

Religious Experience Review

“Describe the way William James explains the religious experiences he studied.”

William James examined religious experience in his lectures entitled ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’. In this work he takes a critical look at religious experiences and seeks to analyse them with scientific methodology. Ideally he says he would like to see a “*Critical Science of Religion*” which he says would separate what Religion tells us about God from what we can empirically show to be true, “*sifting out in this way unworthy formulations we can leave a residuum of conceptions that are at least possible.*”

James was far more interested in personal religion than organised religion, being an empiricist he believed in first-hand experience as a basis for truth. James would rather take the first-hand experience of someone than study a set of traditions ultimately based on second-hand experiences.

James categorises most religious experiences as mystical, he says “*personal religious experience has its root in mystical state of consciousness*”. James believed that humans had a “sense of the unseen”, this sense is “*more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’.*” It is this sense which leads to mystical experiences, and James concludes that it is easy to see how a mystical experience could be attributed to a divine being because of how powerful this “sense of the unseen” seems relative to our other senses.

A mystical experience can include many different experiences, from *déjà-vu* to a drug-induced sense of “presence”, however James identifies four key characteristics which are shown by any mystical experience.

Firstly there is ineffability; this is where words simply fail us. What is being experienced is so abstract, so incomprehensible that it cannot be put into language as we understand it. Examples of this can be found in the Hindu tradition, their concept of a God is so abstract that when - as in Arjun’s experience with Lord Krishna - it comes to describing the experience there are not enough words in our vocabulary. Arjun describes God as being “*with many mouths and eyes and many visions of marvellous visions with numerous divine ornaments, holding many divine weapons ... the limitless God with faces on all sides.*” (10.10-11). This description is entirely beyond our comprehension, it simply makes *no sense* to us. James states that religious

abstracts, because of their incomprehensibility are far more powerful in our mind, and can override our normally rational logic.

The second key characteristic James identifies is noetic quality; this is the feeling that during the experience some revelation takes place. Knowledge from the divine is transferred to the individual – not necessarily through words. For example in Saul's conversion in Acts 9, Saul's brief encounter with God leaves him totally devoted to a God he previously shunned, somewhere in this experience Saul must receive some revelation which gives him this new faith. In the same way when Arjun meets Krishna it is revealed to him that "*I believe you are the Supreme Being to be realised. You are the ultimate resort of the Universe. You are the eternal being.*" (11.18). Linked with this characteristic is the third one which James identified, and that is that mystical experiences are transient.

A transient experience in this context relates to the fact that the effect of the experience is out of proportion to its duration. For example, In Exodus 3 where Moses encounters the burning bush, this experience can have lasted no more than minutes yet its *effect* and its *consequences* lead to Moses being given the will power to free the Jews from the Egyptian slave drivers. Again this is true of Isaiah's experience, his encounter with God lasted but moments, yet its impact was profound.

The final characteristic James identifies within all mystical experiences is that the individual is passive throughout the experience. The individual is so in awe of what they are experiencing, and feeling so subservient before an apparent divinity that the experience is led entirely by the "divine". If we consider The Transfiguration it says that Peter "*did not know what to say, they were so frightened*". Rudolph Otto gives this fear and passivity a name, he calls it *mysterium tremendum et facinar*, which is a "fear of the holy", we find the divinity mysterious, frightening but also fascinating. In Exodus Moses is said to "*hide his face because he was afraid to look at God*".

James draws a logical conclusion from his studies of people's apparent religious experiences. He says that those who have had experiences believe them to be entirely true and accurate, however there is absolutely no reason why anyone else should accept God to exist on the basis of *someone else's* experience. However, whilst these experiences cannot prove the existence of any God, the fact we have this "sense of the unreal", or "sense of the unseen" – i.e. this ability to *feel* things we cannot explain – which is some people may progress to a mystical experience – we cannot discount the idea that there is a reality beyond that which our regular senses detect.