

Spiritual Experience

- seeking clarity within the mystery of personal sacred encounter

THE EXPERIENCE

Touching the invisible

Around the globe, across all faiths and beliefs (even among those of no faith commitment), also back since the dawn of human consciousness, people have had significant and often powerful 'spiritual experiences', (also referred to as 'religious', 'sacred' or 'mystical' experiences). They lead the person to believe they have connected in some direct way to an invisible spiritual dimension of being, even to the divine. These experiences may be fleeting or overwhelming, interesting or life changing, but in every case there is a certainty that something real, though often indescribable, has happened.

Ninian Smart makes this observation:

'Religious experience involves some kind of 'perception' of the *invisible* world, or involves a perception that some visible person or thing is a manifestation of the invisible world'¹

One word that must be closely linked with spiritual experience is 'revelation'. Something we were previously ignorant about is disclosed and experienced and we are enlightened in the process. This may be mental insight, emotional connection or physical encounter; or some or all of these.

Another word often linked with spiritual experience is 'supernatural' (out of the ordinary and beyond the natural order of things). While this word perfectly illustrates the western modernist mindset that reduces what is 'natural' to only that which can be observed, counted, weighed and measured, we challenge its use as either an easy term of dismissal among those sceptical of spiritual experience or creating a distorted two-tier view of reality among those supporting it. Many faith-cultures in the world experience reality as both visible and invisible, physical and spiritual, human and divine and move quite naturally within it; the Christian community of faith should be central among them.

The word 'enthusiasm', so frequently used in popular conversation, comes from the Greek word *enthousiasmos* meaning 'a god-inspired zeal' and is again a witness to the place of spiritual experience in the story of human culture.

Spiritual experiences are often used to argue in favour of the existence of God. While these arguments may not pass the strictest philosophical tests of 'proof' (though neither can they be disproved unless some dishonesty is clearly involved), for the person(s) involved and many hearing their story they are unquestionably authentic. Others doubt the validity of any such claim seeking simple reasonable and rational alternative explanations. Our quest is to question all points of view with the aim of learning which perspective is most likely to be true.

¹ Ninian Smart '*Religious Experience of Mankind*' Collins / Fount 1969 p 28



Experiencing the spiritual

Spiritual experiences are so subtle and diverse it is quite impossible to do them justice in a descriptive list. However, some primary examples would be:

- Seeing a vision
 - Meaningful dreams
 - Hearing a voice
 - Prophecy
 - Unexplained healing
 - Answered prayer
 - Speaking in 'tongues'
 - Trance / 'spirit journey'
 - Miraculous events
 - Strong premonitions
 - Seeing spiritual significance in ordinary / historical events
 - Near-death experience²
 - Manifestations at a séance
 - Profound spiritual awareness in nature
 - Significant artistic inspiration
 - Sudden insight and understanding
 - Unexpected experience of emotion (love, joy, peace, forgiveness ...)
- ... and many more often including combinations of the above.

Some people may be overwhelmed by a particular spiritual experience quite suddenly and with no seeming explanation, while for many they are a direct consequence of a particular spiritual activity or physical experience, a few are even designed for that particularly purpose. Among them might be:

- Meditation
- Prayer
- Initiation rituals
- Breathing exercise
- Fasting
- Eucharist
- Music
- Dance (Sufi whirling)
- Chanting (mantras)
- Worship (liturgy)
- Healing meetings
- Tantric sex
- Near-death experience
- Out-of-body experience
- Visiting sacred sites

² These are variously referred to as 'after-death', 'near-death' or 'survival of bodily death' experiences



- Drug stimulants ('Entheogens' like Peyote / Mescaline)
- Brain stimulation (transcranial magnetic stimulator - TMS)
- Psychological anomalies (schizophrenia)
- Neurophysiological anomalies (temporal lobe epilepsy)
- Theological / philosophical reflection
- Argument, debate, discussion

Spiritual experience of some kind is something that most people would probably feel they could relate to in some way. While at the same time theologians, philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists and neuroscientists each struggle to define or explain it. Important foundational work was none by William James, published in 1902 as 'The Varieties of Religious Experience'. Another influential voice was the German scholar Rudolph Otto, with his 1923 book 'The Idea of the Holy'. These influences will be important as we engage with the challenges that are thrown at the concept of spiritual experience as either a reality or having validity.

Changing individuals and the world

While spiritual experience may often be very personal and quiet, primarily impacting the life of the individual concerned, history shows us that they can have a profound impact on the global human story. Three obvious examples:

- **Gautama** (c 528 BC), mendicant Hindu ascetic searching for the answer to the problem of suffering, finds enlightenment through meditation sitting under a papal tree ('the bodhi tree') in north India and founded the Buddhist faith
- **Jesus** (c 27 CE), Jewish carpenter from Nazareth, identifies with the crowds who are flocking to hear John the baptiser at the river Jordan. Dramatic identification as the one who gives the Spirit, begins an itinerant healing and teaching work.
- **Muhammad** (c 610 CE), a spiritually sensitive Arabian orphan from Mecca begins to receive divine revelations, at the age of forty, in a cave in Mount Hira, outside the city, and the founding of the early Muslim community and the beginning of Islam

However, not all spiritual experiences are positive and on occasions have led to terrible catastrophes:

- **Munster** (1535) a south German city, became a refuge for persecuted Anabaptists, led by John of Leiden who claimed it would be the site of the New Jerusalem, put under siege and then attacked by troops with thousands of ordinary people slaughtered
- **Jonestown** (1978) in the South American forests of Guyana, founded by the visionary leader Revd Jim Jones, became the site for the mass murder-suicide of nearly 1000 people following a deliberately poisoned communion service
- **Waco** (1993) in Texas USA, David Koresh, self-styled prophet of the Branch Davidian of the Seventh Day Adventists who founded 'Ranch Apocalypse' and led the community to into a stand-off an final fire-storm with the FBI in which 75 people died

Innumerable stories of spiritual experience can be told, the majority inspiring, many intriguing, and others perplexing, some of course tragic and horrific. With this diversity and the very complexity and enigma of the experience itself, it is little wonder that it frequently faces severe challenge.



Varieties of spiritual experience

Sara Miles:³

- *atheist, political activist, chef and war correspondent*

“I walked into the church out of curiosity. I had no earthly reason to be there. I had never heard a gospel reading, never said the Lord’s Prayer. I was certainly not interested in becoming a Christian. I, walked in, took a chair, and tried not to catch anyone’s eye. We sat down, stood up, sang, sat down, waited and listened and stood up and sang. “Jesus invites everyone to his table” a woman announced.

We gathered around the table. Someone was putting a piece of fresh crumbly bread into my hands, saying “This is the body of Christ” and handing me the goblet of sweet wine, saying “the blood of Christ” and then something outrageous and terrifying happened. Jesus happened to me. I still can’t explain. It made no sense. I felt as if I had just stepped off a curb or been knocked over painlessly, from behind. The disconnect between what I thought was happening - I was eating a piece of bread; what I heard someone else say was happening – the bread was ‘the body of Christ’; and what I *knew* was happening – God, named ‘Christ’ or ‘Jesus’ was real, and in my mouth!

All the way home, shocked, I scrambled for explanations. Maybe I was hypersuggestible, surrounded by believers pushing me into accepting their superstitions. My tears were just pent-up sadness after a long hard decade, spilling out because I was in a place where I could cry anonymously. Really the whole thing must have been about emotion: the music, the movement, the light ...

Yet that impossible word, *Jesus*, lodged in me like a crumb. I said it over and over to myself, as if repetition would help me understand. I had no idea what it meant; I did not know what to do with it. But it was more real than any thought of mine, or any subjective emotion: it was as real as the actual taste of bread and wine. And the word was indisputable in my body now, as if I had swallowed a radioactive pellet that would outlive my own flesh.

Paul of Tarsus:⁴

- *Pharisee, religious zealot, persecutor of the early Christians*

Speaking to Agrippa and Festus, Paul says ... “ I was convinced that I ought to do many things against Jesus of Nazareth ... With this in mind, I was travelling to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, when at midday along the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, shining around me and my companions. When we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in Hebrew, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It hurts you to kick against the goads.” I asked, “ Who are you, Lord?” The Lord answered, “I am Jesus who you are persecuting. But get up and stand on your feet; for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and testify to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you. I will

³ Sara Miles *‘Take This Bread’* Ballantine Books 2008 p 57-59 (edited for focus and space)

⁴ Extracts taken from the story in Acts 26:1-32 (slightly edited for focus)



rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me”

‘After that, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles ...

Festus exclaimed, “Are you out of your mind Paul! Too much learning is driving you insane!” But Paul said, “I am not out of my mind ... but am speaking the sober truth ... I am certain that none of these things has escaped notice, for this was not done in a corner.”

A Woman’s Near-Death Experience:⁵

- recounted to Dr Raymond Moody

I had a heart attack, and found myself in a black void, and I knew I had left my physical body behind. I knew I was dying, and I thought, “God, I did the best I knew how at the time I did it. Please help me.” Immediately, I was moved out of that blackness, through a pale grey, and I just moved on gliding and moving swiftly, and in front of me in the distance, I could see a grey mist, and I was rushing towards it and as I got closer to it I could see through it. Beyond the mist I could see people, and their forms were just like they are on earth, and I could also see something which one could take to be buildings. The whole thing was permeated with a gorgeous light - a living golden yellow glow, a pale colour, not like the harsh gold colour we know on earth.

As I approached more closely, I felt certain that I was going through that mist. It was such a wonderful, joyous feeling; there are just no words in the human language to describe it. Yet it wasn’t my time to go through the mist, because instantly from the other side appeared a relative who had died many years earlier. He blocked my path, saying, “Go back, your work on earth has not been completed. Go back now.” I didn’t want to go back, but I had no choice, and immediately I was back in my body. I felt that horrible pain in my chest, and I hear my little boy crying, “God, bring my mummy back to me.”

A Man’s Near-Death Experience:⁶

- recounted to Dr Raymond Moody

“I suffer from very severe bronchial asthma and emphysema and was awaiting an operation. One night in hospital I woke up in severe pain, but just at that moment a light appeared in the corner of the room, just below the ceiling. It was just a ball of light, almost like a globe, and it was not very large. A feeling came over me. I can’t say that it was an eerie feeling, because it was not. It was a feeling of complete peace and utter relaxation. I could see a hand reach down for me from the light and sensed a voice saying, “Come with me I want to show you something.” I grabbed on to the hand. As I did, I had the feeling of

⁵ Taken from RA Moody *‘Life After Life’* Mockingbird Atlanta 1975 p56-57 (slightly edited for focus)

⁶ Taken from RA Moody *‘Life After Life’* Mockingbird Atlanta 1975 p72-76 (substantially edited for focus)



being drawn up and of leaving my body, and I looked back and saw it there lying on the bed while I was going up towards the ceiling.

Now I took on the same form as the light. I got the feeling that this form was definitely a spirit. It wasn't a body, just a wisp of smoke or vapour. The form I took had colours, though. There was orange, yellow, and what I took to be an indigo bluish colour.

We started moving through the ceiling and wall of the hospital room. We had no difficulty passing through doors or walls. They would just fade away from us as we approached them. I knew we were moving but there was no sensation of speed. I was shown what I realised was the recovery room and told, "That's where you are going to be. They are going to put you in that bed but you will never waken from that position." I was returned to my bed and re-entered my body. I knew I would be dying; there was no regret or fear. I was ready.

The morning before the operation I became anxious that my wife would not cope with our child. Again I felt this presence (but no light this time). I sensed the words, "Jack why are you crying? I thought you would be pleased with me." I shared my concerns. Thoughts came to me from the presence, "Since you are asking for others you will live until your child becomes a man."

The doctors were concerned about the operation, but in recovery I needed no additional support. The doctor said, "Miracles still happen, you know!" After this I don't have any doubts anymore. I know there is life after death.'

Jay Griffiths:⁷

- author and traveller

"The following night I drank Ayahuasca, a powerful hallucinogenic drug used by shamans throughout South America. I vomited suddenly and violently and then the lights came on in my head, the drug taking effect with a brilliant, radiant strength and energy. I felt ransacked with wonder and charged with life. And then I felt an extraordinary sensation, as if I were giving birth to myself – as a leopard, a jaguar. This was nothing like a vaginal birth but rather birth as transformation. I was concentrating, straining, pushing out of my body the image of my soul. With each breath out, I pushed myself through into jaguariness, like a runner forcing herself through the pain barrier into a transcendent state beyond. It felt like straining and pushing something into being, but the 'something' is not other but oneself in a new form, a process like all difficult works of creation. When with one last effort the process was complete.

I was wilful, I was hungry, I was solitary, I was proud. The jaguar walks its own sure way; treads its own path certainty and a tender ferocity. Beyond love, hate or complexity, things fall into two categories, those on the side of death and the wasteland, and those who walk with the jaguar on the side of life and the wild. From a hunger for life, I roared myself into being, and now sheer life brimmed me to overflowing.

⁷ Taken from Jay Griffiths *'Wild: An Elemental Journey'* Hamilton / Penguin 2006 p81-82 – see also page 10,79-84 (substantially edited for focus)



“We can send you to the stars,” one of the shaman had said to me. And now in my hallucinations, I saw the stars and leapt for them, punting from star to star until I wanted to lick the moon. So I did. The crescent moon, like a slice of white papaya, was small enough to be held in one paw. I caught it gently with my claws and licked its wet smoothness with my rough tongue. What flavour is the moon? Cool water.

The comedown was quick. “We’ve come back to earth.” Said Juan (shaman), with a quiet laugh, and in my still influenced-state I accepted, mater-of-factly, that it was obvious we’d all been to the moon.”

CHALLENGE AND RESPONSE

Attack on two fronts

If you claim to have had a spiritual experience, or base your life and behaviour on ideas drawn from such an experience, you are likely to be open to challenge on two quite different fronts. One will be ‘the rational’ and the other ‘the religious’, as we shall see.

Testing for truth

All spiritual experience is subjective and will always be open to challenge. These may often be presented in a hostile way, but they should be welcomed. This may be difficult for some people to accept, especially when the experience in question is precious to the person concerned; it perhaps forms an important foundation to what they have come to believe, and by its very nature is also difficult (maybe impossible) to communicate accurately.

However, our main concern should be for the truth. If our spiritual experience is true then it should be able to stand up to scrutiny. The questions that objectors raise are valid ones. We may not be able to answer all of them to their full satisfaction (or our own), but if the experience is in fact true then there should be enough about it for it to be able to communicate a sense of integrity and respect to those enquiring.

Of course, when challenged, our first response must be to reply, “Do you really want to know?” If our challenger is only out to enjoy tripping us up, further conversation seems pointless. But if their questions are genuine then together real progress and learning can take place. As Ninian Smart observes:

‘ ... in every area of human knowledge there are disagreements between understandings, but very often we advance in our knowledge exactly because of this. It is only out of dialogue and argument that new insights are won.’⁸

We will endeavour to make our responses from a biblical Jesus-centred perspective, but will try to do so in a way that is sensitive to other faiths and beliefs.

⁸ Ninian Smart *‘Religious Experience of Mankind’* Collins / Fount 1969 p 26



The 'rational' challenge

This attack against spiritual experience comes from atheists, humanists, rationalists and agnostics. Such an experience does not fit their empirical-materialist worldview and so from their perspective cannot be what the person who had the spiritual experience believes it to be. There must be another explanation for what happened that is open to scientific scrutiny.

▪ "It is nothing more than brain physiology"

- Scientists stimulating small areas of the brain with a 'transcranial magnetic stimulator' (TMS) can create spiritual experiences; even atheists can be caused to experience God using the TMS!
- The temporal lobes of the brain may play a role in spiritual experience,⁹ as some sufferers of temporal lobe epilepsy report that during seizures they have profound experiences. V S Ramachandran says:

"... most remarkable of all are those patients who have deeply moving spiritual experiences, including a feeling of divine presence and the sense that they are in direct communication with God. Everything around them is imbued with cosmic significance. They may say, 'I finally understand what it's all about. This is the moment I've been waiting for all my life. Suddenly it all makes sense.' Or, 'Finally I have insight into the true nature of the cosmos.' ... God has vouchsafed for us 'normal' people only occasional glimpses of a deeper truth... but these patients enjoy the unique privilege of gazing directly into God's eyes every time they have a seizure."¹⁰

- There is the 'God-gene' hypothesis that argues some human beings carry a gene (VMAT2) that gives them a predisposition to experiences and sensations of a spiritual kind. It is not argued that this gene is encoded for belief in God, but rather is involved in the breakdown of monoamines, a class of neurotransmitters related to emotional sensitivity.¹¹
- Explaining 'Near Death Experiences' (NDE's) where a brain-dead person should be unable to form new memories, and in fact should have no consciousness at all, is a challenge to science and the sceptic. It is suggested that it might function as an aspect of the sleep disorder 'rapid eye movement intrusion'. In this disorder the person's mind can waken before their body and hallucinations and feel physically detached from the body can occur. It is suggested that in the traumatic medical circumstances in which NDE's occur the REM intrusions are triggered. This occurs in the brain stem that can operate virtually independently of the higher brain. So it is argued that when the higher regions are brain-dead the REM intrusions in the brain stem can still occur.¹²

⁹ See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/horizon/2003/godonbrain.shtml>; also <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/7.11/persinger.html>

¹⁰ V S Ramachandran & Sandra Blakeslee *'Phantoms in the Brain'* Fourth Estate 1998 p179

¹¹ See Nature Magazine Review – 'The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into Our Genes' <http://www.nature.com/ng/journal/v36/n12/full/ng1204-1241.html> also Time Magazine 25th October 2004 'The God Gene' <http://www.time.com/time/covers/1101041025/>

¹² See <http://science.howstuffworks.com/science-life-after-death.htm>, also <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/986177.stm>



- Out-of-the-Body Experiences (OoBE's) may parallel NDE's but can also be quite separate. They are thought to have connections with activity in the 'angular gyrus', part of the 'temporal parietal junction' (TPJ) of the brain. Among other things it appears to control our understanding of our own body and its situation in space. Stimulating the TPJ has induced OBE's in some patients. The link between NDE's and OoBE's is reported in witnesses but explaining it is little more than conjecture in science so far.¹³
 - The use of 'entheogens'¹⁴ - plant-drug substances that cause a person to become or feel inspired in a spiritual manner - are seen as altering the brain chemistry to induce different states of consciousness and need no added explanation of spiritual powers at work.¹⁵
 - Dreams, visions, hearing voices, speaking in tongues, creative inspiration and insight etc are all the consequences of the astonishing complexity and fertility of the human brain, often stimulated at times of stress, challenge, opportunity and joy.
 - Prophecy is often the result of generalised statements, intuition, details too far into the future ever to be proved right (or wrong), statements that unfolding events simply prove to be wrong.
 - Premonitions are the result of not fully understood levels of mental awareness; very widely seen among animals and having strong evolutionary survival benefits.
 - Séance messages, often a manipulated hoax, subconscious suggestion with even forms of telepathy, another example of mental complexity.
- **"It is nothing more than brain processes"**
- Spiritual experience is simply 'imagination' not 'perception'. It is forming an internal mental image from material already in the mind; it is not responding to an actual external physical stimulus.
 - Spiritual experiences are subjective and private. You cannot observe them objectively or test them publicly, so how can you use them to justify objective claims about the world?
 - A J Ayer said "... if a mystic admits that the object of his vision is something which cannot be described, then he must also admit that he is bound to talk nonsense when he describes it... in describing his vision the mystic does not give us any information about the external world: he merely gives us indirect information about the condition of his own mind."
 - Thomas Hobbes asked, 'What is the difference between saying "God spoke to me in a dream" and saying "I dreamt that God spoke to me"?'
 - Answered prayer is a product of chance upon which we invest special meaning. Often there are only one or two possible options (like spinning a coin) and inevitably some of them come up 'heads'. How do they compare to those not answered?
 - Miracles are meanings we give to happy coincidences; we live in a world where astonishing things can on occasions happen by chance

¹³ See <http://science.howstuffworks.com/science-life-after-death.htm>, see also <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/08/070823141057.htm>

¹⁴ Literally from the Greek meaning, 'creating god within'; 'entheogen' is preferred to 'hallucinogen' with its linguistic link to delirium and insanity, and to 'psychedelic' with its association with psychosis and also the 1960's pop culture

¹⁵ See the good article in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Entheogen>



- Finding meaning in everyday events and history is simply imposing our patterns and stories where none actually exist.

Embracing the ‘rational’ challenge

▪ Spiritual experience and brain physiology and processes

- We affirm the physicality of spirituality.
 - The biblical understanding of being a person is that we *are* a body (we don’t *have* a body, it is not something separate from the essential us).
 - Full personhood demands that we are a complete integrated physical and spiritual being.
 - The spiritual flows through the physical, and the physical mediates the spiritual. The idea that somehow we might experience God more completely were we somehow to by-pass or remove the brain-mind is biblically absurd.¹⁶ As is the notion that spiritual experiences can somehow be had apart from engaging the mind, brain and body.
 - The use of meditation to attune the physicality of our mind and body to the spiritual can be very positive. To use it as an attempt to ‘escape the body’ (seen as an obstacle) to reach a ‘higher plain’ is not biblical. Notice the accounts of the many spiritual experiences in scripture that are both awesome and yet fully embodied. Three examples would be:
 - Moses ‘mouth to mouth’ with God on Mt Sinai (Ex 31:11)
 - Paul not knowing if he was ‘in the body or out of the body’ (2Cor 12:2)
 - John on Patmos ‘walks through an open door into heaven’ in his vision (Rev 4:1)
 These and the many other accounts may be either visionary or physical, what is clear is there is absolutely no understanding that the physicality of the body is in any way an obstacle to spiritual experience and is always incorporated within it.
 - A Christian understanding of the possible extent of spiritual and physical interfusing are profoundly expressed in the words, ‘The Word became flesh’ (Jn 1:14); the divine and human, physical and spiritual can find perfect and total mutual expression. The astonishing observations made in the area of brain science are leading some experts to reconsider the very nature of our understanding of what we mean by the idea of ‘physical’.¹⁷
- We challenge the ‘nothing more than ...’ attitude of secular sceptics.
 - The fact that ...
 - ... temporal lobe stimulation (or the experience of those with temporal lobe epilepsy) appears to create spiritual experiences
 - ... a ‘God-gene’ that links to emotional sensitivity is possible

¹⁶ A mature Christian leader was heard to say in a large meeting in the early days of the charismatic movement in British churches (mid-1960’s). “If only God would remove my brain, it is getting in the way of my spiritual experience!” The declaration was greeted with warm applause. This illustrates the depth of misunderstanding about personhood and spirituality to be found across much popular Christian thinking.

¹⁷ An observation made by an Oxford brain scientist in a BBC documentary on the subject broadcast around 1997



- ... brain stem activity following higher-brain death may have the capability of creating Near-Death Experiences (NDE's)
 - ... activity in part of the 'temporal parietal junction' may trigger Out-of-Body-Experiences (OoBE's)
 - ... 'entheogens', the plant-drug substances that cause a person to become or feel inspired in a spiritual manner
- ... does not prove that spiritual experience is 'nothing more than' a phenomenon of physical brain activity with no objective spiritual stimulus or source.
- Inasmuch as these observations are true, they demonstrate something of the astonishing capability of the brain to handle the 'spiritual'; and who knows how very much more there is still to discover and then to understand?
 - It shows the brain has the means and capacity to facilitate experiences of spiritual perception in the same way as it can handle experiences of physical perception within the empirical and tactile world about which we know so much more.
 - The fact that these laboratory stimulated 'spiritual experiences' may not be true, and we don't know if that is the case, it does not prove that no spiritual experiences are true.
 - Ninian Smart comments that physiology 'may explain the function of the eye, brain, central nervous system when religious experience takes place – this cannot tell if the experience is true or false'¹⁸
- We recognise the complexity of the brain, but believe there are just too many other factors involved for that alone to provide satisfactory explanations.
 - People, who have already decided that there can only be an empirical scientific explanation for everything, exclude the possibility of any other options, which of course is itself very unscientific!
 - Dreams, visions, hearing voices, speaking in tongues, creative inspiration and insight etc certainly do point us to the complex depths of the human brain-mind. Pre-existing material may well be drawn upon, re-arranged and form part of the fabric of the experience, but in so many cases there appear to be other spiritual presences and influences that are at work and making the experience particularly significant (evaluation of this we will discuss below).
 - Prophecy can of course be voicing wishful thinking; it can also be so bland as to be meaningless. However, biblical prophecy is primarily about interpreting current events rather than predicting the future. One of the tests of a true prophet is whether their predictions about the future come true (for more on this see below).
 - Premonitions may be the result of an innate animal ability that some have more awareness of than others. It will be a personal act of faith to believe that on occasions that more than just some human sensitivity is involved.
 - Any form of séance is forbidden biblically (cf Deut 18:11), which suggests that not only it is an activity that can do serious psychological harm but also may actually involve damaging spiritual forces.
 - The whole area of the psychic reaches across the very frontiers at which the astonishing complexity of the brain-mind touches the spiritual and the divine. It is filled with both possibilities and questions.

¹⁸ Ninian Smart *'Religious Experience of Mankind'* Collins / Fount 1969 p 30



- We argue that subjective experience does not necessarily exclude objective spiritual reality
 - Many spiritual experiences are subjective and private; you may not be able to observe or explain the actual dynamics of the experience, but you can evaluate the consequences on the individual's life and its impact upon others (see below).
 - When A J Ayer said "... if a mystic admits that the object of his vision is something which cannot be described, then he must also admit that he is bound to talk nonsense when he describes it..." all he is really describing is the limitation of language and nothing about the spiritual experience. To argue that the limitation of language sets the bound for the reality of human experience is absurd – love poetry may be beautiful but it always fails to do true justice to the experience!
 - When Thomas Hobbes asks, 'What is the difference between saying "God spoke to me in a dream" and saying "I dreamt that God spoke to me"?' At one level - nothing. But then it will all depend on what it is believed that God actually said and the likely outcome of any response to it.
 - Christians find prayer and answered prayer a challenging issue! Yes, it is subjective in many ways. It is a consequence of an unfolding relationship with God. What may appear to be random chance circumstances to the outsider and sceptic begin to take on a pattern and rhythm that has meaning. Sceptics will say we are superimposing meaning on random events, we reply that we are discovering it in the light of an unfolding relationship.
 - Miracles present many of the same challenges:
 - To the sceptic the presence of chance in a dynamic universe is all anyone is observing
 - To the believer it is a significant event related to a relationship with God and particular circumstances at the point in their life
 - Miracles are not acts of God contrary to the laws of nature, but significant events happening at appropriate moments
 - Miracles may be dramatic and even astonishing events, but will always be open to alternative interpretations by those who refuse to acknowledge them
 - Most world faiths have places and events that are sacred to the memory of the community, at the centre of their shared spiritual experience (eg Exodus, Easter etc). They take their meaning from the shared memory of the events and their meaning for their identity and hope. For the sceptic it is just perplexing, but they cannot prove that nothing has happened.

The 'religious' challenge

This attack against spiritual experience comes from people of different faiths and even from different groups within the same faith community. None of these people have any difficulty with the reality of spiritual experience; in fact many will claim to have had powerful spiritual experiences themselves. Their objections will be about the claims and the quality of *your* particular experience and question whether what you personally experienced can actually be true because it disagrees with *their* worldview and *their* idea of God (or gods, spirits or the divine), their teachings or doctrines, acceptable ethical behaviour and much more.

The objections themselves are not complex though they may be expressed in many different ways depending on the occasion. We raise them from the perspective of a person standing outside a particular set of beliefs and also from the position of someone standing



within a particular faith position. In each case the objection to a particular spiritual experience will be different. Each objection can be put very simply; though responding to each may prove a little more demanding!

▪ **“Your spiritual experience cannot be true because it is different”**

- *Outsider*: “It is self-evident that all faiths, beliefs and religions are not the same, so a claim for spiritual experience in one faith to be true must make any similar claims in other faiths untrue; or else all claims are true and the perceived differences in faiths are minimal, or no claims are true and there can be no such thing as authentic spiritual experience.”
- *Insider*: “What we believe is true, clearly established in our teaching, faith and practice. Your spiritual experience is outside our understanding of truth so therefore it must be wrong.”

▪ **“Your spiritual experience cannot be true because it is delusion”**

- *Outsider*: “There are so many claims for God and gods, Spirit and spirits how can you be certain about the true source and influences of your spiritual experience?”
- *Insider*: “Your spiritual experience does not come from within our faith-group, so it is at the very least suspect and is probably influenced by ignorance, deception or false spiritual influences.”

▪ **“Your spiritual experience cannot be true because it is destructive”**

- *Outsider*: “Spiritual experience so often places the recipient in an exalted position leading to pride and questionable authority; also down through history has also been used to justify hostility and even atrocities towards other people.”
- *Insider*: “Your spiritual experience is questioned because it has not changed your behaviour in an attractive way and could lead others to unacceptable actions.”

Embracing the ‘religious’ challenge

▪ **Spiritual experience and difference**

- *The difference between individuals*. Every spiritual experience for each individual person across the face of the earth will be unique, irrespective of their faith, belief or religion; just as every experience of human relationship is unique. Uniqueness and therefore difference is built into the very nature of spiritual experience.
- *The difference in worldviews*. The fundamental differences between world faiths are worldviews; how they each perceive the world around them and interpret its meaning. This is hugely significant in the matter of spiritual experience as it sets the environment in which they take place and influence how they are understood.
- *The difference in interpretations*. All spiritual experiences must be interpreted. Anyone who has a spiritual experience brings certain preconceptions to it, whether Christian or Hindu or another faith. These shape the way that religious experience is interpreted. Two people may have what appears to be the same experience, one interprets it in terms of Jesus another in terms of Vishnu. This does not imply that



religious experiences are not experiences of an objective religious reality; the experiences may be the same in each case, only the interpretations differ.

- *The difference in value and truth.* The fact that there is difference does not prove that spiritual experience has not taken place, only that it is understood in different ways. The question as to whether it is understood to be *true* will depend on our acceptance of the worldview within which it is interpreted, what we believe about its source and origin and the qualities it communicates.

▪ **Spiritual experience and delusion**

- *The illusion of delusion.* Secular sceptics, as we have seen, argue that all people of faith are deluded and therefore the same must be true of our claims to spiritual experience. We have responded by saying that the delusion is on their part in not seeing the spiritual pervading the totality of the physical. This is not about trading insults but rather pointing out that reality includes the spiritual and is much more than can be evaluated by the popular scientific method.
- *The reality of delusion.* Surely the majority of people across the world of faith and belief would agree that some claims to spiritual experience are seriously suspect (quite apart from those that are questioned because they don't fit into their particular world view). Taking cultural factors into account, under the pretence of spiritual experience there is behaviour that suggests an unbalanced and disturbed mind and personality. Clearly this is an example of delusion and need for help.
- *The question of delusion.* The realm of the spirit is not simple, and across the world faiths this is confirmed by recognition of 'good' and 'evil' in spiritual manifestation, and the shared language of 'the devil', 'Satan', 'the Accuser' etc. Clearly this can be the cause of destructive spiritual influence and experience, (which we will discuss in more detail below).
 - Jeremiah makes it clear that within the Jewish community there was delusion masquerading as genuine spiritual experience, "Do not let your prophets and diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams which they dream, for it is a lie which they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord" (Jer 29:8-9).
 - Jesus says to the Samaritan woman, "You worship what you do not know ... God is Spirit, and those who worship must worship him in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:22, 24).
 - Other New Testament voices say, "Do not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything" (1Thes 5:19-21) and again, "... do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1Jn 4:1).

Handling the idea of delusion and spiritual experience with reference to other world faiths must be done with enormous sensitivity. The history of the Christian church in this area is shameful. This is not the place to develop this discussion in detail. Jesus says, "The person who is not with me is against me" (Mt 12:30), but on another occasion he says, "The person who is not against us is for us" (Lk 9:50).

▪ **Spiritual experience as destructive**

- *Life-giving not destructive.* We have already noted examples of spiritual experiences that lead to destructive consequences (Jonestown, Wacco etc). Surely everyone who is at all convinced by the possibility of genuine spiritual experience must instinctively



feel that if it is truly genuine then it must ultimately bring about good, life-giving consequences. (The only exceptions would be with those who hold a very narrow religious worldview that excludes all those who think differently; but even they expect positive spiritual experiences for themselves!).

- *Holiness not destructive*. Religious people may face criticism and hostility; however, across the globe most cultures have a real respect for an individual that is a 'holy person' - someone who shows integrity of character in truthfulness, kindness, wisdom and uprightness. This would be seen as the consequence of authentic spiritual experience.

TESTING THE TRUTH

It is clear that authenticating spiritual experience is not always straightforward. It is something that has to be handled very sensitively, wisely and carefully. The biblical tradition is both clear and cautious in equal measure.

In the Hebrew tradition

The teaching in the Hebrew scriptures about prophets and prophecy is the most helpful guide to reflecting on spiritual experience. At the outset care is required. AB Davidson cautions, 'A hard and fast line of demarcation between true and false prophecy can hardly be drawn.'¹⁹

- False prophecy tends to be marked by a nationalistic spirit and is characterised by, self-interest (Jer 23:16), telling people what they want to hear (Mic 2:11) and financial benefit for the prophet (Am 7:12)
- True prophecy tends to be marked by an ethical spirit and focus

Warnings:

- On occasions God appears to permit a 'lying spirit' to continue to deceive those who have chosen a path of destruction and so draw events to their natural moral conclusion (cf 1Kg 22:19-23)
- Ecstasy, in itself, is not a guide to whether a prophecy (therefore spiritual experience) is true or false
- Miracles are indecisive, for example Egyptian sorcerers did miracles that were almost able to match those of Moses (Ex 7:8-13)
- Davidson is clear, 'The ancient Hebrews were in the same position as ourselves. Neither miracles nor anything else will produce conviction apart from the moral conditions of the mind'²⁰

There are three critical tests of spiritual experience:

- What is prophesied must come true

'If you say in your heart,
"How may I know the word which the Lord has not spoken?"
When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord,

¹⁹ AB Davidson article '*Prophecy and Prophets*' (section on 'False Prophets' p 116-118) in J Hastings (Ed) '*A Dictionary of the Bible*' Edinburgh T&T Clark 1902 p116

²⁰ *ibid* see p118



if the word does not come to pass or come true,
that is a word that the Lord has not spoken;
the prophet has spoken presumptuously ,
you need not be afraid of him'
(Dt 18:21-22)

- It must not contradict God's character

'If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams,
and gives you a sign or a wonder,
and the sign or the wonder which they tell you comes to pass,
and if they say, "Let us go after other gods",
which you have not known, "and let us serve them,"
you shall not listen to the words of that prophet,
or that dreamer of dreams ...
The Lord you God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear,
His commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey,
Him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast'
(Dt 13:1-4)

- Character of the prophet themselves

'Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets
who lead my people astray,
who cry "Peace" when they have something to eat,
but declare war against those who put nothing into their mouths ...
But as for me, I am filled with power
with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might'
(Mic 3:5,8)

In the New Testament tradition

It is the teaching of Jesus that is the most helpful guide to reflecting on spiritual experience.

- Jesus challenges false teachers, false prophets and false messiahs

"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in you stop them" (Matt 23:13-14)

'Then if anyone says to you, "Look! Here is the messiah!" or "There he is!" - do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Take note I have told you before hand. So if they say to you "Look! He is in the wilderness" do not go out. If they say, "Look! He is in the inner rooms" do not believe it.
(Matt 24:23-26)

- How do you recognise the true teacher, true prophet or true messiah?

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of their



heart produces good, and the evil person out of their evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks” (Lk 6:43-45)

“You will know them by their fruits”
(Matt 7:20)

“... hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil”
(1Thes 5:21-22)

In summary ...

The simple conclusion is that the case against authentic spiritual experience is far from proven.

We take the ‘rational’ challenge to spiritual experience very seriously:

- Our total physicality must be involved, our brain-minds must be central
- To dismiss it as ‘nothing more than ...’ the electro-chemistry of brain-mind function is certainly not proven
- To give a full physical description of brain-mind function does not begin to explain ‘meaning’ (eg. A full chemical description of a newspaper with regard to the composition of its paper and ink says nothing whatever about the actual message it contains)
- Science proposes a hypothesis and tests it, so it is with spiritual experience. While the results are varied there is enough there to give us confidence that a simple ‘brain-mind function’ understanding is not sufficient
- It of course raises the question as to how the spiritual and physical actually interact
- Faith is not an unscientific activity!

We take the ‘religious’ challenge to spiritual experience very seriously:

- The fact that there is ‘difference’ across and between world faiths does not mean that individuals cannot have true and significant spiritual experiences for them – interpreted within their cultural references – God is at work among all faiths.
- This is not saying that ultimately all understandings of faith are true and equally authentic
- There can be ‘false’ spiritual experiences that are simply concerned with self-interest and destructive behaviour
- Authentic spiritual experience must point beyond itself and be life-giving, it must be life-changing in a positive way and be good
- Spiritual experience must always be ‘tested’ and never blindly accepted; it must be reflected upon and must make sense within daily life
- That faith is involved throughout is essential, but it must be based upon reasons to be confident that the experience is true

Questions

1. How would you respond to the person who told you that your spiritual experience was nothing more than electro-chemical brain-mind activity?



2. A Hindu friend tells you that they have just had a powerful spiritual experience that has made Vishnu so much more real to them. How would you respond and what would your understanding and explanation be?

3. Jesus says, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matt 7:20). How helpful is this in trying to come to an understanding about spiritual experience? What questions does it answer? What questions does it raise? What issues remain unresolved?

Reading and Resources

M Buber '*I and Thou*' Continuum 2004

W James '*Varieties of Religious Experience*' Penguin 1983

RA Moody '*Life After Life*' Rider & Co 2001

RA Moody '*Reflections on Life After Life*' Rider & Co 2001

R Otto '*Idea of the Holy*' Oxford University Press 1968

C Southgate '*God, Humanity and the Cosmos*' T&T Clarke 2005²¹

²¹ See especially pages 206-209

