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Challenging Religious Issues

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Supporting A-level Religious Studies. The St Mary's and St Giles' Centre

Challenging Religious Issues

Supporting Religious Studies at A-level and beyond

Issue 2 Summer 2013

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Evil and Suffering

Jeff Astley

The article distinguishes different types of evil, before reviewing both radical and more mainstream explanations of the existence of human suffering and wrongdoing in a creation ruled by a wholly good God who is unlimited in power and knowledge.

Specification link: WJEC RS1/2 PHIL: Introduction to Philosophy of Religion (AS), 3. Evil and suffering.

Types of evil

'Evil' has been defined as 'that which ought not to be' (Hick, 1983, p. 93). It is what human beings avoid and disapprove of, and what they ought to avoid and disapprove of. To call a situation or act 'evil' means that 'intrinsically' (that is, in and of itself; if it existed alone) it is a bad thing, even if 'instrumentally' it leads to other good things. We may distinguish between:

- *Moral Evil* – human wrongdoing and the (physical) pain and (mental) suffering to which it gives rise
- *Non-Moral Evil* – which is made up of:
  Natural or Physical Evil – events of nature (disease, famine, earthquakes, etc.) that give rise to pain and suffering; and
  Metaphysical Evil – the unavoidable imperfections and limitations of a material, finite universe.

Disagreeing about evil and goodness

There is no difficulty in reconciling the existence of what (some call) evil with the existence and nature of God where there is no agreement over the fundamental value judgements people use to describe situations as 'good' or 'evil'. Therefore, in principle, the problem of evil does not arise for those who insist on a *subjective* or a radically *relative* view of value judgements, in which conflicting judgements ('This is good/right!' 'No, it is bad/wrong!') do not contradict each other. In practice, however, such agreement exists for many situations.

Some have claimed that the problem of evil is easily solved since goodness in God cannot be treated as anything like goodness in humans. Calling God 'good' does not carry the same implications as calling a person 'good', if:

- the word is used 'equivocally' (with completely different meanings) when it is applied to God and human beings; or
- goodness in God is analogous (similar) to human goodness *only* because God is the source of our goodness: as a climate is called 'healthy' because it leads to literal health in people.

Explaining evil

The theological problem of evil only arises in a particular theological context: the existence of an all good and all powerful, creator God. It is often expressed as a dilemma:

- A God who *can not* prevent or eliminate evil is not all powerful.
- A God who *will not* prevent or eliminate evil is not all good.

This dilemma may be solved by rejecting one or more of the following statements.

1. Evil exists.
2. There is only one God who is the supreme creator of everything *ex nihilo* ('out of nothing').
3. God is omniscient (all knowing) and omnipotent (all powerful).
4. God is all loving ('infinitely, perfectly good').
5. An omniscient and omnipotent God must both (i) *know* about all evil and know how to prevent or eliminate all evil, and (ii) *be able* to do so.
6. An all loving God must *wish* to prevent or eliminate all evil.

Evil is unreal

Some religious traditions claim that evil is an illusion of the mind (*maya* in Hinduism). However, this does not justify humans 'suffering' under this illusion.

God is not the only god

Dualistic and polytheistic traditions can blame evil gods or spirits for the world's evil, exempting the good god who has no *ultimate* responsibility for – or power over – them. Monotheism presents a more challenging problem (here 'the Devil' is only a created spirit who owes his existence to the only God).

God is not the supreme Creator

The universe is God's *ultimate* responsibility only if God created it out of nothing. Otherwise, natural evil may be put down to the recalcitrant ('obstinately disobedient') nature of any co-eternal, pre-existing material from which the cosmos was fashioned: as suggested by Justin Martyr in the second century and 'process theologians' today.

God is limited in knowledge or power

A *finite God* would not be able to prevent evil, for such a God could not exercise absolute control over the natural creation, unlike the infinite (unlimited) and therefore *omnipotent* God of traditional theism. William James endorsed this view in the nineteenth century. Process theologians see God as 'persuading' rather than controlling natural events, and extend freedom and unpredictability to all events in Nature – so that the free will defence (see below) applies throughout the universe.

Other religious thinkers deny God's *omniscience*, in particular questioning how God can know what we shall do next if our actions are in part free, undetermined and undecided. (Even God could not fully *predict* such acts; although if God exists 'outside time' all human history could be *known timelessly* – as if God is on a mountain summit,

seeing 'at a glance' the beginning, mid-section and destination of a road winding round its base; although its travellers can only see the part they are currently walking).

God is not perfectly good

John Roth writes, 'God is good, but not perfectly good, and . . . could be better' (in Davis, 2001, p. 31).

An omnipotent and omniscient God may not be able to prevent or eliminate all evil

Some natural and/or metaphysical evil may be 'an inevitable consequence of the sort of world in which [we] exist' (Ward, 1990, p. 55). Because matter occupies space, pain is caused (by the compression of pain receptors) whenever two sentient physical objects come to occupy the same space, e.g. with a cancerous growth. This 'mutual interference of systems', Austin Farrer argues, is 'the grand cause of physical evil'; and the universe could only be delivered from it 'by being deprived of its physicality' (Farrer, 1966, pp. 50-51). God chose, however, to create *embodied* creatures, and not only minds or spirits (e.g. angels) that do not occupy space.

Note, too, that pain evolved as a survival mechanism. Without its warnings, we would suffer more harm. (But the pain of a terminal illness cannot be justified on these grounds.)

Another argument claims that, if we plot our experiences along a *Hedonic Scale* (a scale of pleasure), even God could not remove the items we place on the lower (evil) half of the scale and still leave the upper (good) half intact. For if all the unpleasant experiences were taken away, we should inevitably re-assess the remaining ones – ranking some as negative ('to be avoided'). (However, the suffering caused by pain is not really 'on the same scale' as pleasant and unpleasant experiences – compare the painful experience of, e.g., torture or swallowing acid, with being with someone you don't like or drinking flat Coke.)

What this exercise does show is how notions like 'pleasurable', 'happy' and 'good' only have an application in a universe where there are situations for which such terms are *not* used (see below). There are also similarities here to the impersonal *Aesthetic Analogy*, which treats evil as analogous to the dark parts of a painting that are a necessary contrast to its brighter areas.

An all loving God may not wish to prevent or eliminate all evil

A universe containing certain types of evil may in some ways be *better* than a universe without any evil. If so, God would have a 'morally sufficient reason' for allowing these evils.

The Free Will Defence (FWD) argues that moral evil is the risk God takes in creating beings with real free will. It is better that God should have created truly free and responsible beings who might do wrong, rather than programmed robots who could be guaranteed never to do wrong. Further, God could not truly value our goodness or worship if we were mere extensions of God's will.

This assumes a 'strong view' of free will, restricting freedom to 'agents whose choices do not have fully deterministic precedent causes', so that it is 'not logically possible to create humanly free agents such that necessarily they do not do evil actions' (Swinburne, 1977, p. 86). ('Soft determinists' deny this, claiming that to be 'free' only means to be free of external constraints, even if our choosing and acting are completely determined.

For them, God *could* have created free people who were guaranteed always to do what is right.)

St Augustine used the FWD as an explanation of natural as well as moral evil. Because we all share a 'seminal identity' with the first human, Adam, 'man was willing perverted and justly condemned, and so begot perverted and condemned offspring. For we were all in that one man, seeing that we all were that one man' (Augustine, *City of God*, bk. XIII, ch. 15, section 14). All human beings, therefore, inherit original sin and original guilt (see Glossary) – and therefore rightly suffer pain, suffering and death as God's punishment for the Fall, and for their own sins.

Some have also extended the FWD to a fall of angelic beings prior to the creation of humans. Although the Devil's free actions remain his responsibility – as do ours – God must take ultimate responsible for creating such beings and allowing their continued existence. (In the FWD the moral 'buck' stops with God.)

Difficulties with this *Augustinian theodicy* include:

- a lack of scientific evidence for any perfect past without suffering and death, or a single historical Adam as the ancestor of all humans;
- doubts about the existence of evil supernatural agents, or whether their creation can be justified given the risk of their rebellion (cf. Vardy, 1992, ch. 14);
- 'I cannot be guilty in respect of the sins of another' (Swinburne, 1998, p. 41; see Ezekiel ch. 18).

John Keats applied the phrase, the *Vale of Soul-Making* (VSM), to this world. The concept is an essential element, together with the FWD, in the alternative liberal explanation of evil that John Hick described as the *Irenaean theodicy*, tracing it back to the second century St Irenaeus (see Astley, 2010, pp. 175-177). On this view, natural evil is necessary if the world is to provide an environment in which free human beings may develop, morally and spiritually, into the 'likeness of God'. Without evil in our world, there could be no virtue, because:

- in order to be properly called 'good' humans must be liable to temptation, not immunized from evil;
- compassion and courage, for example, can only develop in a world of suffering and danger;
- if God always prevented the 'bad' consequences of our 'wrong' acts – the suffering caused by our sins – we should never recognize the wrongness of our evil intentions;
- (according to Swinburne) natural evils must exist in order for humans to have knowledge of how to create *or prevent* moral evils (e.g. we need knowledge of the effect of wounds).

In a painless world:

> The race would consist of feckless Adams and Eves, harmless and innocent, but devoid of positive character and without the dignity of real responsibilities, tasks, and achievements. By eliminating the problems and hardships of an objective environment, with its own laws, life would become like a reverie in which, delightfully but aimlessly, we should float and drift at ease. (Hick, 1985, p. 307)

VSM theodicy views the world as a testing and often dangerous place – just the sort of environment that is required for moral and spiritual growth.

Additionally, someone whose goodness arises in making responsible choices and conquering temptations is good 'in a richer and more valuable sense than would be one created *ab initio* in a state either of innocence or of virtue' (Hick, 1985, p. 255). VSM theodicy also explains the chance distribution of natural evils, for if suffering were *seen* to be for our eventual good (as in this theodicy – or as a just punishment for wrong acts, as Augustine thought), it might never evoke our sympathy or caring help. But that effect is the whole point of it (see Hick, in Davis, 2001, pp. 49-50; Astley, 2007, ch. 5).

Eschatological Justifications appeal to a 'bigger picture' that includes the last things (*eschata*) of heaven and, perhaps, hell. Some regard the punishment of moral evil in a future life as restoring the 'moral balance' of the universe; others join Hick in arguing for a continued moral and spiritual development of individuals beyond this life, until all fulfil their character potential. Many regard the future good of heaven as such as to justify retrospectively all the evils that were a necessary means to this end (see Romans 8:18–23):

> the good of beatific face-to-face intimacy with God would *engulf* . . . even the horrendous evils humans experience in this present life here below, and overcome any prima facie reasons the individual had to doubt whether his/her life would or could be worth living. (Marilyn McCord Adams, in Adams and Adams, 1990, p. 218)

Glossary

Ab initio: from the beginning.

Buck, passing the: attributing responsibility for one's actions to another.

Dualism is belief in an ultimate division into two principles (e.g. a good spirit over against an evil spirit or material world).

Monotheism is belief that only one true God exists.

Polytheism is belief in a variety of gods.

Omnipotence is the ability to do anything that logically can be done.

Omniscience is the ability to know everything that can logically be known.

Original guilt is our inherited guilt for Adam's sin.

Original sin is our inherited corrupt tendency to sin.

Sentient: able to feel things.

Theodicy is a defence of God's goodness and power in light of the existence of evil.

Links

http://www.johnhick.org.uk/jsite/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=48:dzp&catid=37:articles&Itemid=58

http://mind.ucsd.edu/syllabi/02-03/01w/readings/swinburne-evil.html

http://instruct.westvalley.edu/lafave/evil_and_theodicies_tutor2u.html

Discussion points

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the Augustinian explanation of natural evil?
2. Is it helpful to think of the world as a vale of soul-making?
3. Is freedom worth the evil it may cause?

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The Revd Professor Jeff Astley, founding Director of the North of England Institute for Christian Education, ran an annual study day for over 750 A level RS students for many years. He is currently an honorary professor in Durham, Glyndŵr and York St John Universities. His publications include Jeff Astley, David Brown and Ann Loades (eds), Evil: A Reader, *London: T & T Clark, 2003*.

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Psychology and Mysticism: An Empirical Approach

Leslie J. Francis

William James's classic analysis of the dimensions of mysticism were expanded by Happold to embrace seven components: ineffability, noesis, transiency, passivity, consciousness of the oneness of everything, sense of timelessness and true ego. These components have been used to construct the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale. Readers are invited to learn about this measure and to participate in a new study of the psychology of mysticism.

Specification links: WJEC RS4 HE: Religion and Human Experience (A2). Religious experience ; RS1/2 PHIL: Introduction to Philosophy of Religion (AS). 4. An introduction to religious experience: Mysticism

Introduction

The notions of mysticism and mystical experience have been of central interest to psychologists of religion from the early days of the discipline in the latter part of the nineteenth century. William James (1902/1982), in his pioneering examination of these notions, laid the foundation on which later generations have built.

Subsequent work in the psychology of mysticism has followed in two main trajectories. One trajectory, like James's original work, has employed qualitative research methods. This approach has collected examples of mystical experience from a variety of oral and written sources, and has been concerned with identifying, analysing and describing its rich contours. The other trajectory has employed quantitative research methods. This approach has designed questionnaires and has been concerned with issues like measurement, correlation, and scientific prediction, using data gathered by these 'research instruments'.

The present paper is concerned with the quantitative trajectory. Contemporary quantitative research in this field will be explored by posing the following questions:

1. What are the assumptions of quantitative psychology?
2. How is mysticism defined and measured?
3. What is the connection between mysticism and psychopathology or psychological illness?

Quantitative approaches in psychology

Quantitative approaches in psychology are concerned to identify and to define psychological constructs with a precision that enables them to be measured and quantified. For example, measurement has played a key part in the psychological exploration of intelligence and personality. If constructs like 'intelligence' and 'personality' can be measured with sufficient reliability and validity (see below), it becomes possible to explore variations and individual differences. It is also possible to explore the connections or correlations between different constructs.

One strong approach within quantitative psychology begins by establishing a clear theoretical notion of what it is that is being measured. The second step is to 'operationalise' that definition by developing a set of survey questions that map closely onto the definition. The third step is to test empirically that these items work consistently to provide a reliable and valid measure.

Within the field of mysticism, two major instruments have been developed to measure aspects of mysticism: one builds on the understanding and definition of mysticism proposed by Stace (1960); the other on the understanding and definition of mysticism proposed by James (1902/1982) and expanded by Happold (1963). We will concentrate on Happold's definition here.

Working with Happold's definition

F. C. Happold's definition of mysticism embraces seven key characteristics (the first four of which were taken directly from James): ineffability, noesis, transiency, passivity, consciousness of the oneness of everything, sense of timelessness and true ego. Happold's definition was used by Francis and Louden (2000) to construct the Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale (MOS). This scale identified three indicators of each of these seven characteristics in order to construct a 21-item measure. People answering this questionnaire are invited to assess how much these items are true to their own experience, using a five-point scale. (There is a link to this questionnaire later in this paper, so that you can reflect on your own answers, but please continue reading the next part of this article before going to the questionnaire.)

Ineffability is a negative description emphasising the private or incommunicable quality of mystical experience. According to James (1982, p. 380), those who have this kind of experience report that 'it defies expression, that no adequate report of its content can be given in words'. The MOS accesses ineffability with the following three items:

- experiencing something I could not put into words
- feeling moved by a power beyond description
- being aware of more than I could ever describe

Noesis emphasises how mystical experiences give insight into levels of truth inaccessible to the discursive intellect. According to James (1982, pp. 380-381), those who have these kind of experiences regard them 'to be also states of knowledge . . . They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain.' The

MOS accesses noesis with the following three items:

- sensing God in the beauty of nature
- knowing I was surrounded by a presence
- hearing God speak to me

Transiency emphasises how mystical experience is brief, inconstant and intermittent. According to James (1982, p. 381), a mystical state does not endure for long, though they may recur 'and from one recurrence to another it is susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as an inner richness and importance.' The MOS accesses transiency with the following three items:

- brief glimpses into the heart of things
- transient visions of the transcendental
- passing moments of divine revelation

Passivity emphasises both the experience of being controlled by a superior power, and the undeserved, gratuitous nature of the mystical experience. According to James (1982, p. 381), mystical states are 'not passive interruptions, an invasion of the subject's inner life with no residual recollection of significance, and this distinguishes them from phenomena like prophetic speech, automatic writing, and mediumistic trance'. The MOS accesses passivity with the following three items:

- being overwhelmed by a sense of wonder
- being in a state of mystery outside my body
- being grasped by a power beyond my control

Consciousness of the oneness of everything emphasises how mystical experience conveys the sense in which existence is perceived as a unity. According to Happold (1963, p. 47), although it may be expressed in different ways by Hindu, Sufi and Christian contemplatives, the resolution of the dilemma of duality (two-ness) through this sense of the oneness of everything 'is at the heart of the most highly developed mystical consciousness'. The MOS accesses consciousness of this oneness with the following three items:

- feeling at one with the universe
- feeling at one with living beings
- sensing the unity in all things

Sense of timelessness emphasises how mystical experiences appear to have a timeless quality and to occupy an entirely different dimension from that of any known sense of time and to be wholly unrelated to anything that can be measured by what is known as clock-time. According to Happold (1963, p. 48), 'the mystic feels himself to be in a dimension where time is not, where "all is always now".' The MOS accesses sense of timelessness with the following three items:

- losing a sense of time, place and person
- being conscious only of timelessness and eternity
- the merging of past, present and future

True ego emphasises how mystical experience speaks to the deep, the true inner-self, and how such experience addresses the soul or the inner spirit. According to Happold (1963, p. 48) mystical experience gives rise to 'the conviction that the familiar phenomenal

ego is not the real *I*.' The MOS accesses this notion of the true ego with the following three items:

- being absorbed within the divine
- losing my everyday self in a greater being
- feeling my everyday self absorbed in the depths of being

In the foundation paper for the Mystical Orientation Scale, Francis and Louden (2000) draw on data provided by a sample of 1,468 Roman Catholic priests in England and Wales. This study demonstrated that the 21 different items hung together well to produce a reliable measure of mystical orientation. In a second study, Bourke, Francis, and Robbins (2004) checked the reliability of the MOS among a sample of 168 church musicians (130 men and 38 women). This second study was important because it demonstrated that the scale worked in a similar way among two very different groups of people. While the Mystical Orientation Scale was originally constructed to identify mystical orientation within a Christian context, a modified form of the instrument is currently being tested in Hindu, Islamic, Jewish and secular contexts.

Measurement in psychology

The Francis-Louden Mystical Orientation Scale provides a good example of a robust instruments of measurement within the individual differences approach to the psychology of religion. Such instruments have been designed to be both valid and reliable. A *valid* instrument is one that has been shown to measure what it claims to measure. A *reliable* instrument is one that has been shown to generate consistent readings (responses). The theory of psychological measurement (psychometrics) maintains that the multiple items used to create a scale sample a wider and more stable domain than that assessed by single-item measures. Scale scores are consequently less volatile and more dependable than the percentage responses generated from single questions.

One way of conceptualising scale measurements is through analogy with the thermometer. Consequently scales can be used to 'take the temperature' of defined psychological constructs within different groups and allow comparisons to be made between groups. For example, comparison between the two sets of scores provided by Francis and Louden (2000) among Roman Catholic priests and by Bourke, Francis, and Robbins (2004) among church musicians revealed higher levels of mystical orientation among the musicians than among the priests. Comparison between the three sets of scores provided by Francis (in press) among Christian, Muslim and secular young people revealed lower levels of mystical orientation among the secular young people.

The second way in which scales can be used is to explore how 'variations in the temperature' correlate with other phenomena. The next section of this paper illustrates this approach by discussing how quantitative psychology has explored the connection between mysticism and psychopathology, using measures of mysticism and psychopathology side-by-side and examining the correlations between the two (or more) measures. The research question under consideration is whether

mysticism is more likely among those who are psychologically sick.

Mysticism and psychopathology

A key question throughout the literature on mysticism concerns whether mystical experience is consistent with normal personality, or whether mystical experience may be association with forms of psychopathology. This question was posed by Caird (1987) in a way accessible to empirical testing by routine techniques available to measurement-based traditions within individual differences psychology, drawing on the dimensional model of personality proposed by Hans Eysenck and his associates (see Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975).

Two specific features of Eysenck's dimensional model of personality are of particular relevance in this respect. First, Eysenck maintains that psychological disorders or pathologies are not discontinuous from normal personality. In other words, clear precursors of psychotic and neurotic disorders are present within normal populations and are open to identification and assessment. Second, Eysenck demonstrates that normal personality can be expressed adequately in terms of three major dimensions that he called extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism. Eysenck's dimensional model of personality has been operationalised through a series of instruments, including the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975).

Eysenck's first dimension of personality is defined by a continuum moving from introversion, through ambiversion, to extraversion. The higher scorer on the extraversion scale is characterised by the test manual (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1975) as a social individual, who likes parties, has many friends, needs to have people to talk to and prefers meeting people to reading or studying alone. The typical extravert craves excitement, takes chances, acts on the spur of the moment, is carefree, easygoing, optimistic, and likes to 'laugh and be merry'.

Eysenck's second dimension of personality is defined by a continuum moving from emotional stability, through emotional lability, to neurotic disorder. The high scorer on the neuroticism scale is characterised by the test manual as an anxious, worrying individual, who is moody and frequently depressed, likely to sleep badly and to suffer from various psychosomatic disorders. In the test manual, Eysenck & Eysenck (1975) suggest that, if the higher scorers on the neuroticism scale have to be described in one word, one might say that they are 'worriers', and that their main characteristic is a constant preoccupation with things that might go wrong, with a strong emotional reaction of anxiety to these thoughts.

Eysenck's third dimension of personality is defined by a continuum moving from tendermindedness, through toughmindedness, to psychotic disorder. The higher scorer on the psychoticism scale is characterised by Eysenck and Eysenck (1976) in their study of psychoticism as being cold, impersonal, hostile, lacking in sympathy, unfriendly, untruthful, odd, unemotional, unhelpful, lacking in insight, strange and with paranoid ideas that people are against them.

Against this background, Caird (1987) drew attention to two conflicting views regarding the association between

mysticism and Eysenck's dimensional model of personality:

- The Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry (1976) regarded mystical experiences as signs of *poor* psychological health. On this account we would expect mystical orientation to be associated with high neuroticism and high psychoticism scores.
- Maslow (1964) identified mystical experiences as signs of *good* psychological health. On this account we would expect mystical orientation to be associated with low neuroticism and low psychoticism scores.

In this way, Caird (1987) threw out a challenge to the scientific community to check which of these two conflicting views is more likely to be correct. The scientific way to do this is to design a survey that includes both a measure of mysticism and Eysenck's measure of personality. While a single study makes a very useful start, the way in which scientific knowledge generally progresses is through a series of studies using the same or similar measures but among different populations. Currently five different studies across several diverse populations have addressed this problem and they have all come to the same conclusion. All five studies found no significant correlation (positive or negative) between mystical orientation and either neuroticism or psychoticism

These consistent findings demonstrate the value of patient replication studies deigned to build up an integrated body of knowledge within the measurement-based individual differences approach to the social psychology of religion.

Activity

The following web link takes you to a new survey designed by the author. The survey employs the MOS to explore the link between mystical orientation and psychological type (personality).
Please complete the survey and invite others to do so as well. Your replies are completely anonymous and confidential and will help to build up new knowledge about the psychology of mysticism.
http://www.st-marys-centre.org.uk/research/Onlinesurveys.html.

Glossary

Correlation is a statistical term concerned to assess the extent to which two independent measures vary one with another. A correlation of 0 shows that the two measures are independent of each other. A positive correlation shows how much the two variables move together in the same direction: for example, among children there is a positive correlation between age and height. A negative correlation shows how much the two variables move in opposite directions: for example, the further a car travels, the less petrol remains in the tank.

Individual differences: a scientific approach within psychology that draws on ideas of measurement to describe ways in which people differ. We are used to the idea of recording (say) people's weight, and calculating the average weight and range of weights of seventeen-year-olds. We recognise, too, how weight is related to height, diet and aspects of health and wellbeing. In the same way, psychology is interested in exploring variability in psychological factors such as intelligence, personality and mystical orientation.

Measurement is a statistical term that applies numbers systematically to assess specific constructs, as rulers measure the height of a table in inches and scales measure the weight of potatoes in pounds. (Here the unit of measurement – inches or pounds – has been calibrated to remain constant independently of the particular ruler of the particular set of scales used.)

Psychopathology: different branches of psychology are concerned with different kinds of questions; psychopathology is concerned specifically with psychological sickness or abnormality.

Discussion points

1. Using Happold's seven characteristics of mysticism, create an account of a mystical experience.
2. Look carefully at the 21 items used in the Mystical Orientation Scale and critique how well they really access mystical experience.

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Challenging Religious Issues
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Secularisation: Approaches and Aspects

Richard Bartholomew

This article analyses different understandings of secularisation, with particular reference to the challenges of science, differentiation, marginalisation, pluralism and worldliness.

Specification link: WJEC RS1/2 CS: Introduction to Religion in Contemporary Society (AS), 3. Religion and community.

Introduction

In 2010 the media reported that a disused Methodist chapel in Bournemouth had been turned into a supermarket. Had the church building simply been demolished to make way for a new shop it is doubtful that anyone would have noticed, but the juxtaposition of stained glass and shop shelving, and of church architecture and corporate logos, caught the journalists' imagination as a visible sign of how British society has moved away from religious belief to a this-worldly preoccupation with consumerism.

However, while the presence of disused and converted churches points to changes in British society – as do other buildings adapted for new uses or left to decay – the meaning of those changes is by no means self-evident. Some churches that are no longer needed by their original owners have passed to other Christian groups, or even to other religions; there are also new church buildings, including some large spaces designed as multi-media auditoriums to facilitate more modern forms of Christian worship. Meanwhile, although fewer people may be going to church on a Sunday than in the past, churches and chapels remain popular venues for weddings and funerals; and buildings alone – whether purpose-built for a religious purpose or adapted – do not reflect the full range of religious belief and practice, even within Christianity.

Christianity continues to retain a position of official privilege in the UK: the Queen is the Supreme Governor of the Church of England; bishops sit in the House of Lords, and daily Parliamentary business begins with prayer; official acts of national commemoration, such as the laying of wreaths at war memorials on Remembrance Sunday, involve religious professionals and elements of worship; those giving evidence in court will be asked to swear on the Bible, unless they choose another holy text or to opt out;

and it remains the law that community schools should hold a daily assembly, the majority of which should include an act of worship of a 'broadly' Christian character unless an exemption to provide alternative worship has been sought from the Local Education Authority for some or all of its pupils.

Some may regard such signs of 'official' Christianity as no more than the residue of a previous age; like a church wedding or funeral, they lend some aesthetic dignity to an occasion, but they do not really inform us how people make decisions in their day-to-day lives. One sociologist argues that 'young people are more likely to find ecstasy in a dance hall than in a church or invest more of their energy and wealth in following a football team than worshipping God' (Bruce, 2011, p. 81).

Disenchantment and differentiation

One approach to secularisation argues that religion has less influence today because religious explanations of the world have been superseded by those of science. In 1660 a scientific society was founded in London, known today as the Royal Society. It took as its motto *nullius in verba* (roughly, 'take no-one's word for it'); such a sentiment is not necessarily opposed to religion, but it clearly marks the difference between scientific method and appeals to religious authority.

The most famous conflict between science and traditional Christian belief came in the 1850s, with the publication of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. This was just one nineteenth-century challenge to Christian teaching: the same era saw historical and critical approaches to the Bible that brought into question traditional Christian beliefs about the life of Jesus and other stories in the Bible. Darwin largely lost his own Christian faith, and so did a number of other scientists and intellectuals. Today, the notion that religion is incompatible with a scientific education is most famously promoted by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins (2009) and his ideological associates, known as the 'New Atheists', believe that science should be used actively to debunk and discredit religious belief.

It is clearly not the case that science has done away with religion. Some religious groups or individuals either reject scientific problems out of hand, or have developed counter-arguments against mainstream scientific thinking. 'Creation Science', for instance, claims that scientists have ignored or misinterpreted evidence which confirms that God created the universe only a few thousand years ago. Meanwhile, mainline religious groups fully accept scientific discoveries, taking the view that science and religion offer complementary perspectives on understanding reality. The theory of evolution may itself be central to some religious beliefs.

More significant than any incompatibility between a particular religious doctrine and science is a shift in the underlying perspective on the world that science brings. As the sociologist Max Weber noted in 1918:

> One can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted. One need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits . . . Technical means and calculations perform the service. (Weber, 1918/1948, p. 129)

Industrialisation and capitalism have created highly complex and bureaucratic societies in which religious motivations

are marginalised from decision-making. Religious belief is 'differentiated' from society and becomes marginalised (Wilson, 1966).

The problem here is that marginalisation means making a judgement about where the centre should be. Just because the authority of religious organisations is diminished, it does not mean that religion cannot continue to have an influence through the individuals who still hold religious beliefs. In the USA, for instance, there is an official separation between church and state, yet politicians and public figures often make statements about their faith. Differentiation can be seen as a neutral concept (Martin, 1978): for instance, some Christians see the official role given to Christianity in the UK as an appropriation of religion that distracts from the religion's core purpose.

It should be noted that religious professionals are still recognised in Britain as serving a role at times of stress or trauma. In particular, the NHS employs chaplains who 'offer a service of spiritual care to all patients, their carers, friends and family as well as the staff of the NHS.' The chaplains' work also 'enables individuals and groups in a healthcare setting to respond to spiritual and emotional need and to the experiences of life and death, illness and injury' (NHS Careers website). If people – or some people, at least – feel a 'spiritual need', might that undermine the claim that British society is now secular?

Pluralism

For many centuries, religious belief in the West was policed by the authorities. Religious practices deemed to be 'witchcraft' were banned; those who dissented from church teaching were regarded as 'heretics' or 'blasphemers' to be suppressed and punished; the position of Jews remained precarious. Society was hierarchical, and rulers regarded their status as deriving from the will of God; it was therefore both a duty and a matter of self-interest in general to enforce correct religious belief.

However, enforcing conformity became more difficult from the sixteenth century. The result of the Reformation was not just division between Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians, Protestants themselves argued over the correct interpretation of the Bible resulting in a diversity of churches and perspectives. In 1689, the Parliament of England passed the Toleration Act. This granted freedom of worship for Dissenting or Non-Conforming Protestants, who had religious objections to the Church of England. Freedom of religion was not, however, extended to Roman Catholics, or to Unitarians (who believed in a form of Christianity that rejected the doctrine of the Trinity). Official religious discrimination also remained, in the form of Test Acts which limited the involvement of non-Anglicans in public life. Most of these barriers were removed in the nineteenth century, although a law barring the heir to the British throne from marrying a Roman Catholic was lifted only in 2013.

This gradual acceptance of religious pluralism can be seen as a sign of secularisation: the state has less of a stake in enforcing or promoting religious uniformity because religion is simply less important in a differentiated society. Instead, society is held together by networks of bureaucracy, law and mass media. Religion has become 'privatised', in that a person can choose from a range of options, and this is itself a sign of religion's growing weakness (Wilson, 1966).

As with differentiation, though, the acceptance of pluralism can also be positively embraced by religious believers as a good, rather than seen as a sign of declining religious authority. Some sociologists have also argued that religious pluralism in fact creates a more vibrant 'free market' in religion (Finke & Stark, 2005), which has in particular benefited Christianity in the USA.

Since the late twentieth century, pluralism in the UK has gone beyond removing impediments to passing positive legislation for the benefit of religious minorities. The best-known example is perhaps the Motor-Cycle Crash Helmets (Religious Exemptions) Act 1976, which states that Sikhs wearing turbans are exempt from the general requirement to wear a crash helmet while riding a motorbike. The state also has a continuing interest in preventing disorder; hence in 2006 it became illegal in England and Wales to incite hatred against someone based on their religion. This suggests that British society recognises the continued need to 'manage' religion, just as it has managed race relations.

Related to this, education about religious belief and practice is also increasingly seen as desirable in professions such as the police and social work, to deal with a religiously diverse population.

Worldliness

Another aspect of secularisation can be described as 'increasing worldliness', as religions adapt to the spirit of the age. Churches and alternative religions offer emotional uplift rather than the opportunity to dwell on one's sins (Norman, 2002); the lifestyle of religious people becomes increasingly indistinguishable from that of non-believers; religious groups develop into institutions run along principles of self-interest, resulting in scandals or moral compromises that undermine their credibility.

However, to contrast 'worldliness' and 'religion' is again to make a judgement about the meaning and purpose of religion. Religion has often had a strong this-worldly and practical focus; in some parts of the world, people regard religious observances as exchanges with higher powers in which the only attraction is the promise of good fortune and prosperity.

For some religious people, the willingness of churches to perform weddings for gay couples is seen as a shocking sell-out to modern, secular values, given the Bible's disapproval of homosexuality and Christianity's definition of marriage as between one man and one woman. Christians who support gay marriage, though, reject the accusation of compromise: rather, they believe that to deny the right of marriage to gay couples is to treat a segment of the population unequally and unfairly, and that this is un-Christian.

Conclusion

The 'secularisation debate' seems to be never-ending. A nation can have a state religion; but in the context of differentiation, that religion's true position may be little more than historical and ornamental. On the other hand, religion 'on the margins' can still be influential through its adherents, and indeed believers may welcome disentanglement from the state. Religion can be contrasted with increasing worldliness, but that is to make a judgement about 'real' religion. Pluralism can be seen as a sign either of decline of authority or of vibrancy.

This article began with a supermarket in Bournemouth that was once a church, a formerly sacred space that is now given over to a secular function. While the building makes for a striking image, we must also think about the customers and staff who now shop and work there. Do they have spiritual beliefs and/or 'needs'? To what extent would we find a diversity of belief among them? Does religion influence their life decisions at all? And how do they relate to the residual religious imagery that remains on display in their supermarket?

Links

http://hirr.hartsem.edu/ency/secularization.htm ('Secularization', from the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society,* ed. William H. Swatos, Jnr.)

http://www.secularismandnonreligion.org/ (*Secularism and Nonreligion* journal)

http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0078.xml (Simon Coleman and Abby Day, 'Secularization', at Oxford Bibliographies)

Discussion points

1. How would you distinguish between the concepts of secularisation and secularism?
2. In what ways has British society become 'more secular' over the last 100 years?
3. How might pluralism be related to secularisation?
4. How might (a) religious and (b) non-religious customers and staff respond to the residual religious imagery that remains on display in a supermarket created out of a former church building?

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Secular and Religious Meditation

Phra Nicholas Thanissaro

The article describes meditation in its secular context drawing on medical research, and in its religious context drawing on interviews with British Buddhist teenagers. A sample exercise in meditation is included and the importance of meditation in a post-secular society is discussed.

Specification link: WJEC RS1/2 ER: Introduction to Eastern Religions (AS), 4. Some central practices (meditation).

Introduction

Meditation is a mental discipline that helps practitioners let go of their normal reflexive, thinking mind so that a deeper sense of awareness, insight and relaxation can emerge. Meditation has its roots in the ancient history of many religions – however it is also practised in secular contexts for self-development and healing. This short article will try to reconcile the two aspects.

The first written record of meditation is the 5,000 year old Hindu *Vigyana Bhairava Tantra* which describes in poetic verse 112 meditation techniques for realising one's true self. More recently, in 500 BCE, Siddhartha Gautama gave up a privileged life to pursue spiritual knowledge through meditation, becoming the Buddha. He taught concentration and mindfulness meditation to help others achieve wisdom and encouraged people to extend love and compassion for all living beings. Subsequently, across Asia, meditation practices arose suited to different belief systems – to include Hindu yoga, Tibetan Buddhist visualisation and Chinese martial arts. In the West, meditation emerged in the Abrahamic religions and has more recently developed secular applications (MBCT, MBSR and ACT) and in the present day is regularly practised in hospital settings for healing depression (MDD) and stress.

Meditation has often been confused with hypnosis and deep relaxation. Although all three may make use of guided relaxation or visualisation, the focus of attention is different in each case. In general, the focus for meditation is a point *within* the space of the body (e.g. the solar plexus or the nostril), whereas in hypnosis the focus is *outside* the body (a fob watch or a spot on the wall). With deep relaxation, there may be no focus at all – the mind may just be distracted by pleasant mental imagery

such as an imagined beach scene. Also hypnosis is usually meant to result in a particular therapeutic end such as weight loss, whereas meditation aims to give a general outcome for the quality of the mind.

Meditation as a secular practice

Those interested in meditation as a secular practice are often attracted by its physical benefits. They often hope to recover from depression, stress or the recurrence of heart-attacks, or to become less mentally vulnerable to the inevitable ups and downs in their daily lives. Even in terms of brain physiology meditation has been shown to foster beneficial effects. Meditation has been shown to generate pleasant alpha or theta brainwaves (Lagopoulos et al. 2009). Andrew Newberg et al. (2010) linked meditation to increased activity in the left pre-frontal cortex of the brain – an area associated with concentration, planning and positive feelings. Lazar et al. (2005) found meditation not only increases left pre-frontal cortex activity but increases the *thickness* of left and right pre-frontal cortex – suggesting meditation might offset age-related thinning of the cortex. Bradley Peterson et al. (2009) found that cortical thinning is associated with depression, and meditation may offer an alternative to avoid or heal depression, which is usually treated by coaching, psychotherapy and medication. Evidence from University of Wisconsin Madison fMRI scans (Lutz et al. 2008) shows those practising long-term meditation on love and compassion may actually be able to *rewire* their brain circuits to enhance areas of the brain that detect feelings and emotions. Levenson et al. (2012) found meditation tames the amygdala – the primitive part of the brain responsible for the flight or fight response – in brief, that meditators are less vulnerable to panic responses when hearing a sudden noise. In Britain, on the basis of pioneering research at the Universities of Bangor and Oxford, the NHS has adopted MBCT as an alternative therapy for depression, but with mixed reactions (see Leader, 2008).

Meditation as part of religion

For those on a more spiritual quest, the benefits sought from meditation can often include self-realisation, meaning, compassion and mindfulness in life, higher states of consciousness and more creativity. Where meditation becomes part of religion, it has a particularly important place in Buddhism.

According to the Buddhist Sangiti Sutta (D.iii.219) three levels of knowledge are acknowledged:

- rote learning [*cintāmayapaññā*]
- learning by hands-on practice [*sutamayapaññā*]
- insight learning [*bhāvanāmayapaññā*]

Meditation has a central position in Buddhism because it is believed to be the means by which the Buddha himself attained enlightenment, going on to found a whole new religion based on these insights. The enlightenment experience of the Buddha is attributed to the third category. Such experiences, often colloquially known as ‘Aha’ experiences, are recognised by four characteristics: suddenness of onset (the experience is surprising and immediate), ease (the solution is processed without difficulty), positive affect (insights are gratifying), and the feeling of being right

(after an insight, problem solvers judge the solution as being true and have confidence in this judgement) (Topolinski & Reber, 2010).

In even the most prestigious of academic institutions, only the first two sorts of learning are generally offered – theory and experience – mostly concerning occupational skills or facts and figures concerning the world around us. However, self-knowledge and the ability to transcend weaknesses within oneself are restricted to the third category of learning, which requires a mind free of thought – because insight is said to arise from a place within, beyond the reach of the analytical mind, and necessitates the mind being made free of thought before that can be attained. Since thoughts don't go away by themselves, meditation is the only means by which the important third sort of learning can take place. By practising meditation, Buddhists feel they are following in the footsteps of the Buddha's enlightenment experience, and hence enter the stream of a living tradition of knowledge passed down continuously over the course of 2,600 years.

When Buddhists say that meditation is a means of self-improvement, often they are referring to the level of meditation known as 'meditation for calm' [*samatha-bhāvanā*] whereby the turbulent nature of the untrained mind can be pacified and brought to a clear focus by overcoming five unsettling influences in the mind known as 'hindrances': sense-desire, ill-will, sleepiness, absent-mindedness and doubt. Whatever the method of meditation, the initial task for the meditator is to free the mind of the influence of these five hindrances.

Having settled the mind and made it one-pointed, the meditator can hope to use meditation as a means of self-transcendence. In this respect, meditators often refer to the level of meditation known as 'meditation for insight' [*vipassanā-bhāvanā*]. In Buddhism, meditation is expected to be a means of transcending the unsatisfactory aspects of our human nature – impermanence [*aniccā*], suffering [*dukkha*] (you will already be familiar with this from your studies of the Four Noble Truths) and non-self [*anattā*]. Even within Buddhism, there is an ongoing debate about the enigmatic question of what is left of yourself once you have transcended your self. Nonetheless, there is some agreement that you do transcend the impurities in the mind that would attract you back into future rebirth, thereby gaining the chance to enter upon Nirvana.

As part of an ongoing project with young people in the UK, the present author asked Buddhist teenagers about meditation and the role it played in their religion. Meditation was discussed as a practice, but also as a state of mind. Where meditation was regarded as a practice (mostly by those who were Buddhists with Asian heritage) they tended to practise meditation sitting formally to develop a calm and focused mind and to free it of unwholesomeness, with meditation on the breath and loving kindness and walking meditation mentioned as common examples. Buddhists explained that meditation brought peace of mind; brought them closer to Nirvana or enlightenment; allowed them to be one with themselves; gave them self-confidence in the face of peer pressure; elevated pain threshold,

self-control and a more positive outlook on life; and that the calmness helped them solve problems. Most agreed that these benefits were an important part of being a Buddhist. In the words of Maya, a 15-year-old Sri Lankan Buddhist girl:

> I *do* meditate . . . I used to meditate at six o'clock. I'd wake up and sit in my room and just meditate – and it would get me ready for the day. It really does stress you, like during my exams, when it was my 'mocks' (GCSEs) – six o'clock, wake up, meditate like *five* minutes, and you are *ready* for the day. Literally, if I forget coffee, that is your stimulant!

None of the teenagers thought that meditation was the *only* important thing for Buddhists but said it was a lifestyle that should also include chanting, being kind and keeping the Precepts. Where meditation was considered as a state of mind (mostly by Caucasian Buddhists) the benefits mentioned included: *seeing* yourself without bias, stepping back from life, focusing, having a more mature perspective, being more aware, changing yourself to be more of a pleasure to be with, trying to be a better person – becoming calmer and realising new things.

The nature of meditation

Understanding meditation theoretically is like trying to imagine how food tastes by looking at the pictures in a recipe book. To gain more of an insider's perspective of *one* form of meditation, you might like to set aside 20 minutes to follow the instructions in the box below. Having tried this exercise, you will start to appreciate that mastering meditation is not the work of a single day. Most earnest meditators practise daily for at least 20 minutes, or go away on weekend or week-long meditation retreats from time to time to perfect their practice.

Conclusion

Sociologists argue that society in Europe is becoming 'post-secular' – that there is a re-emergence of religion in public life – although religion must often play by the rules of secularity. Meditation is one example of post-institutional spirituality which seems increasingly acceptable as a part of the 'deregulation' of religious ideas – an invitation to work with oneself in mind, body and spirit in a way that may be an increasingly important element of the lived religion of generations to come (Utriainen et al. 2012, p. 189).

A twenty minute[1] self-experiment in meditation

Before starting the meditation proper, test your ability to visualise by imagining a picture of the sun. Notice what colour the picture is. You should now understand the distinction between seeing with the eyes and 'seeing' with the mind's eye. With your mind, as well as your eyes, you can see pictures and colours. This is the basic skill used when meditating by visualisation.

Having understood the nature of visualising, adopt a stable and comfortable position – sitting cross-legged on a cushion or, if on a chair, sitting with your feet flat on the floor – so that you feel you could sit for the full 20 minutes without your body being under stress (lying down is not an advisable option). Have a clock close by, or set a countdown timer in vibration mode to twenty minutes on your mobile phone. Your hands should rest overlapping, palms-upwards in your lap. Make sure your back is straight enough without being completely rigid – as this helps to maintain alertness when meditating. Before beginning the meditation proper, read the instructions in the following paragraph through to the end, to familiarise yourself with the sequence and timing.

When you are ready, close your eyes gently. Take two to three slow, deep breaths. For the first few minutes scan mentally down through your body from head to toe, relaxing each muscle as you go. Spend a further few minutes emptying your mind of worries and concerns. For the remainder of the session, visualise the same picture of the sun you just saw, but this time as if you see it inside your solar plexus. To reduce any interrupting thoughts in your mind silently repeat a mantra such as 'brighter and brighter, clearer and clearer' as if you hear its sound coming from the centre of the imagined sun. Bring your attention back to the solar plexus whenever it wanders. In the beginning the mind will wander often. The untrained mind is like an untamed puppy which needs to be brought back and told to 'stay' again and again. However, by perseverance, the concentration is trained to stay with the object of meditation. Finally, at the end of the meditation period, when you notice that 20 minutes have elapsed, gently come to the end of your practice and open your eyes.

Reflect on what you were able to see in your meditation, especially changes that took place in the visualised image, and the feeling that accompanied your inner experience. You might debate how a similar quality of experience might be helpful to: (a) a Buddhist; or (b) a stressed person.

Alternatively, a 17 minute long, free of charge (and copyright), MP3 link which can be downloaded and played can be found at: *http://ordinationthai.org/en/media/audio/meditation/Meditation_Leading_2.MP3*

[1] Note that attention span increases with age. A rough idea of the appropriate length of time in a meditation session spent sitting still with eyes closed can be calculated using the 'as many minutes as you are years old' maxim (e.g. a maximum of 17 minutes for 17-year-olds).

Glossary

ACT is Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.

FMRI is Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging: a technique for measuring brain activity according to blood flow.

MBCT is Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy.

MBSR is Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.

MDD means Major Depression Disorder**.**

Solar plexus is a point in the centre of the diaphragm, two-fingers' breadth above the navel.

Discussion points

1. How is concentration in meditation different from concentrating on a video game?
2. Is it accurate to say that meditation is a way to escape the realities of life? Justify your answer.
3. How might the motivation to meditate for healthy people be similar or different from those meditating as a therapy?
4. What is the role of meditation within Buddhism?
5. 'Self' is a contested term in Buddhism. What might be the role of meditation for a Buddhist in (a) self-enhancement; (b) self-transcendence?

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