



- A) Explain the challenges against the objectivity and authenticity of religious experience (20)

A religious experience is any experience which is interpreted through a religious framework. They often fall under the brackets of visions, mystical experiences, conversion or prayer. People who have religious experiences claim that they were objectively true and factual, and that they should shape the way they, and others, see the world.

Contemporary scholar Caroline Frank-Davis created a threefold critique against the authenticity of religious experience. Her first criticism is 'object related' and relates to the 'object' which is being experienced. In most religious experiences, the subject experiences some kind of 'object'. This is often interpreted as being God or some kind of transcendent power. For Davis, the likelihood that a transcendent object could be interpreted is extremely unlikely as there is no empirical evidence to prove it. Influenced by the Hume's fork, she agrees that all knowledge must be sourced from empirically verifiable observation. For example, Davis states that it is as likely that someone would encounter an 8ft green alien as it is likely that 16th century Catholic mystic St Teresa gained a simple union with God. In this sense, religious experiences do not encounter objective 'truth'.

Davis' second challenge is 'description related'. This challenges the fact that most religious experiences are ineffable, meaning they can't be described using empirical experience. There are many examples of those who have a religious experience having to use analogy to explain what has happened to them, such as St Teresa's 'garden' analogies to explain how her prayers were like Jesus watering her garden. Davis draws upon the influence of the logical positivists to state that any language which is non-cognitive and unverifiable should be discarded as it is meaningless. In this sense, the accounts of religious experiences for Davis are meaningless.

Davis' final challenge is the 'subject' related challenge. In this challenge she criticises the person having the experience. She claims that we should not place too much confidence in people with such bizarre claims. These people, says Davis, should be tested for drug use or a mental health illness. Failing this, the subject could just be lying for material gain or attention. Davis uses the example of St Bernadette who saw Our Lady at Lourdes as an example of a subject related concern. St Bernadette had an apparition which has led to millions of Catholics to visit Lourdes each year, however, psychologists have since suggested that St Bernadette was schizophrenic, and susceptible to visions. Again, this shows how the authenticity of the experience is undermined as the vision simply wasn't real.

Other general challenges are made on the grounds of delusional claims. This is similar to Davis' 'subject related' challenge and reinforces the idea that many religious experiences sound unlikely, and delusional. The person may even have been taking drugs or some other hallucinogenic. This means that the experience isn't objectively true. This challenge is supported by the fact that many people who have religious experiences go on to profit from them in some way or another. For example, the vision of Our Lady to 3 young peasant children in Fatima, Portugal, turned the once remote and deprived village into a tourist hotspot attracting millions of annual visitors.