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Challenging Religious Issues

David Wilkinson
on New Atheism

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Are they Compatible or
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Supporting A-level Religious Studies. The St Mary's and St Giles' Centre

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Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

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New Atheism

David Wilkinson

In this article, the main proponents and arguments of new atheism are discussed with reference to their particular strengths and weaknesses and to earlier forms of atheism.

Specification links:
WJEC/CBAC Unit 5 Philosophy of Religion: Theme 1: Challenges to religious belief (part 2), C: Issues relating to rejection of religion - Atheism (=EDUQAS Component 2: Theme 2, F).
EDEXCEL Paper 1: Philosophy of Religion, Topic 2.5 … types of atheism; and *Paper 4, Option 4B: Christianity; Topic 4.2 Secularisation (2).*
OCR Developments in Christian thought, 6. Challenges: The Challenge of Secularism.
AQA Component 2: Study of religion and dialogues; 2B Section A: Christianity; Christianity and the challenge of secularisation.

Introduction

On the morning of Tuesday, September 11, 2001 a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda were carried out on the United States, killing nearly 3000 people and destroying the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre in New York.

The act would lead to a political earthquake and a controversial and tragic war with Iraq. But '9/11' would also lead to a new intellectual movement among a number of people who were concerned with the power and potential harm of fundamentalist religion.

'New atheism' was the movement that united a number of atheist thinkers into a close friendship and a shared goal: to oppose the influence of religion in the contemporary world. Its main leaders had up to that time all been highly critical of religion, but now Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett were dubbed by their critics 'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' for the concerted way they attacked traditional religious beliefs and practices. Beginning with the 2004 publication of Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, new atheism was promoted through best-selling books, the broadcast media and social media (Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; Harris, 2004, 2006; Hitchens, 2007).

Who are the new atheists?

Sam Harris (b. 1967) has a PhD in neuroscience and was the first to achieve popular publishing success. He attacks not only 'extremist' religion but also 'moderate' religion, which he believes is just as dangerous because it contributes to the problems of the world by tolerating and teaching things that are false. So, alongside Christian and Muslim fundamentalists, he also attacks Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestantism. His language is at times extreme: 'Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them' (Harris, 2004, p. 52). His books were consistently high on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

Daniel Dennett (b. 1942) is a professor of philosophy interested in the nature of mind, brain and consciousness, as well as the nature of biological evolution. He has argued that religion is simply a bi-product of evolution.

Richard Dawkins (b. 1941) worked for a number of years in zoology and is highly regarded as a brilliant populariser of science especially in the area of evolution. When he was appointed as the (Charles) Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, he gained the freedom to allow his intellectual interests to widen, not least in seeing science as in conflict with religion. Dawkins' seminal contribution to New Atheism is *The God Delusion* (2006), which peaked at number four in the *New York Times* bestseller list, number one on Amazon.co.uk, number two on Amazon.com, and has been translated into thirty-one languages. It sold over 2 million copies worldwide.

In contrast, Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) was not an academic but an accomplished journalist, prolific writer and debater. His book *god is not Great*, which was also a worldwide bestseller, is vicious in its arguments against religion, claiming that religious heroes such as St. Francis of Assisi, Gandhi, Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama are duplicitous, ridiculous, or at best hampered by their faith in any good they did or do.

Of course, there are many others who shared the intellectual ground and arguments of new atheism. From Peter Atkins, the Oxford chemist, through to comedians such as Stephen Fry, Ricky Gervais and Tim Minchin, new atheism had a wide influence. Even the physicist Professor Stephen Hawking became more outspoken about his atheist beliefs in his *The Grand Design* published in 2010.

While it would be fair to say that the popularity of New Atheism peaked 10 years ago, certainly in terms of its publishing success, the ripples of its argument continue to move through Western culture.

What are the central themes of new atheism?

New atheism is difficult to understand as *one* philosophical position. It is better to think of it as a broad position made up of some common themes shared by and promoted by a group of friends sharing a common concern. These themes will not be held with equal force by all new atheists, but you will see them in their writings or interviews. I will use Dawkins and *The God Delusion* to illustrate them.

1. You should be proud to be an atheist

Dawkins wrote *The God Delusion* in order to give fellow atheists the confidence to 'come out of the closet'. He feels that in so much of the world religion

has power and a privileged place in society, so that those who are atheists can feel threatened and discriminated against. New atheism gives the intellectual resources and leadership to make space for atheism in the contemporary world.

In *God and the New Atheism*, John Haught highlights important differences between the New Atheists and existential atheist philosophers such as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche and, to some extent, Bertrand Russell (Haught, 2008). While new atheists celebrate atheism and anti-theism as liberating, Camus, Sartre and Nietzsche are deeply concerned with what they see as the nihilistic cost in denying God's existence. For example, Sartre mourned, 'Indeed everything is permissible if God does not exist and as a result man is forlorn because neither within him or without does he find anything to cling to' (in Marino, 2004, p. 349).

In contrast, Dawkins comments, 'You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled' (Dawkins, 2006, p. 23).

2. Science is in conflict with religion

For the new atheists, science becomes a major way to attack religion. They fear the growth in six-day creationism and intelligent design, seeing this as a menace to science teaching in schools and our understanding of the world in general. But more than that, they argue that science rules out the *possibility* of religious belief. This is based on:

a. their belief in the 'conflict model' in history, which reads events surrounding Galileo or Darwin as battles between science and the Bible.

b. their sharing, with older generations of atheists, Auguste Comte's positivist philosophy and subsequent 'Logical Positivism', which sees science alone as the sole reliable source for true knowledge. There are therefore no limits of scientific theory or, to put it another way, there are no meaningful statements that lie outside science.

This conflict model of understanding the relationship of science and religion has been widely discredited by the historians of science (Harrison, 2015; see also Shapin, 1996, p. 195; Brooke, 1991, p. 42); and most philosophers long ago rejected Logical Positivism.

3. You cannot prove the existence of God

Dawkins gives a standard critique of the three traditional philosophical arguments (cosmological, design and ontological) for the existence of God. Here there is nothing beyond what was said by eighteenth-century philosophers such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant.

In this, Dawkins ignores one of the central tenets of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), which believe that you cannot prove the existence or nature of God, but that God is known by his self-revelation, particularly in acts of history or in scriptures. While some Christians have used the traditional proofs for the existence of God, most believe that God exists and his nature is love because of the evidence of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they believe was God himself become a human being.

4. Christian faith is irrational

In a now famous passage, Dawkins writes,

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. (Dawkins, 2006, p. 31)

He argues how this is inconsistent with a claim that the New Testament demonstrates a God of love. This criterion continues a tradition of an earlier atheist tradition exemplified by Thomas Paine's critiques of biblical morality.

In a much deeper critique, Dawkins argues that Christian theology is not a real academic subject at all, and should not be allowed in a university:

> What has 'theology' ever said that is of the smallest use to anybody? When has 'theology' ever said anything that is demonstrably true and is not obvious? (Dawkins, 1993)

Dawkins used this argument to object to the appointment of the philosopher Keith Ward, who joined him at the University of Oxford as Regius Professorship of Divinity. In robust exchanges, Ward argued that new atheism seems to have a deeply emotional antipathy to the idea of a moral and spiritual purpose for human life, which is rooted in a view of religion as anthropomorphic, literalistic, and life-, joy- and freedom-denying. But to characterise all religion in this way is to fail to make important discriminations between various kinds of belief in God (Ward, 2008).

5. Religion is the product of evolution

To explain the existence of religion, new atheists such as Dawkins and Dennett call for a scientific explanation. Using the tools of evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology, they suggest possible theories regarding the origin of religion and subsequent evolution of modern religions from ancient folk beliefs. The picture that emerges is that as we learned that we lived in a world of other minds, we extended this insight to ascribe to agency any things that puzzle or frighten us. This led to our postulating gods who were simply the 'agents who had access to all the strategic information' that we desperately lacked. Out of this came religious leaders and rituals to give us access to such information.

Thus, religion is not a response to the reality of the divine; it is a product of a human need to cope better with the natural world. Here again, while the language of new atheism in terms of genetics may be very different, the thrust of the argument is not too far from that of Ludwig Feuerbach, who argued, 'The substance and object of religion is altogether human; we have shown that divine wisdom is human wisdom; that the secret of theology is anthropology; and that the absolute mind is the so-called finite subjective mind' (Feuerbach, 2008 [1841], p. 270).

6. Religion poisons humanity

While new atheism rightly criticises acts of inhumanity associated with and sometimes tolerated by religion, including sex abuse, homophobia and gender injustice, it goes much further to claim that religion's very presence and persistence in a society is detrimental to the health of that society. Thus 'child

abuse' for Dawkins includes teaching children about Christianity.

Perhaps one of the main differences between new atheism and older atheism is a sense of anger at religion, and the damage it causes in the world.

Links

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5ZOwNK6n9U (Ricky Gervais and Stephen Colbert)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A4RxzzxYan4 (Andrew Brown and Dan Dennett)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJO4aYoaleg (Tim Keller)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ga4JvEMiXw (Sam Harris)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQox1hQrABQ (Chris Hitchens)

http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism.html (Gary Wolf, 'The Church of the Non-Believers: A Band of Intellectual Brothers is Mounting a Crusade Against Belief in God. Are They Winning Converts or Merely Preaching to the Choir?,' *Wired*, 14(11), November, 2006)

Discussion points

1. Is 'moderate' religion as dangerous as 'fundamentalist' religion?
2. From the point of view of a Christian, a Jew or a Muslim, what responses could be given to each of the new atheist arguments?
3. Is the view that 'everything may be explained by science' itself a *scientific* claim?

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Islam and Democracy: Are they Compatible or Irreconcilable?

Part 2: Arguments For and Against

Abdullah Sahin

This article follows from the author's analysis of the background to the relationship between Islam and secular democracy, and the problems it raises (in Challenging Religious Issues*, Issue 12). The present article details the arguments both for and against the claim that Islam can be reconciled with modern secular democracy.*

Specification links:
WJEC/CBAC Unit 3: /EDUQAS Component 1: A Study of Religion, Option B: A Study of Islam, Theme 2: Significant historical developments in religious thought, Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief.
EDEXCEL Paper 4: Option 4D: Islam, Topic 3: Practices, 3.2 The ummah as an expression of Islamic identity; Topic 6: Religion and Society, 6.3.
OCR Developments in Islamic Thought, 6: Challenges, Topic: Islam and the State.
AQA 2D Islam: Islam and the challenge of secularisation; Islam, migration and religious pluralism.

Introduction
In issue 12 of this journal (available at: http://www.st-marys-centre.org.uk/resources/Aleveljournal.html *or* http://www.saltleytrust.org.uk/challenging-religious-issues-journal/, I rehearsed the background to the debate over Islam and democracy, focusing on the issues involved. In this second part of my presentation, I intend to examine critically both the arguments offered for claiming an incompatibility between Islam and democracy, and those that suggest that Islam can be reconciled with modern secular democracy. A final section will offer an overview of conclusions.

Secular-liberal democracy as a political governance model
Modern democracy originated in the political experience and legacy of ancient Greek city states, which appeared to have lasted two centuries, but it was almost forgotten until being rediscovered

within the context of a long struggle in Western Europe (roughly between 16th and 18th centuries) that took place between kings and the Catholics and Protestant churches. This struggle produced political liberalism in which civil liberties, including freedom of religion, could be secured. It is important to note that the remarkable historical transformation that occurred then integrated ideas from the ancient Greeks, Christian institutions and the gradually-emerging secular structures of governance. The evolution of a constitutional state framework emerged out of various medieval administrative structures in ecclesiastical bodies whose authority and power were gradually transferred to an elected and representative system. Some central contemporary democratic ideas such as universal human rights would not have been possible without a creative synthesis of ideas from the Greek Stoics, the Judaeo-Christian view of the distinctiveness of humankind as God's special creation and the seventeenth-century Dissenters' call for freedom of belief. These fundamental ideas have gradually become codified in the French and American revolutions and finally accumulated in the modern declaration of human rights (Nippel, 2016).

However, democracy is far from being a perfect system of governance. In ancient Greek city states, women and slaves were excluded from civic engagement in democratic polity. Democracies can also easily become illiberal, leading to authoritarian populism and eventual dictatorships, where the rule of law, the separation and independence of legislative, executive and judiciary powers, freedom of opinion, tolerance of difference, the autonomy of civil society, the rights of minorities, and so on, are not respected. Governing authorities can be legitimated by a voting majority while democratic rights and civil liberties are not maintained. Scholars note that *isonomia* (equality of law), another ancient Athenian concept relating to popular governance (the rule of the people), has not been revived in modern Western political culture. More significantly, democratic governance requires a functioning civil democratic culture and some mechanism of accountability such as a free press, respect for the rule of law and independent opposition. The philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were sceptical about democracy, as it required the presence of virtuous citizens who could observe civic values and practices essential to maintaining the democratic culture of governance. They therefore warned that it might not function properly and could eventually turn into a system of mob rule (*ochlocracy*). In the recent history of Western Europe, the emergence of Nazism in Germany is a good example of how democracies could be used to establish authoritarian and dictatorial political systems.

The incompatibility thesis on Islam and democracy

The thrust of the arguments claiming the complete incompatibility between Islam and democracy revolve around the absolute sovereignty of God, emphasised in the Qur'ān and prophetic traditions, over all aspects of human life – including both the spiritual and political realms. This argument is known as '*hakimiyyat Allah'*, referring to the Qur'ānic verses suggesting that all authority and sovereignty belong to God (12:40). This is presented as evidence that the Qur'ān demands that Muslims should refer to the authority of God, the prophet and their successors, the *khalif*s, in all matters of

life (4:59). Furthermore, the foremost task of the Islamic political authority, the khalif who embodies both spiritual and earthly authority, is to ensure the application of *sharia*, the totality of sacred laws in Islam representing the divine will. As such, *sharia* is taken to be an *ahistorical* phenomenon, fixed for all times and all places. In this view, Islam has a clear political system called *khilāfah* that is enshrined in the Muslim core sources, the Qur'ān and Hadith, and was applied by the prophet and upon his death was meticulously followed by his rightly-guided successors. They all possessed certain spiritual, personal virtues qualifying them for the leadership of the whole Muslim nation, the *umma*. These qualities, it is argued, are discernible within the foundational Muslim sources of the Qur'ān and Hadith and the broader framework of Islamic Law. This argument also emphasises the significance of the ways in which these early khalifs were nominated and selected by a special committee known as *ahl al-ḥall wal-aqd* (the people of loosing and binding), a term subsequently used in Islamic political thought to refer to the qualified competent religious legal scholars that appoint or depose rulers. As such in this view, the *khalifs* – Abu Bakr (632-34 CE), Omar (634-644 CE), Uthman (644-656 CE) and Ali (656-661 CE) constitute the normative standards for the divinely-bestowed political system of *khilāfah* which is claimed to have been observed throughout the Islamic history until its abolition in 1924 by Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey – created out of the ashes of the Ottoman Empire in the image of Western secular nation states. For Shia Islam, both religious and spiritual authority are combined in the divinely-appointed *imams*, who are not subject to any form of nomination or election but are designated by *nass*, the divine scripture and authority.

It appears that such political theologies indicate a political governance system in which God is the absolute sovereign and from which all authority derives. Although in Sunni Islam there is no system of an official clergy and a church-like hierarchical body of religious authority, the khalif – by virtue of being the representative of God on earth (often depicted as God's shadow, *zilullah*, in medieval Muslim political and legal thought) – is viewed as representing both spiritual and political authority and enforcing the divine law (*sharia*). The thesis of the categorical incompatibility between Islam and democracy is based on the view that Islam has a clearly defined political system which appears to exhibit strong features of a *theocracy* as well as *theonomy* (that is, governance based on divine law, *sharia*).

Scholars often credit Flavius Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived in the first century CE, with introducing the concept of 'theocracy' when describing the features of the Jewish governance model. Josephus argued that, while mankind had developed many forms of rule, most could be subsumed under the following three types: monarchy (dynastic rule), oligarchy (rule by a certain group of people) and democracy (rule of the people). He held, however, that the government of the Jews was unique and used the term 'theocracy' to describe this polity ordained by Moses, in which God is sovereign and His word is law.

The incompatibility view stresses that democracy is based on the idea that political sovereignty belongs to people/humans and, as such, goes against the fundamental tenet of Islam that God is the universal sovereign over

human affairs. Furthermore, the principle of secularity in liberal democracy, which requires the separation of religion from politics (and where religion/church is assumed to be concerned with the after-life of individuals, and government their bodily presence and properties on this earth), goes against Islam's self-understanding as a *complete* way of life. Furthermore, in a democracy a vote of only 51% in parliament could introduce laws that contradict Islamic teachings. And in democracy the emphasis on freedom of speech and complete equality before the law suggests that religion may be criticised, even ridiculed. As seen from this perspective, almost all aspects of liberal and secular democracy can be looked on as being clearly anti-Islamic. It follows, therefore, that Muslims, regardless of living in a Muslim-majority or Muslim-minority society, should not participate in a system declared to be infidel (*kufr*) that resembles the pre-Islamic ignorance age (*jahiliyya*) of seventh-century Arabia. Muslims should, rather, follow the doctrine of *al-walaa wal baraa*: strict loyalty to Muslims and disassociation from non-Muslims, which is often referenced in the Qur'ān (e.g. 2:28). Moreover, this perspective insists on literally following the principle of medieval territorial juristic and political division between the abode of Islam (*dar al-Islam*), where Islamic law is applied, and the abode of non-Islam, of infidels (*dar al-kufr*). This has led to modern extreme religious groups becoming obsessed with creating a medieval-style Muslim political abode in order to fully apply *sharia* and warning Muslims to be in a perpetual state of resistance, if not war, against non-Muslims.

It must be noted that this line of ahistorical and literalist political theology within Sunni Islam has been confined to a few minority groups that developed within the context of a post-colonial Muslim world. *Historically*, Sunni Islam overwhelmingly formed what can be described as a quietist/passive political theology, which developed out of efforts to avoid any political disorder and emphasised the need to preserve and maintain political stability and the welfare of society. (For further information, see part one of this article.) The traumatic experience of Western colonialism and the subsequent interference of colonial powers in the Muslim world, however, have contributed to the emergence of a binary radical political reading of Islam that was formed almost entirely as a strong reaction to the West. Islam was reimagined along the lines of an early twentieth-century Western capitalist or communist system, having its own alternative 'Islamic' political, economic and social systems (nizam).

Gradually more splinter and rigid sub-groups have emerged out of this early reactionary revivalist and highly politicised movements that increasingly have adopted the literalism and violent outlook of the Khawarij, the first truly extremist sect in Islam (see the first part of this article). Their interpretation of Islam, however, has not found support among mainstream Muslims. But the growing aggressiveness of Western foreign policy towards the Muslim world, and increasing socio-economic inequality, poverty and corruption in Muslim societies, have helped marginal groups to become much more vocal, and even persuade other revivalist groups who had remained politically passive, e.g. the broad *Salafi movement,* to buy into their totalitarian and messianic-apocalyptic religious vision. The extremist ideas propagated by small fringe groups such as *hizb al-tahrir*, which has popularised

anti-democracy rhetoric, have gradually been embraced by the more violent international terror networks such as *al Qaidah* and, later, by the recently collapsed, so-called Islamic State, the deadliest form of contemporary Islamist politics.

In Shia Islam, there is a close resemblance with Catholicism and to some extent with some forms of Buddhism such as the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism in which, traditionally, the Dalai Lama together with the monastic body has constituted the political leadership. The divinely-appointed imams assume the role of the infallible papal authority. The Republic of Iran, established in 1979, is often depicted as a 'theocratic republic' and has a mixture of theocratic and democratic elements. There is an elected president and parliament, but the Supreme Spiritual Leader possesses more power than the elected president. More importantly, in the absence of an awaited hidden *imam*, a special religious council of religious scholars (known as *wilayat al-faqih*) was introduced to ensure an Islamic presence at all levels of the state.

The view that Islam and democracy are reconcilable

This compatibility thesis depends on first deconstructing the arguments put forward to claim a categorical incompatibility between Islam and democracy. The second element of the compatibility thesis suggests that the study of the Qur'ān, the prophetic traditions and the early Muslim experience of forming the faithful community under the prophetic leadership do *not* reveal the presence of a clearly-defined political system. The Qur'ānic use of the terms *khalif/ khilāfah* refers to the stewardship of the earth that has been entrusted to humanity. Humans are charged with the moral and religious duty of caring for the earth, and for its just and responsible management. Furthermore, the Qur'ān is clear about those principles and values that need to be observed in life by the faithful: such as justice, recognition of the dignity and rights of all, and bringing about a fair and faithful society. The Qur'ān does not prescribe any actual political apparatus to achieve these goals. It does refer to political powers and kingdoms with the word *mulk*, and presents examples of Israeli kings, such as Dawuud (David) and (Suleyman) (Solomon), upon whom God bestowed both spiritual and earthly leadership qualities. The Qur'ān also refers to a particular kingdom headed by a woman, Belqis (Queen of Shiba), without making any negative judgement about whether women can be political leaders. What the Qur'ān seems to be interested in is whether justice rules in these kingdoms, or not. The justice-focused transformative prophetic mission of the Hebrew Bible, eloquently summarised by the late John Hull (2014), is strongly shared by Islam. The prophetic spirit, through providing moral guidance and critical accountability to the earthly power, primarily calls for the formation of just and faithful societies.

More significantly, Islam was revealed within a tribal cultural reality where even the settled Arabs within the small city of Mecca observed an inherited tribal leadership system. Islam transformed this model by emphasising the significance of meritocracy, moral excellence and the virtuous – but above all prophetic – courage to facilitate justice and the wellbeing of all. The Qur'ān shows trust in human capacity and collective wisdom to bring about the means of realising these values in real life. The model set by the early rightly-

guided *khalifs* went beyond the usual tribal leadership of rule by a nobility, and stressed righteousness and meritocracy as the key criteria for being elected as a leader. One prophetic report declares that ‘even if a black slave assumes your leadership, as long he observes the values of Islam in his governance obey him’ and another that ‘there is no obedience to an unjust ruler’. The prophet himself was reported to have said that ‘among the greatest *jihād* is a word of justice in front of a tyrannical ruler’. All of which implies that rulers remain accountable to the people they rule. More importantly still, the prophet, as the statesman and spiritual leader in the emerging first Muslim society in Medinah, was prepared to work with the sizable non-Muslim population (Jewish, Christian and pagan Arabs) through consensus building to secure the wellbeing of all, signing the famous Medinah pledge/charter in 622 CE (Ibn Ishaq, 2002) safeguarding their welfare which some have considered to be a forerunner of modern constitutions. The Qur’ān explicitly states that consultation and consensus building should guide the social affairs of the faithful community (42:38).

Finally, Muhammad does not appear to have acted like a completely infallible ruler. A prophetic report depicts him giving advice to a group of date farmers who were eager to apply his suggestions in their farm. When the prophet’s advice seems to have not yielded the desired outcomes, the farmers were disappointed. Muhammad apparently smiled when he heard this and told the farmers that he had only shared his personal views on the matter, adding ‘you are better, more qualified to run your worldly affairs’. (Muhammad, by profession, was a tradesman running his wife Khadija’s business until he assumed his prophetic vocation.)

Muhammad’s native city, Mecca, was a commercial centre attracting tradesmen from abroad. When the Meccans decided to set up a special committee of virtuous men pledging to protect the visiting foreign tradesmen’s wellbeing and security, Muhammad, before his prophethood, joined the initiative. Many years later, after receiving the revelation, he would remember with admiration this committee, set up in the so-called ‘time of ignorance’ (*jahiliyya*). He is reported to have said that ‘if the committee was active he would not have hesitated to become part of it as it served the public good’.

The compatibility thesis shows significant variations. In addition to the above position that advocates an Islamic version of democracy, there is a more aggressive view that suggests Islam is compatible with both secularism and democracy; and calls for a Western-style secular political model to be initiated in the Muslim world in order to achieve much-needed political and social reforms. The first modern representative of this view was the Egyptian scholar, Ali Abdel Raziq (d. 1966), whose book *Islam and the foundations of political power*, originally published in 1925, argued against any role for religion in politics, and who famously suggested that ‘Islam does not advocate a specific form of government’. He focused his criticism both on those who use religious law as contemporary political prescription, and on the history of rulers claiming legitimacy by the *khalifate*. He also criticised equating secularity with atheism (in Arabic *la deeni*). Although he has remained a controversial figure, his ideas have shaped the later Islamic

modernist movement that called for radical social, political and legal reforms in the Muslim world.

Conclusion

Several conclusions may be drawn from this inquiry. First, there is a complex set of issues informing the question of the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Theological, political and historical dimensions of the topic need to be addressed by adopting an interdisciplinary methodological framework that is neither reductionist nor anachronistic.

Second, reflection on the Qur'ān and prophetic reports suggests the presence of a holistic embrace of the human condition with all its historical and cultural contingency. This includes a firm awareness that application of the core Islamic teachings, *sharia*, will remain context-dependent and open to modifications (5:48). Political theology in Islam fundamentally aims to educate humanity to recognise that they are entrusted with the stewardship of the earth; and calls for people to become catalysts for the formation of just and peaceful social polities where the dignity and rights of all are secured. Above all else, the right of God as the giver of the gift of life should be recognised, and this demand framed and justified within a clear ethical rationale. Bringing about a grateful, just humanity informs the Qur'ān's central message to humanity and, in consequence, God remains grateful to humanity (Sahin, 2017a). God is not in competition with human earthly temporary power. He is interested in seeing how humans will enact their freedom and power on earth: will they respond to the cry of the oppressed and marginalised, and bring about good deeds that are beneficial to themselves and others; or choose to cause mischief and injustice?

Third, the scriptural, theological and historical data suggest there is no real hindrance to a creative and critical dialogue between Islam and contemporary secular democracy. However, this requires going beyond literalist and ahistorical interpretations of Islam, particularly turning sharia into a mere body of regulations that are trapped within a binary way of framing the relationship between Islam and democracy. There is an urgent need to develop a reflective and contextual Islamic hermeneutic ('interpretation'), so that the civil and human-flourishing, justice-centred character of its social, political and spiritual message and values can be discerned.

Fourth, the active presence of human agency in politics should not be taken as contradicting God's sovereignty. There is often a considerable degree of misunderstanding about certain Qur'ānic passages that are too easily taken as pointing towards a God-centred socio-political governance that leaves little space for human agency. For example, the Qur'ānic passages that warn the 'People of the Book', and particularly the Jews of seventh-century Madinah, against ignoring the divine guidance they already possess and neglecting its authoritative application to their lives (5:44-45), have been repeatedly subjected to a naïve hermeneutic and used to declare the illegitimacy of a modern secular and democratic state.

Fifth, a simplistic imitation of Western secular democracy is not a constructive way forward for Muslim societies to reform their political systems. Such a reform requires adopting a reflective engagement with both Islamic and Western political legacy in a critical

manner. Critically approached, *secularity,* for example, unlike the narrower and more ideological concept of *secularism,* can be interpreted as a crucial inclusive principle informing modern democratic political order, and should not be seen as inherently antithetical to or a threat to Islam. The diverse models of secularity within Western liberal democracies suggest that, alongside other value systems, faith traditions can be recognised and their collective claims and sensitivities, to varying degrees, accommodated. Furthermore, in modern secular Europe, for example in Germany, Christian democracy is a well-established political movement that consolidated the formation of stable democracies in Europe in the aftermath of the second world war. Perhaps today in Muslim majority societies what is urgently needed is the emergence of an inclusive democratic politics inspired by the Islamic civic values of respecting human dignity (*karama*), consensus building (*ijma*) and observing justice (*adala*) at all levels of society. Similarly, in Muslim minority communities in Europe what is needed is to form a new Islamic public theology that encourages a *critically faithful* Muslim presence (Sahin, 2017b) that entails active engagement within the framework of secular democratic politics, and that is committed to preserving human dignity, and upholding the values of socio-economic justice and the common good.

Links

http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23810527 (Roger Scruton, A Point of View: Democracy and Islamic law)

https://www.bahasakita.com/islam-and-democracy-in-indonesia/ (Dr Nikolaos van Dam)

Discussion points

1. Having read the arguments for and against the compatibility of Islam with democracy, which position do you think is most convincing, and why?
2. Discuss, with particular reference to Islam, the general claim that religion and politics have such different aims that they should never be mixed.
3. Do you think that the organisation of civil society is important in democracies, and can religions such as Islam be considered as having a civic role in modern Western democratic societies?
4. What are the main weaknesses of democracy? Can you think of better alternatives?

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Some Non-Cognitive Theories of Morality

Jeff Astley

The article presents a critical account of the non-cognitive meta-ethical theories of emotivism and expressivism.

Specification links:
WJEC/CBAC Theme 1: Ethical Thought (part 2): Knowledge and understanding of religion and belief, C: . . . Meta-ethical approaches: Emotivism
(=EDUQAS Component 3: Religion and Ethics Theme 1: Ethical Thought, F. Meta-ethical approaches – Emotivism).
EDEXCEL Paper 2: Religion and Ethics; Topic 4.1 Meta-ethics.
OCR Religion and ethics Topic 4. Ethical Language: Meta-ethics.

Introduction

There are two types of *theory* in the study of ethics:

- first-order, 'normative' theories about what sorts of actions are right or wrong, or what kind of person one should be, such as utilitarianism or virtue theory; and
- second-order theories concerned with the *meaning* of calling actions 'right' or 'wrong', and motives and characters 'good' or 'bad' (meta-ethical theories).

Meta-ethics, as the name implies, comes 'after' ethics. It takes us behind our ordinary moral discussions about people and their behaviour. Meta-ethics does not itself make substantive moral judgements; rather, it tells us (for example) 'what kind of judgement is made when we make judgements about lying and adultery' (Benn, 1998, p. 13).

Many meta-ethical theories regard morality as essentially a cognitive matter, in the sense that it makes claims about what is true, about objective 'moral facts' – such as facts about the existence of a moral value or of the will of God. On these views, language in morality is 'truth-claiming'.

Non-cognitive theories, however, argue that morality does not consist of beliefs about objective facts, but is the

expression of our subjective states – such as our emotions, attitudes, commitments or 'stances' regarding some matter. Since moral language is not cognitive it does not make statements, and is therefore never (at least, not straightforwardly) true or false.

In making the moral judgement that a certain act is 'right' or a certain situation 'good', the speaker may be doing several things:

- *prescribing* the attitude other people should have to that act or situation, and how they should behave with regard to it;
- *expressing* the emotions or attitudes the speaker himself/herself has to that act or situation, and by implication would have to all 'morally identical' acts or situations;
- *committing* himself/herself to a 'norm' or agreement of being for (or against) all such acts or situations and of acting appropriately.

Non-cognitive meta-ethical theories tend to identify one of these activities as that which makes the moral judgement 'moral'. So, *prescriptivism* (Hare, 1952, 1963) regards moral speech as issuing implicit commands, urgings, commendations or condemnations that are universalisable, in that they apply to everyone in these same circumstances. If I say that rape is wrong, therefore, I am really prescribing the view that all other people should always take of an act of rape.

The family of views represented by the terms *emotivism*, *expressivism* and *projectivism* (see below) places its focus instead on the view that moral claims are essentially expressions of emotions or attitudes.

Subjectivism

For *subjectivism,* moral judgements are based on human subjective states.[1] Subjectivism may be either cognitive or non-cognitive.

Simple subjectivism is a cognitive account that treats our moral judgements as statements of facts about our subjective states (our attitudes or feelings): e.g. that you are disgusted by cruelty. Critics say that it fails as an account of morality because it understands values simply as personal preferences, and cannot explain:

(a) either moral disagreement (for 'I like violence' is quite compatible with 'you hate violence');
(b) or moral reasoning (including appeals to moral principles).

Our moral judgements are not infallible, as simple subjectivism also implies.

Some philosophers have argued that the problem is only that '"simple subjectivism" is too simple', and have attempted to refine and improve moral subjectivism (Rachels, 1993, p. 436; cf. 1999, ch. 3), developing it as a non-cognitive theory.

Emotivism

The first attempt became known as *emotivism*, the view that moral claims are not beliefs about but *expressions of* feeling. Thus, the claim that 'rape is wrong' is equivalent to uttering the word 'rape' and shouting 'Boo' or 'damn it', or shaking your head vigorously, revealing your moral disapproval of rape (Ayer, 1936, ch. 6).

Although in its earlier forms the theory concentrated on the expression of

[1] The term *sentimentalism* is often used of the view that 'evaluation is to be understood by way of human emotional response' (D'Arms and Jacobson, 2006, pp. 187-188).

emotions, most exponents agreed that it is better to understand a moral judgement as expressing an attitude or 'stance' (Blackburn, 2006, p. 149). *Attitudes* are internal states of a person that (a) include emotions (in various degrees), (b) are always 'for' or 'against' something, and (c) predispose us to behave in appropriate ways towards it. Attitudes represent our personal evaluations and orientations. In making moral judgements, then, a person should be thought of as (more or less strongly) 'voicing his own mind, that is, putting forward an attitude or stance as the attitude or stance that is to be held' (p. 151).

If moral claims represent the expression of our attitudes, there is room for *disagreement*. When people disagree over moral issues they want different things. People who have different attitudes towards (say) incest or war are often seeking incompatible states of affairs in the world (Price, 1969, pp. 409-412). In matters of morality, such attitudes are strongly held.[2]

'Disagreement is possible because attitudes are adopted and maintained, need to be rationally grounded and can be attacked and defended' (Urmson, 1968, p. 147). But what is the place of *reason* here? If morality is a matter of giving good reasons for our actions, *can* morality be subjectivist?

Ideal observers?

The ideal observer (or spectator) theory, which some trace back to David Hume, treats the judgement that an action is the right action as a claim that it would be approved by an *ideal* (impartial, fully rational and informed, consistent and sympathetic) observer. The judgement is therefore universalisable. While this is no longer a *non-cognitive* position, can it count as a subjectivist view? Perhaps it can, if only in the sense that it is ultimately still about our human disposition to respond to things.

In the context of emotivism, the idea of a neutral and fully informed observer might allow us to talk about the importance of developing *rational* attitudes, and even feelings. Such a 'moderate emotivism' might still claim to see 'moral judgements as emotional exclamations, and not truth claims. But it insists that feelings can be rationally appraised to some degree: *rational feelings* are ones that are informed and impartial' (Gensler, 1998, p. 67). Although this does not seem to be all that is meant by reasoning from moral principles, it is a proper use of the word 'rational'.

Sophisticated expressivism/projectivism

Allan Gibbard interprets the word 'rational' in a moral context as our way of endorsing an action as 'the wise choice', 'what we ought to do', which expresses our acceptance of the norms that permit the action (Gibbard, 1990, p. 9). This 'norm expressivism' is a sophisticated version of what is now called, more generally, *expressivism*. These more recent attitude theories of ethics recognise a gap between having and expressing an attitude or emotion, and its being *appropriate*. For such accounts, morality is not 'just' subjective nor 'simply' non-cognitive, although they acknowledge that the notion of objectivity in ethics is not the same sort of thing as objectivity in logic or science.

Simon Blackburn defends a thought-through expressivism that treats an ethic

[2] Stevenson (1944, p. 3) called this 'disagreement *in* attitude' (as distinguished from mere 'disagreement *about* attitudes').

as 'the propositional reflection of the dispositions and attitudes, policies and stances, of people' (Blackburn, 1998, p. 310). Blackburn maintains that there is 'no interesting split between values and desires' (p. 275). Instead, he claims that there is 'a staircase of practical and emotional ascent' of our feelings of disgust, anger and guilt, which climbs from simple preferences for tastes and smells, through 'aesthetic taste' (including our feelings, for example, for the sublimity of wilderness, and our contempt for advertisers who wish to project adverts into space), right up to 'cases of harm and evil where dissent is not tolerated' (pp. 8-14). He argues that 'ethical thought, the content of the ethical proposition, its motivational power, its authority, and the question of whether disputes involving different valuations are cognitive disputes or something else' are all 'better understood by expressivism' (p. 121). Unlike discussions of taste, however, ethical conversations properly involve *reasons* and *disagreements* (Blackburn, 2001, p. 28).

> Reasoning is allowed to assure us of the matters of fact within which our decision is situated. Intelligence is involved in appreciating what is really involved in our goals. Most notably . . . reason does assure us of the adaptation of means to ends. But it can be used to correct our understanding of what it would be like for ourselves or others if our aims were realized. (Blackburn, 1998, p. 262)

Blackburn's expressivism even treats moral judgements as *true*. Such talk is simply our way of reflecting on, criticising, rejecting or defending moral attitudes. But this need not imply objectivism. Blackburn describes his view as a *quasi-realism* that makes sense of the 'realist-sounding discourse' of moral discussion.[3]

> I allow talk of moral truth . . . I believe that the primary function of talking of 'knowledge' is to indicate that a judgement is beyond revision. That is, we rule out any chance that an improvement might occur, that would properly lead to revision of the judgement . . . I do not say that we can talk as if kicking dogs were wrong, when 'really' it isn't wrong. I say that it is wrong (so it is true that it is wrong, so it is really true that it is wrong, so this is an example of a moral truth, so there are moral truths) . . . All that is claimed, and that is surely uncontroversial, is that we judge oughts because of something that is true: because of the shape of our prescriptions and attitudes and stances, because of our desires, and because of our emotional natures. (Blackburn, 1998, pp. 318-320)

Arguing that 'the surface phenomena of moral theory' do not offer any obstacles to this *projective theory of ethics*[4] – indeed that they are 'just what we should expect' (Blackburn, 1993, p. 167) – Blackburn permits us still to talk of 'moral truths' (although they are not like truths in physics), and of 'moral knowledge'. For such a sophisticated exponent, morality cannot be said to be *simply* 'non-factual', 'non-rational' or 'subjective', since quasi-realism mimics the moral thoughts and practices that are supposedly definitive of realism.

[3] *Moral realism*, by contrast, is the view that moral judgements are grounded in the nature of things, and are therefore objectively right or wrong, independently of our subjective and variable human reactions to them.

[4] *Projectivism* is the view that values do not reside in the objective world 'out there', but are projections of our own sentiments or attitudes onto a morally neutral reality.

> There are features of the claim that a moral judgement is true that prevent this being taken as the claim that it corresponds in any way with a state of affairs. It follows that an attribution of truth to such a judgement must involve a different sort of assessment . . . [Yet] it is a complete mistake to think that the notion of moral truth and the associated notions of moral attributes and propositions disappear when the realistic theory is refuted. To think that a moral proposition is true is to concur in an attitude to its subject . . . To think, however, that the anti-realist results show that there is no such thing as moral truth is quite wrong. To think there are no moral truths is to think that nothing should be morally endorsed, that is, to endorse the endorsement of nothing, and this attitude of indifference is one that it would be wrong to recommend, and silly to practise. (Blackburn, 1993, pp. 111, 129)

Blackburn agrees that you can always ask of any feeling or desire whether it is morally 'good' or not, just as you can ask of any perception whether it is an illusion or not, but insists that you can only do so by relying on other feelings (as you can only judge illusions by relying on other perceptions). Nevertheless, the critics will still argue that 'however the theory is embellished, it ultimately seems to rest on nothing but attitudes – indeed . . . attitudes we merely happen to have [e.g. that we disapprove of cruelty]. Yet this must be false. Surely cruelty would be wrong . . . regardless of anyone's responses or attitudes' (D'Arms and Jacobson, 2006, p. 198). This points to the difference between an individual's attitudes (and desires and emotions), on the one hand, and her assessment of the *merit* of the object or situation to which that attitude is directed (its *moral* 'desirability'), on the other (Williams, 1985, p. 125).

For this reason, many complain that these accounts of our human responses need to be further supplemented by some reference to what is *more than* an individual's preferences, emotions, attitudes or prescriptions. But Blackburn contends that he does this, arguing that, although 'it is because of our responses that we *say* that cruelty is wrong', nonetheless 'what makes cruelty abhorrent is not that it offends us, but all those hideous things that make it do so': that is, 'facts' about the effects of cruelty (Blackburn, 1993, p. 172; cf. 1998, pp. 307-308). 'What makes it wrong to kick dogs is the cruelty or pain to the animal' (Blackburn, 1984, p. 218).

Links

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meta-ethics (Wikipedia on Meta-ethics)

Discussion points

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of understanding moral claims in terms of expressing (a) emotions and (b) attitudes?
2. Is the ‘ideal observer’ position defensible as an account of the nature of moral judgements? If not, why not?
3. Does Simon Blackburn’s ‘quasi-realism’ give an adequate defence of expressivism against the argument that moral judgements must be cognitive claims about what is ‘true’ and ‘real’?

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Religious Experience Through Art

Daniel Moulin-Stożek

This article introduces and explores religious experience through the example of Bernini's sculpture, *The Ecstasy of St Teresa.*

Specification links:
WJEC/CBAC/EDUQAS: Unit 2, Section B, Theme 4: The nature and influence of religious experience.
AQA: Component 1, Section A: Religious experience.
EDEXCEL: AREA B, Section 4: Religious experience.
OCR: Unit 2, Section 3: God and the world, the nature and influence of religious experience.

The origins of art as religious experience

What is art? Why do people make it? Why go to an art gallery? These questions are simple, but not straightforward to answer. As one of the most popular art historians of all time, E. H. Gombrich (2006) notes, most things you find in museums were not made to be put in them. Gombrich's book is to be recommended for several reasons, but here I summarise some key points relevant to the study of religion. Gombrich explains that art objects had quite a different function in their original contexts, and this was most often of a religious or ritual nature. Art in the Western tradition developed from the funeral decorations used by the ancient Egyptians. These practices continued through the Greek and Roman civilisations, led to various developments in the medieval and renaissance periods, and eventually evolved into the art we know in the present day.

This history immediately demonstrates art's religious significance. The primary purpose of the art of the ancient Egyptians was to provide a record for the after-life and therefore to preserve the main features of those who commissioned the grave. The idea of all art is, Gombrich argues, that images preserve something of the power of that which they imitate. The possessor of the image retains or projects something of

that real life power through symbolic depiction, sight, touch. We can see this principle in the earliest of cave paintings, in the classical period, and in the contemporary use of images and designs in various contexts.

Differences over the depiction of holy images

The creation of images of God has a conflicted history in Christianity. While Islam and Judaism see attempts to represent God as idolatry (worship of that which is not God), overall the Christian tradition accepts art as a way of apprehending and representing God's presence. The Christian tradition borrowed symbols of the ancient civilisations to do this. One good example is that of the halo we find on pictures of Christian saints – which was originally derived from the solar disc of the Egyptian sun God, Ra. It should be noted, however, that there was a strong movement of iconoclasm within the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Empire in the eighth and ninth centuries when religious and imperial authorities wished to destroy the use of icons on theological grounds, and most Protestant denominations today tend to avoid devotional statues and paintings in places of worship where the emphasis is mainly placed on the written word of God.

Some people believe that the first cave paintings and human-made structures – such as stone circles like Stonehenge – were both designed to evoke religious experience, and to express it. Rudolf Otto (1923 [1917]), who famously advanced the view that there was a universal category of human experience of the holy, the *numinous*, believed that art was one of the best ways to demonstrate the sacred. Architecture creates a space for an experience of the numinous, and awe-inspiring buildings can be found in all cultures past and present, East and West. Whether or not we agree with Otto and his predecessor, the early pioneer of psychology William James, that religious experience is in some sense common to all humans, an in-depth examination of art objects can provide a useful key to exploring religious experience in specific contexts and traditions. Theological differences can be discerned in the different styles of material objects, architecture and art.

The Baroque and mystical experience

'Baroque' is a term derived from a kind of fancy-looking pearl. It has been used since the nineteenth century to refer to a style of art that represents religious emotion through extravagant and luxurious imagery. The Baroque, a period straddling the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, emerged in Catholic Europe in response to the Protestant Reformation which had emphasised simplicity and reason in religion. Religious experience was an important theme in artworks in this style, given the desire of the Catholic Church to counter the Reformation by emphasising the emotional and experiential aspects of Christianity. In Protestant Europe, the reformers removed religious images and relics from churches. In Catholic areas, however, such as Italy where the Baroque began, churches became more ornate and lavish than ever before.

A supreme example of Baroque art is Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1645-52). (To see an image of this, please follow the link given below.) Like many of the masterpieces of Western art, this sculpture was commissioned and created to inspire worshipers in a church, in this case, Santa Maria della Vittoria in

Rome. It shows the Spanish author and nun, Saint Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) in the rapture of an encounter with an angel.

Teresa was a mystic. She reported a personal knowledge of God gained through her religious experiences, including inner visions of images, voices, ecstasies and raptures, which she then sought to communicate to others. She reported experiencing something tangibly 'other' than herself – indicating that there was another dimension to reality than that ordinarily experienced by human beings, namely, God.

Scholars have sometimes distinguished such a 'theistic', 'devotional' or 'dualistic mysticism', which seeks communion with but not identity with God and is perceived as *communicating with* an overwhelming loving presence; from a 'monistic mysticism' or 'unitive mysticism' that leads to a sense of *becoming one* with the whole universe or with a transcendent, impersonal absolute reality (e.g. Brahman). This distinction has, however, been criticised as over simplistic, and it is denied by those like Walter Stace who argue that theistic mysticism is the same experience as that described as monistic, the only difference being one of interpretation – that it is 'interpreted theistically as a seeing of God' (Stace, 1961, p. 94).

Intriguingly, Teresa (like some other mystics) described the ultimate state of mystical union, in which the mystic – having died to her/his lower self – lives in and through the divine, as a *spiritual marriage*: even using the symbols of rain falling into a river, or a river flowing to the sea, to illustrate this state. However, Teresa herself did not engage in or encourage a metaphysical analysis of her experiences, and one scholar maintains that, while she experienced both forms of mystical awareness, she 'value[d] more highly a theistic union of relation, not an experience of absorption where no differentiation remains' (Green, 1983, p. 235).

Gombrich feels that Bernini's emotional and sensuous sculpture may be a little excessive for viewers from the Protestant North. Indeed, the sculpture has a controversial history. Critics are divided as to whether the sculpture is intended to be slightly erotic in nature. Teresa swoons, falling back, and with rays of gold descending from above, a winged angel is poised, ready to impale her with a spear. Yet, this object faithfully portrays the physical description given by the Saint in her autobiography, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila* (originally published 1562). This is a famous work of literature, again a product of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, which emphasises the importance of religious emotion and experience through its passionate accounts. In the episode depicted by Bernini, Teresa describes her vision of an angel, which although given in detail, had – in some sense – an unutterable, but physical quality:

> In his [the angel's] hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails [stomach]. When he pulled it out, I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. (St Teresa of Avila, 1957 [1562]), p. 210)

The ecstasy of Saint Teresa as an example of religious experience

In his classic text, *The varieties of religious experience* (1960, first published in 1902), William James used documented examples of religious experiences as a way to begin to

understand the human mind. Texts such as Saint Teresa's autobiography provided the data to do this. Although James does not discount the possibility of religious experiences being genuine, he was interested in discovering how particular religious experiences may represent universal psychological processes common to all humans and therefore found in all religions (however, it should be noted that James draws his examples predominantly from the Christian tradition). According to James's analyses of famous and well-documented examples, mystical experiences have four typical aspects (pp. 367-368). The person who has the experience feels they are in the power of God or some Absolute and lacks control (passivity). The experience is in a sense incommunicable and can only be explained in metaphors and symbols (ineffability), and is short-lived (transient). But perhaps most important of all, religious experiences are not only out of the ordinary, they also point to significant greater truths (noetic), which cannot be gained elsewhere.

Bernini's sculpture illustrates James's categories perfectly. We do not see the ripping out of entrails, for that is only a metaphor to describe the intensity of Teresa's experience. The rippling folds of cloth – one hallmark of the frilly and opulent fashion of the Baroque – capture the movement of a precise moment in time. But this is a transient vision, appearing on a cloud, temporarily suspended in space, and will soon vanish. It is, although monumentally carved in stone, touchable and real, a glimpse of something else. Teresa is at the mercy of the angel and falls, powerless to interrupt the course of the event. Thus enthralled, the vision points to a revelation of knowledge that is otherworldly – that could only be witnessed by a saint.

Teresa was worried that no one would believe in her intense and personal experiences, and at times she herself doubted that she really could have had genuine religious experiences. Yet her writings captured not only the imagination of Bernini, one of the greatest of artists, and James, one of the pioneers of the scientific study of religion, but also many devoted readers. With the example of Saint Teresa, we can therefore see some of the various effects of religious experience. Although often contested and doubted, they can spur not only religious belief, but also wider cultural change.

Glossary

Ineffability: not being able to describe something in words.

Mystic: someone who claims direct experience of God/the Absolute.

Noetic: related to the mind, states of insight and knowledge.

Numinous: the experience of the holy.

Passivity: not having control.

Transient: short lived.

Links

An image of *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* can be freely accessed through several online art encyclopaedias, such as *Artble* https://www.artble.com/artists/gian_lorenzo_bernini/sculpture/the_ecstasy_of_saint_theresa

A translation of the Life of Saint Teresa may be found here https://archive.org/stream/SantaTeresaDeAvilaWorksComplete/SaintTeresaOfAvilaCollectedWorksComplete_djvu.txt

Discussion points

1. What, in your view, makes a piece of art, art?
2. What problems could artists have in depicting God in art?
3. Does all good art represent or try to create religious experience? What examples and counter examples are there to support your argument?
4. Is Otto correct in thinking that all religious architecture promotes the same sense of the numinous across cultures and faiths?

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