

Candidate 7 evidence

To what extent do psychological perspectives offer the best understanding of religious experience?

Word Count (3691)

A religious experience is a deep and personal encounter with the divine. These experiences play a crucial role in shaping beliefs and traditions, not only influencing individual lives but also society. Theorists such as William James and Sigmund Freud have explored the nature of religious experience through a psychological lens and analyse what these experiences are and the effect they have on people. Psychology is the scientific study of the human mind, how it works and how it affects our behaviours. Together, psychology and religion both seek the understanding of human life. As religion is an integral part to both the identity and practices of many individuals and communities, shaping many values and traditions, psychologists find it vital to explore the psychology behind religion. By understanding human life, we must explore religious experiences and how they occur, making psychology a crucial part in understanding religious experiences. It is also crucial to look at these experiences from a sociological perspective which examines the social contexts, cultural influences and collective behaviours that shape religious beliefs and experiences. Emile Durkheim is a famous sociologist that explains these religious phenomenons in a sociological way.

The aim of this essay is to critically examine the contributions of both psychological and sociological approaches to religious experience and then compare and prove the extent of which psychological perspective offers the better understanding of religious experience.

William James also known as the 'father of American psychology' published a book named "The varieties of Religious experiences." In this book we hear his perspective and knowledge on the topic of religious experiences including their nature and complexities and investigates how they shape individuals. James was a pragmatist so was much more interested in the significance of the belief in God had on someone's life rather than focusing on Gods existence, providing a psychological account of religious experiences. James believes that religious experiences are the core of religion as they can bring about profound changes in a person's beliefs, and behaviours whereas religious teachings and practices are considered 'second hand' religion, they are not what religion is truly about and have been built off religious

experiences. As a result, this makes James believe in all religions to be true as every religion contains a mystical experience with the divine higher power or the unknown. James famously quoted a religious experience to be *"the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine"*.¹ This meaning that he believed humans have a feeling of 'something there', some higher presence within them. James believed that much of religious experience is related to what is called the sick soul. This is the idea that life is meaningless, and it is this that leads to personal experiences with the divine. He argues that as humans we seek for some meaning or pleasure to life and if there is none, religion can be a way to fulfil this. James also linked religious experiences to the divided self. The concept that humans have two sides and to overcome this, we need to experience a state of unification which is described as a religious or spiritual state. This can result in people actively participating in religious practices such as prayers and worship as a way for them to gain a closeness to the divine. James believed that a religious experience can be identified by four marks; noetic, ineffable, transient and passive. It is believed that it is a religious experience if the experience itself can be described in these four ways. An example of an experience that fits into these four characteristics is Saul's road to conversion. Ineffable meaning the experience is too great to put into words, people are usually lost for words and cannot explain their mystical experience into ordinary everyday words. When Saul was left blinded, Saul and his men were speechless and unable to describe what has just happened. Noetic meaning the strong sense of significance and knowledge associated with the experience. After the experience Saul gained a deep understanding of christianity and became one of the most influential christian figures of his time. Transient meaning the experience is quick, the memories from it fade quickly and are difficult to recall. Saul's experience was sudden, but it had a long lasting effects on his beliefs and actions. The final mark being passive meaning the experience happens without the person seeking it. Saul was Jewish, so had no intention of this experience to happen². These marks help to characterise the nature of religious experiences and illustrates the significance in the lives of those who have experienced them. It suggests that religious experience creates a deep connection to God, one that goes beyond what we can comprehend. I think James' marks

offers a clear explanation of what is associated with religious experiences, but if religious experiences are ineffable, then how can we properly investigate them? There is no to prove of its existence if it is beyond describable. James believed conversion is a strong example of religious experiences providing a life changing impact as it can lead to changed or unified lives. James created fruits associated with it. It is the fruits that are of value to humanity. They include a feeling of assurance, a feeling of loss and worry, a sense of perceiving things not known before and a feeling of ecstasy. This highlights the transformative effects that the experiences have on people. They bring about positive attributes that can change somebody's mentality for the better. I think James' argument offers a clear understanding of how to define a religious experience. Much of his characteristics and fruits that he has associated with religious experiences can be seen in real life examples, making his argument stronger. However, many people actively seek prayer and meditation to become closer to the divine and experience its presence. This wouldn't make every experience passive, highlighting a weakness to James' argument.

Conversion experiences transform an individual from an unhappy divided or imperfect self to a more unified soul and happy state. In James' book he included a case study about an alcoholic man who experienced a religious experience which dramatically altered his life trajectory. Before the experience the man was strongly addicted to alcohol, leading a life full of addiction beyond redemption. However, he experienced an overwhelming religious feeling that was described as sudden and profound which changed his life for the better. James argued that his life was practically over by the detrimental usage of alcohol but his experience with the divine brought about huge transformative effects, particularly in terms of personal and moral renewal³. From this example and Sauls conversion, we can clearly see they fit into what James categorises as a religious experience. They are meaningful and beneficial for individuals, ultimately bringing about happiness into their life. James argues that there must be an explanation why the four marks are found in religious experiences in all kinds of religions in the world, it can't just occur by chance. This is an important argument that James makes, indicating the probability of God. He believes as long as religious experiences bring about great effects in a person's life, then it acts as evidence towards Gods existence. This shows the significance of the psychological impact of religious experiences on individuals, as they

indicate whether the experience is genuine. Overall, many people would argue that James' psychological account provides a great understanding of religious experience as they fit well with many historic and modern examples of experiences with the divine. I agree to an extent that James provides a clear understanding as we can use a lot of examples to back up James' premises. His argument is clear and easy to follow and link to real life scenarios.

Another psychologist that provides a psychological account of religious experiences is Sigmund Freud. James and Freud offer opposing views on the topic; nevertheless, both offer a psychological insight into the religious phenomena. Freud believed that religion was no more than psychological obsession, he essentially saw religion and religious experiences as illusions. These illusions are projections of wishful impulses and an attempt to gain control over the external societal expectations. Freud was very critical of religion and in his book "The Future of an Illusion", Freud wrote "*Religion is comparable to childhood neurosis*".⁴ They are an illusion in which people turn to disguise the miseries in their life. He believed that religious experiences are hallucinations caused by the deep unconscious, serving the immature emotional needs of the repressed childhood desires living on within the adult. He makes clear of the similarities between a religious person and a child; they both crave a father-figure who protects and loves them. According to Freud, the human psyche is made up of three competing elements: the Id, ego and the superego. The id is our innate biological instincts and desires, the ego is managing the id in socially acceptable ways and the superego which are the internalised societal rules and morals. Freud links these three components to the Oedipus complex which illustrate what he thought was the root cause of religious experiences. The complex occurs during the Phallic stage of development, which is around age 3-6 and is said to play a crucial part in psychosexual development.⁵ it is during this stage where they experience an unconscious desire for their mother. They become attracted to their mother and resentful towards his father who is seen as a rival. This envy and hostility towards the father lead to hatred and for the father to be gone. This idea is not accepted in society, so the boys end up repressing these desires due to fear of castration. Freud argued a way to attempt to gain control of these desires were to project the father figure onto a cosmic God. The superego essentially kicks in and replaces the father as the source of authority to God.

Religious beliefs and experiences can be seen as a manifestation of repressed desires and conflicted ideals. Freud also believed the father figure of a God serves for the protection and security they yearned for as a child. He stated that *"and that at the bottom God is nothing other than an exalted father"*⁶. The hatred for their father deprived them of a loving father-son relationship so this was substituted with a belief in God, who represents a powerful father figure. Overall, I think Oedipus complex isn't relevant as it doesn't explain for half the population. It is giving a possible explanation as to why some men are religious, but the Oedipus complex does not apply to women. It also dismisses the idea of homosexuality as he assumes a boy is attracted to their mother. Freud's theory is just an assumption which could be true to a minority of people, but it does not apply to most people and there is no evidence to show that it is valid.

Emile Durkheim, a French Sociologist, believed that religious experiences are a social phenomenon rooted in the dynamics of groups and social structures. Durkheim made the distinction between the sacred and the profane in which he believes every human has these two aspects and they are important within society. He saw religion as a mechanism to distinguish between these and argued that religious rituals reinforce social bonds and collective conscience. The sacred part of us are the things which transcend the humdrum of everyday life, they are set apart and forbidden that motivate feelings of wonder and fear and are surrounded by taboos and prohibitions while the profane part of us are the things that have no special significance, they are the things that are ordinary and happen in day-to-day life. Durkheim believed it is the sacred part of us that drive our brains to things of deep philosophical questions such as the meaning of life and this connects people and drives them to seek religion/ something beyond ourselves to answer these questions. Durkheim believed that to understand the role of religion in society, relationship between sacred symbols and what they represent must be discovered. Durkheim's approach to religion has four major functions: disciplinary, cohesive, vitalising and euphoric social forces. One function of religion is disciplinary, meaning religious rituals prepare people for social life by imposing self-discipline and a code of morality, together with a certain measure of asceticism. The second function is cohesive which means religious ceremonies bring people together and serve to reaffirm their common bonds and reinforce social solidarity. Religion is vitalising as religious

observance maintains and revitalises the social heritage of the group and helps transmit its enduring values to future generations. Finally, the last function of religion is that its euphoric and that it serves to counteract feelings of frustration and loss by re-establishing a sense of wellbeing and a sense of the essential rightness of the moral world of which the believer is part. Durkheim used totemic religion of Australian Aborigines to develop his theory of religion. Each clan had a totem which was represented by drawings or carvings made from stone or wood. The totem helped distinguish the clan from others and inspired feelings of awe as it represents the power of the group. To the members of the clan, the totem was a very sacred object in which they worshipped and would perform rituals for. Durkheim believed that by worshipping the totem, clan members are actually worshipping society. He believed that we worship a totem instead of society is because the clan is too complex a thing for people to understand and religious symbols are an easier thing to worship. Collective conscience is the shared norms, values, beliefs and knowledge that make social life and cooperation between individuals possible. When people come together in religious rituals they are reinforcing their social bonds. Through worship they express their faith in their common values, Durkheim believes the collective experience of religious society serves as the foundation for ideas about life's meaning. Durkheim stated, *"under the influence of collective enthusiasm, people are sometimes seized by a positive delirium which compels them in actions in which they do not recognise themselves"*.⁷ This suggests Durkheim believed religious experiences are collective and arise from the shared beliefs and practices of a community. Individuals may act differently when driven by the energy and influence of the group. This experience can help individuals to transcend their individual selves and feel part of something greater, which can influence their actions and beliefs. As a result, this can create a sense of purpose within these communities as religious experiences, rituals and ceremonies can create a sense of shared identity and bind individuals together. Overall, I think Durkheim's perspective offers an insight in the significant of religion and religious experiences in social cohesion and identity. Through his concepts of sacred and profane, he explains how they unify communities and social bonds.

William James brings a strong perspective of religious experiences, he analysed the different forms of experiences including conversion, prayer and saintliness and the effects they have on people and their lives. From James' explanation of religious experiences, the effects that arise

from them are powerful and beneficial.⁸ They change the lives of individuals in such a positive way. James took an objective stance; he made observations of religious experiences and applied them to God. A strength of this is that he manages to discuss these experiences without out being stuck having to focus on trying to prove whether God exists or not, he simply states that the positive effects of religious experiences, imply of a God. William James also offers a clear understanding and explanation of religious experiences, laying out his argument simply making it easy to follow and understand. He identifies common features of religious experiences, and they fit well with many historic and modern examples of experiences with the divine. However, philosopher Thomas Hobbes questioned how it was possible to tell the difference between talking to God in a dream and dreaming about God. James is convinced of religious experiences, making him willing to believe there is something greater to it just because it makes people happy as a result, when it could simply be a dream that we have mixed up with an experience with the divine. Another weakness is that there is no validity of religious experience. It doesn't help that a religious experience is defined as ineffable as it is hard to believe something is true from something we cannot explain through our words and imagine ourselves as each experience is different and personal. We can't prove that it is real as we are relying on word of mouth rather than hard evidence making the idea of lying is a possibility. Philosopher Bertrand Russel said *"The fact that a belief has a good moral effect upon a man is no evidence whatsoever in favour of its truth"*⁹. He suggested that someone can be positively influenced by a story that could be completely made up. The experience can have the same outcomes whether it was real or made up in their mind. I think a consequence of religious experiences being ineffable is if we can properly investigate them? There's no way to prove of its existence and no evidence to validify James' characteristics. Freud's argument can be seen as a valid way of giving a psychological explanation of religious belief as it is human nature to seek some kind of comfort and for many people that is in religion. Feeling connected to a higher power can provide great comfort and provide someone security. However, a weakness of Freuds's perspective is that it doesn't cover the possibility of miracles. Miracles are an extraordinary event that occurs which is neither explicable by natural nor scientific laws so is attributed to a religious experience from the divine. As Freud

offers a psychological perspective of religious experience, this does not answer how miracles occur. It doesn't link with the oedipus complex or the need of a divine father figure. As a result, Freud simply just argued miracles do not really occur. However, C.S Lewis argued that we can't possibly know that they don't exist completely, he said "*if there is any evidence, the philosophy that you bring to that evidence determines how you interpret it*"¹⁰. This means it is our underlying beliefs that shape what we believe about supernatural ideals such as miracles. There is no way to prove they do exist or if they don't, so for Freud to completely dismiss the entire idea weakens his argument. Unlike Freud's view on religious experiences' James' idea fits into the idea of miracles, which many could argue makes James' perspective stronger in this scenario. Many critiques may argue that Durkheim's theory is no longer relevant as it does not apply to the increasingly diverse religious sphere where there are more complex and industrial societies. His theory assumes a more homogenous society where shared beliefs are more prevalent, but in reality, there are many beliefs such as atheism, agnosticism, and various spiritual practices. William James on the other hand, is inclusive to all religions and religious experiences. He offers an explanation to every experience with the divine unlike Durkheim where he only applies his theory to specific groups and scenarios. Durkheim was also not concerned with the varieties of religious experiences on individuals but rather the communal bonds and activity that which arise from religious experiences.

In conclusion, the extent of which psychological perspectives contribute to offer an understanding of religious experience is questionable. The two psychologists James and Freud take different approaches to the religious phenomena. Out of the two I believe James offers a better understanding of religious experiences as his argument can be seen through many historic and modern-day examples. His characteristics fit into what we believe are religious experiences and his idea of the sick soul relates to why many people are religious. However, James claims religious experiences is considered first hand religion, but I think this weakens his argument as many people are religious who have not experienced God for themselves. I also think James leaves too many open-ended conclusions which allow for many interpretations of religious experience, making his perspective not as understanding. I think James does offer a better understanding compared to Freud as Freud offers too many controversial and far-fetched arguments. Freud bases his argument from bad assumptions and

is lacking in evidence as he doesn't test his assumptions. His famous Oedipus complex is based off one single case study and large-scale studies have not been able to verify if the complex is even valid. His theory then focuses on men with little work on the psychology of women. Lots of people who experience religious experiences are women such as St Theresa, how does this relate to the Oedipus complex? I think Durkheim's sociology of religion is quite influential and valuable as it highlights the social functions of religion, specifically the social bonds religion brings and its impact on communities. He emphasises that it reinforces the moral and social norms held collectively by everyone within society. It remains relevant to modern day society as we can observe how religious practices to this day continue to shape beliefs and values in many communities. However, Durkheim focuses on the social bonds and communities that arise from religious experiences, but a religious experience is a personal encounter with the divine. It is between a person and their relationship with God, and it shouldn't focus on how this leads to a change in society. Overall, I think psychological perspectives of religious experience offers a better understanding. Psychologists examine these phenomena in a personal manner and how they effect humans. On the other hand, sociologists don't investigate the actual encounter of religious experience but rather how they shape society as a whole. Therefore, to a great extent I believe that psychologists offer the best understanding to religious experience.

Bibliography

Books

1. William James, 'The Varieties of Religious Experience' P. 36. (1902)
2. Holy Bible (New International Version). Acts 9:1-19
3. William James, 'The Varieties of Religious Experience' P. 202. (1902)

Websites

4. Kendra Cherry (6th November, 2023) *Sigmund Freud on Religion*. Available at: <https://www.verywellmind.com/freud-religion-2795858> (accessed 11th December 2024)

5. Saul McLeod (25th January, 2024) *Oedipus Complex: Sigmund Freud Mather Theory*. Available at: <https://www.simplypsychology.org/oedipal-complex.html> (accessed 11th December 2024)
6. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy *Sigmund Freud: Religion*. Available at <https://iep.utm.edu/freud-r/#:~:text=The%20psycho%2Danalysis%20of%20individual,flesh%20and%20oscillates%20and%20changes> (accessed 13th December 2024)
7. James Bishop (11th May 2019) *Emile Durkheim – Religion as an “Eminently Social” reality*. Available at: <https://jamesbishopblog.com/2019/05/11/emile-durkheim-religion-as-an-eminently-social-reality/> (accessed 14th December 2024)
8. Revision World *William James Argument*. Available at: <https://revisionworld.com/a2-level-level-revision/religious-studies/philosophy-religion/religious-experience/william-james-argument> (accessed 16th December 2024)
9. Armand M. Nicholi (23rd September 1997) *C.S Lewis and Sigmund Freud: A Comparison of Their Thoughts and Viewpoints on Life, Pain and Death*. Available at: <https://www.independent.org/publications/article.asp?id=1668#:~:text=If%20there%20is%20any%20evidence,our%20interpretation%20of%20the%20evidence> (accessed 16th December 2024)