of God accepts two stages and the Church of God (Tennessee) accepts three.

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When Pentecostal denominations came into existence at the start of the twentieth century they put all these factors together into a doctrinal pattern, and several presented their beliefs with the simple phrase, the 'foursquare Gospel': Jesus is saviour, baptiser in the Spirit, healer and soon-coming king.

The place of revival

At the beginning of the twentieth century a number of religious revivals occurred. These were intensifications of the life of the Church that brought huge excitement to religious meetings, attracted newspaper reports, drew in all kinds of people who never normally went to church, resulted in mass conversions and consequently led to noticeable social change. The Welsh revival ran from the autumn of 1904 until the autumn of 1905 and during this time something like 100,000 people were added to the Churches. Church meetings would carry on until late at night and on almost every night of the week.

The Welsh revival is connected through correspondence with the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, California, at which black and white believers mingled freely and welcomed the arrival of a 'new Pentecost' and spoke in other tongues (Robeck, 2006). These two revivals were seen as coming directly from the hand of God and being a sign of the near return of Jesus. But they were also unorganised, emotional and slightly chaotic events which, when the revival fires died down, left the believers who had attended uncertain about what to do next. It was from these revivals that Pentecostal denominations came to be organised, some in the United States and others in the UK. The first British Pentecostal denomination was founded in about 1910 (the Apostolic Church), the

Elim Church in 1915 and the Assemblies of God in 1924 (Kay, 2000, p. 29). These denominations tried to perpetuate the life of revival while incorporating into their constitutional documents belief in baptism in the Spirit, speaking with tongues, prophecy and healing.

Charismatic movement

For about 40 years the Pentecostal Churches multiplied their congregations, held evangelistic campaigns, built Bible colleges, circulated magazines and sent out missionaries across the world. But they were largely contained within their own boundaries and interacted relatively little with other Christian traditions. Across the world by 1960 they amounted to perhaps 15 million people (Hunt & Van der Maas, 2002, p. 286).

This began to change after about 1960 when an Episcopal preacher in the United States, Dennis Bennett (1917-91), began to speak in tongues. This was quickly followed by a group of Catholic academics on the campus of Duquesne University in February 1967 and then by evangelicals within many existing denominations.

During the next decade, Pentecostal Christians who had been relatively isolated from other members of the worldwide Church were now able to join with them in interdenominational gatherings. Charismatic Christians and Pentecostal Christians sang the same songs, worshipped together, heard the same preachers and believed many similar things. This was especially the case since one of the effects of the baptism in the Holy Spirit was to energise and mobilise lay Christians, with the result that most charismatic congregations would hold house groups (sometimes called 'cell groups') that would function

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midweek in addition to the main services on Sunday. The format and atmosphere of a house group within Pentecostal and charismatic Churches were almost identical, and when one adds to this summer events like Spring Harvest that were organised interdenominationally, it is easily seen how the older classical Pentecostals and the younger newer charismatics intermingled in the UK. Similar interchanges took place elsewhere in the world and, especially in the West, denominational loyalty declined and a family might easily swap from a Pentecostal Church to a charismatic one or *vice versa* if they moved home. The charismatic movement – which might be defined as the stream of people in almost every mainline denomination that accept the current operation of the Holy Spirit in their daily lives – is now much larger than the old Pentecostal movement. When numbers of charismatics and Pentecostals are added together across the world, it is thought there are something like 500 million people involved, but the vast majority of these are charismatics, with the Pentecostals amounting to perhaps a tenth of the total. But it is very difficult to distinguish with any confidence the charismatics and neo-charismatics in China and parts of Africa. All told, the Pentecostals and charismatics (and neo-charismatics: i.e. charismatics who are not in traditional mainline Churches like Anglican or Baptist) are contained in over 740 Pentecostal denominations, 6,530 non-Pentecostal denominations and 18,810 neo-charismatic networks and groupings (Hunt & Van der Maas, 2002, p. 284). The three bursts of growth – Pentecostal, charismatic and neo-charismatic – are sometimes compared to three waves of the Holy Spirit breaking over the Church.

Worship

Worship within Pentecostal and neo-charismatic Churches varies depending on congregational size. Where the congregation is under about 100 people, in addition to lively worship songs, hearing Bible readings and long expressive sermons, it is common to find a great deal of congregational participation in the meetings. People may stand up to pray out loud, to prophesy, to share some kind of answers to prayer, or speak about a vision or 'picture' that they have received. This open participation is a consequence of their belief in the activity of the Holy Spirit in the life of each believer. We may say that the barrier between laity and clergy has to some extent been broken down, or that belief in the Holy Spirit has the effect of democratising congregational life. But this is not the full story, because in larger Pentecostal and (neo-)charismatic Churches the meetings are much less participatory, and the division between clergy and laity is enforced by a belief that the clergy are particularly and especially 'anointed' by the Holy Spirit. These leaders may be viewed as highly gifted apostles or prophets. In such Churches, spontaneous prayer or prophecy tends to be confined to the house meetings.

In charismatic Churches that are liturgical, e.g. Anglican and Roman Catholic, the service is laid down in advance within a prayer book. What happens here is that, if the congregation is charismatic, opportunity has to be given within the order of service for the spontaneous exercise of spiritual gifts. The liturgy offers the framework, but spiritual gifts and spontaneous congregational contributions paradoxically occur at prearranged moments during the service.

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Emphases

The Pentecostal and (neo-)charismatic movements emphasise religious experience. This is seen as validating doctrine, not as independent of it. Thus belief in the doctrine of baptism in the Holy Spirit is validated by an experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the Pentecostal and charismatic movements emphasise healing by prayer and the laying on of hands. Although evangelists and pastors will lay hands on people and pray for them, this task is also shared by lay people.

It was once said that Pentecostalism emphasised speaking with tongues too much; but while you will hear utterances

in tongues in their meetings, the practice is now more often associated with personal prayer and is less decisively seen as an evidence of baptism in the Spirit.

There is an emphasis on material or financial prosperity because it is believed that a loving God does not want people to live in poverty. This may lead to humanitarian work of all kinds (Miller & Yamamori, 2007). There is also an emphasis on the ministry of women because it is believed that the Holy Spirit is poured out equally on men and women and that the capacity to minister flows from the power of the Spirit (Acts 2:17, 18).

Links

<http://www.aog.org.uk> (Assemblies of God in Great Britain)

<http://ag.org/top/> (American Assemblies of God)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Charmatic_Renewal (Wikipedia: Catholic charismatic renewal)

<http://www.elim.org.uk> (Elim Pentecostal Churches in the UK)

<http://www.kicc.org.uk/Home/tabid/36/Default.aspx> (Kingsway International Christian Centre, a black megaChurch in London)

<http://www.pewforum.org/2006/10/05/pentecostal-resource-page/> (online resource on international Pentecostalism using survey data)

<http://www.springharvest.org> (Spring Harvest)

Discussion points

1. How would you define 'religious experience' and what sort of experience would you expect 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' to be?
2. Why do you think that Christianity seems to require renewal movements from time to time?
3. Should Christians expect the Church today to be the same as the Church in the Bible?
4. Should Christians expect the Holy Spirit to act in the same way today as the Holy Spirit in the Bible?

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