

Biblical Apologetics

Isn't Christian Experience Only Psychological?

A former colleague of mine (Richard Cunningham now chairman of UCCF), during his student years, used to go to Hyde Park corner and preach the gospel. After one such event a man asked to speak to him. The man was a psychologist and explained to Richard that well basically his Christian experience of conversion, a sense of God and so on was all perfectly explainable in very rational terms and so did not point to the actuality of a God in heaven.

This really unnerved Richard and set him thinking and researching. But what if you were Richard how might you reply to the psychologist?

Presuppositions about nature universe – bias
Historicity of Gospel
Explain the outward manifestations but not the inner reality

The thing is that many people would answer simply on the basis of their feelings. I feel the love of God, He gives me peace, I hear his voice and so on. But what about when for various reasons we do not feel his love or presence what then e.g. physical illness or we medication for mental illness means we feel very little emotionally?

One perceptive young law student once pointed out that one might experience the same feelings from a lamp. You can enjoy spending time in its presence, it gives light and warmth, we can spend time in its presence and it can bring a sense of peace, one even sense its presence with you wherever you go. We need to think, actually are we wasting our time here are we being deluded. Was Marx right that religion is a kind of opium for the masses – it subdues the soul.

Dr Who clip

The presuppositions of psychology and psychiatry.

Psychology comes from two Greek words – psyche and logos which literally mean soul words or means study of the soul or mind.

Up until the 1960's people were diagnosed with religious mania. As the name suggests the problem lies with religion not with the individual but in actuality is the problem with the individual and they just happen to be religious?

Psychology and Psychiatry have been influenced by atheistic science. The most influential of these is probably Freud whose notion was that belief in God

was ultimately a compensation for disappointment in our earthly fathers. Subsequent study of his own life showed up a Jewish born man who was deeply disappointed with his father, brought up by a Catholic Nanny which gave him a strong dislike for Catholic hierarchy and holding a deep grudge believing that anti-Semitism prevented him from gaining wide academic acclaim.

Yes psychology can describe Christian experience – wow factor of conversion experiences and the experience of being in a gathered group of like minded people and so on. But all it is doing is describing what it sees. It is what it cannot see that is the problem.

For example imagine someone describing the scenario between two ships communicating in morse code using lights but they did not believe in morse code. What they could describe is the number of flashes, the speed of the light, the effect of the atmospheric conditions and so on but ultimately it would never understand the higher meaning of it all which is communication.

The place of feelings and conditioning and faith

Eastern religions are popular with some because they promise deep peace for the practitioner.

Converts to Islam will give testimony to a completely changed life. As we have seen some Christian experience can be described in psychological terms. How do we know that what we experience is real. How do we know that God really does love us on the day we do not feel loved?

I mean take the example of a man who places a fried egg over his left ear and proclaims he has found universal peace. I mean it is hard to counter his personal testimony. He may genuinely feel a sense of peace from this egg on his ear. But do others find the same? Have millions of people for 2000 years found themselves feeling universal peace from a fried egg on their left ear?

You are that way because you were brought up in a Christian home or country. If you were brought up in a home you would be a Hindu. So its all about environment and so on – you are conditioned by expectations. But many people brought up in a Christian country or home reject the faith. Some eg Hindu people convert to Christianity upon hearing it for the first time

How do we really know we are loved? How do we know that our experience of peace and those of many other Christians is more than just conditioning, genes, memes, wish fulfilment and so on.

The Cross and the empty tomb. The footprints in the sand in Galilee. Our faith is based on more than our subjective feelings. It is based in the objective facts of history.

Part 2

The former Bishop of Edinburgh, Richard Holloway once said,

“This is my dilemma.... I am dust and ashes, frail and wayward, a set of predetermined behavioural responses programmed by my genetic inheritance and by social context, riddled by fears, beset with needs whose origins I do not understand and whose satisfaction I cannot achieve, quintessence of dust and unto dust I shall return, who can expect much of that?...There is something else in me; there is an awareness that truly, I am not what I am; and what I am and what I am not is what I truly am. Dust I may be, but troubled dust, dust that dreams, dust that has its strange premonitions of transfiguration, of a glory in store, a destiny prepared, an inheritance that will one day be my own.”

Also the author Kenneth Clark once said,

“I lived in solitude, surrounded by books on the

history of religion, which have always been my favourite reading. This may help to account for a curious episode that took place on one of my stays in the Villino. I had a religious experience. It took place in the Church of San Lorenzo, but did not seem to be connected with the harmonious beauty of the architecture. I can only say that for a few minutes my whole being was irradiated by a kind of heavenly joy, far more intense than anything I had known before. This state of mind lasted for several months and, wonderful though it was, it posed an awkward problem in terms of action. My life was far from blameless: I would have to reform. My family would think I was going mad, and perhaps after all, it was a delusion, for I was in every way unworthy of receiving such a flood of grace. Gradually the effect wore off, and I made no effort to retain it. I think I was right; I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course. But that I had 'felt the finger of God' I am quite sure and, although the memory of this experience has faded it still helps me to understand the joys of the saints.”

Questions and experience force us to think hard about issues of faith.

What happens when we believe? What happens when the Holy Spirit explodes on the soul of the believer?

Eph 2:1 “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins”

John 3:3 “I tell you the truth no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he born again”

Romans 8:29 “Those he predestined he also called; those he called he also justified; those he justified he also glorified”

2 Cor 5: 17 “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has gone the new has come”

Romans 5:6 “For we know that our old self was crucified with him”

Romans 3:25 “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement (propitiation)”

Romans 8:1 “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death”

Romans 8:15 “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received a Spirit of sonship (adoption). And by him we cry, “Abba, father”. The Spirit himself testifies that we are God’s children.

Eph 1:13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your

salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Gal 5:25 “Since we live by the Spirit let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Fruit)

2 Cor 12:9-10 But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

1 Thess 5:23 “May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through”

Mark 12:30 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.^[a]

John3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son”

Tell the psychologist – solid Christian belief and experience is often accompanied by sound mental health. On average a committed believer will enjoy better physical and mental health than a non-believer!