

Corporate religious experiences are more reliable than individual religious experiences, and can prove God's existence.

A religious experience (hereafter RE) is when somebody interprets an experience as having been instigated by God and, even in the 21st Century, a BBC poll in 2013 found that 47% of the population claims to have had one. In a society which is increasingly secular, with 73% of young people not identifying with a religious institution, this statistic is striking and according to Richard Swinburne's (*The Existence of God*, 1963) Cumulative Argument, which argues that there is a correlation between the number of times that something happens and its likelihood, religious experience, and especially corporate experiences, must be taken as reliable. A corporate experience is when multiple people will share an RE at the same time -- for example, at the Toronto Vineyard Church in Canada where people, including Ray Comfort, claim to have been "slain" by the spirit and have been collectively shown to "bark like dogs". However, in this essay, I will argue that there is no difference between corporate and individual REs and that, therefore, we cannot say that one is more reliable than the other. In light of recent developments in science, psychology and physiology have been able to explain events which were previously and historically taken as divine interference. As Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006) refers to in his distinction between Soul 1 and Soul 2, science will eventually be able to explain the supposedly *spiritual* part to the self, even if it is unable to now and, therefore, religious experiences can never be deemed reliable.

A book so influential that the infamous positivist philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was said to carry a copy of it in his top pocket, William James's *A Treatise of Religious Experiences* (1901) attempts to categorise REs and define them so that they can be talked about with ease and, ultimately, they can become more widely accepted as reliable. James proposes that all religious experiences are ineffable (meaning they cannot be explained), passive (meaning that we cannot ask for them), noetic (meaning that we learn something from them) and transient (meaning that they do not last for very long). James's creation of a criterion when considering REs is indeed notable and can increase their validity because, following the core principles of empirical science, it uses *observatory* evidence of the world and people's experiences to reach its conclusions, a particularly significant and valid approach considering that he is writing just fifty years after Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* and which implies that his criterion can still be used in modern 21st Century society. However, it must be pointed out that, unlike

science, there is no *concrete* evidence which has been used to reach James's claims because it relies on people telling the truth. In Swinburne's Principle of Testimony, he says that we should trust people when they say that they have had a religious experience in the same way that we would trust somebody if they said that they had seen a table; however, modern psychology writes that the eye-witnesses are often mistaken -- which is why they cannot be used exclusively in a court of law -- and, seeing as REs are so *unlikely* by definition, defying the laws of nature in the interference of a *supernatural* being, this evidence alone cannot then suffice and REs cannot be taken as reliable. Swinburne may again use the Cumulative Argument to point out that Corporate experiences are however much more reliable because there are *multiple* people who claim to have seen, for example, the Virgin Mary on the Battlefields near Ypres in 1914. In a court of law, these multiple testimonies could be said to *secure the validity* of the collective claim. It could then be said that corporate REs are more reliable than individual ones when we consider these claims in terms of modern science and law; however, I would argue, it is important to consider that corporate religious experiences often work according to a crowd mentality.

In his 1902 book *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James developed a means of categorising religious experiences, claiming that they were all ineffable, passive, noetic and transient. James's categories show that not only are corporate experiences all individual, but all individual experiences are corporate because of the similarities between them. For James and Swinburne, this then makes them more reliable. However, I would argue that James's categories do not suffice. Considering the example of Howard Storm, who had a near death experience in 1981, it seems that his experience was not ineffable because he was able to write a whole book (*My Descent into Death*) on the topic; however, at the same time, I would point out that if religious experiences truly were effable, there would be no skeptics. This attribute arises predominantly *in response to* skepticism and the physiological and psychological attempts to explain REs which we have seen. Not only this, but Evelyn Underhill has also pointed out that not all REs are transient and that "the experienced mystic" may have experiences which last for a long time -- indeed, in the BBC survey, 6% of people said that they had had REs which lasted over a year. Whilst Walter Stace's later developed means of categorising REs in the 1970s has, according to Vardy, been able to strengthen their validity, I would argue that this only weakens the theory because it shows that the two cannot agree and that, ultimately, not all religious experiences are the same -- they cannot be considered as a single 'corporate' experience and

thence, even even Sam Harris's claim that there is "sanity in numbers" cannot apply to the issues raised in response to REs.

The infamous magician Derren Brown applied his principles in a 2008 documentary to religion, trying to draw a link between the deception he uses in his magic tricks and that which is shown in Christianity (and specifically Christianity for the purpose of this documentary). In his third experiment, he converted a room of atheists to Christianity and, he says, this only worked because of the fact that a *group* of people were involved. In other words, and squaring to modern psychology, people are influenced by one another. Therefore, corporate REs can be taken as equally reliable as, if not *less* reliable than, individual experiences. Indeed, when you watch videos of the corporate experiences at the Toronto Vineyard Church, there does not appear to be a *genuine* and *personal* connection with God. Rather, as people roll on the floor and laugh maniacally in a way which makes them appear intoxicated, it seems more like a circus show. Watching it, your gut instinct is that any knowledge gained from these experience (for, as James said, they should be noetic) is not reliable, and neither is the experience itself.

Some critics of the Toronto Vineyard Church speculate that these experiences are indeed due to drunkenness, as well as the crowd mentality observed, and similar physiological explanations have been devised and applied to REs in an effort to disprove their reliability -- not just corporate experiences, but also those which are individual as well. Recent developments in neurotheology have examined a link between REs and the temporal lobe sensitivity. In the 1990s, Michael Persinger developed what has become known as the God Helmet which, by passing an electromagnetic wave through the brain, claims to induce an RE. Indeed, Don Hill, the first to try the helmet, agreed that he could feel that "sensed presence" which is outlined in Persinger's thesis. Considering changes in the natural electromagnetic waves on earth, scientists have gone one step further, noting a correlation between infamous REs and particularly strong electromagnetic forces. Perhaps most significant is that of Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Latter Day Saints, who received the Book of Mormon from Jesus during a meteor shower, when the waves would have been strong. However, whilst this evidence does seem significant for disproving the reliability of REs, this is not enough to say that there is a correlation between the two because, if this link were definite, *all* people would experience God during a meteor shower. The most significant and notable implication of Persinger's God Helmet experience is not therefore the suggestion that this correlation exists,

but rather that there is a correlation between temporal lobe *sensitivity* and religious experiences. After all, when Richard Dawkins, a man who has very low temporal lobe sensitivity, tried on the helmet, he did not feel anything out of the ordinary. This argument is not only damaging, but damning for believers in REs and can be used to discount significant stories in the Christian faith, none more notable than the conversion experience of St. Paul in 36 CE whose story, critics argue, is enough to diagnose him with temporal lobe epilepsy -- the flashing lights and blindness being evidence of a seizure. Therefore, in light of scientific developments, it can be said that all religious experiences are unreliable, and not only corporate experiences.

Whilst we have seen that no religious experience can be deemed scientifically “reliable”, it must be recognised that reliability in itself is not important to believers in REs and cannot then, ultimately, disprove their existence. Wittgenstein, recognising that people are involved in different language games depending on their “form of life”, would rightfully point out that REs make a *different kind of sense* within the Christian community and cannot be disproved by the same empirical evidence proposed by science. Ludwig Feuerbach has said that “the secret to theology is anthropology”, arguing that the image of God is merely a projection of our current fears. With this understanding, I would argue that, whilst REs are indeed objectively unreliable, it is pragmatic and even *psychologically natural* for believers to accept their validity without justification. The scientific and religious “forms of life” understand REs differently and cannot then argue against one another in this debate: we must accept that both individual and corporate REs are equally valid for Christians.

(Timed and without notes; however, I did go over by 15 minutes on this one!).