

Analyse the role of personal experience in defining and defending Christian belief.

Firstly

Christians say that personal experience plays a necessary role in defining and defending Christian faith because Jesus offers a heart-changing and life-transforming relationship with God [1]. This essay considers the Christian doctrines and a critique will appear at the end.

Christianity is based on faith which is seen in scripture as a personal experience - a person to person connection and union - of Jesus Christ our saviour who gives us everlasting life with God the source of love and happiness even here and now. Let us explore how we can determine what the gospel says and its veracity through the personal experience of God.

Defining Christian belief means working out what a Christian needs to believe to be a real or proper Christian. If there is no way to define what Christians believe then it is a waste of time trying to defend Christian belief.

The person hears the gospel or reads it. The gospel is communicated to the person.

The person will find the gospel to be a non-gospel unless it speaks to her or his own experience. Christians say that the gospel promises an experience of the power of God to transform you so that you are good in the midst of an ungodly world, and add that this cannot happen unless you have tasted the anxieties and experienced the temptations that may come from an ungodly world.

The Bible is a record of the personal religious experiences of a wide range of people. The Bible claims to be the word of God. God supposedly worked in people to reveal his truth through their personal experiences. You cannot experience what they experienced for it was their experience but you can be inspired to have religious experiences of your own.

Spiritual Experience Matters

What do Christians say on the topic of religious experience? Let us outline their dubious teachings.

They think that though there are such things as misleading spiritual experiences they know their own are real for there is evidence and proof that they are. They think they find the doctrines of needing a loving saviour such as Jesus who dies for their sins and forgives them in their experience. Their experience helps them to define what Christians believe. Faith is true for Christians and is based on the presence of God in one's heart. The one trusted lives inside making it a very intimate connection.

God is love - therefore we can experience his love and therefore him [2].

Mere belief in Jesus will do nothing for us - it's mere intellectual assent [3]. It isn't enough for me to know that Jesus loves me - I must sense and feel it too. I need to experience his love and have a personal relationship with him [4].

If experience helps me discover Christian truth, then I see that we are not the makers of truth but its receivers [5]. I will never be confident in my experience of God unless I accept that "truth is not merely a product of our imagination or our personal experiences" [6]. My encounter with God is a gift from him [7].

Christianity gives meaning to my life rescuing me from anxiety that senses that life is meaningless. This experience of angst is "a real point of contact for the gospel". [8] If God helps me to come to him, that delivers me from fearing that I'll never be good enough.

Religious experience should strengthen faith and help me change my life and grow in holiness. Experience when based on emotion can mislead [9] so I need to check my experiences against God's revealed word [10].

I will not follow the gospel unless I am attracted by the joy and compassion and integrity that God will bestow on the one who follows him and only God can satisfy the need for happiness and holiness [11]. I have suppressed my innate knowledge of God and the basic truths and through encountering God I can tune into it once more and be transformed spiritually [12].

The experience of commonsense informs me not to expect myself to become perfect in holiness and wisdom immediately but to co-operate with God as he helps me progress.

These considerations tell me that the true gospel should be about salvation by God's forgiveness and God gradually healing my heart of evil tendency.

Personal Experience of Sinfulness

A relationship is two-way. God loves me and I have to love him. In my experience a one-sided relationship is not a relationship at all.

Sin is a refusal to be experience a true relationship with God. God is all-love therefore to be unloving is rejecting God's quality which is love and rejecting God.

Christ said we must love the Lord with all our being - love him completely without reserve or limit [13]. To deny him the love he deserves is a great evil and injustice. Christ is asserting that a relationship with God is far more intimate and important than marriage. Sin breaks that relationship [14]. It seems harsh to say that I break the marriage by even one sin. A single moment of adultery can break a marriage relationship so one sin can constitute a break from God.

The adulterer may not understand the pain he has caused his wife or the damage he has done to the marriage. He may even blame her for wrecking the marriage. An analogy to that is how sinners may not understand the extent of their own opposition to God. We often invent a God that suits ourselves and worship this idol.

I need to understand the damage I have done to see that I need a saviour to make up for my sins thus reconciling me to God. We can read scripture texts that say there is nobody good at all and feel that they do not ring true. The only thing that can help us experience the truth is the light of the Holy Spirit. He opens our hearts and minds to the meaning of scripture so that we can truly absorb it. And he will remind us of experiences that verify and clarify the meaning of scripture and grant us similar experiences. We relate what we read to our own experience and then everything comes together.

We will be enabled to see that though we should all be "married" to God from the first moment of our existence we have constantly refused to let that happen.

The Experience of Needing a Saviour

If we sense how unlimited and totally wonderful God is, we will realise that there is nothing we can do to make up our sins to him [15]. Adultery against the perfect wife is far more horrendous than adultery against a lazy wife. Imagine how heinous it is against the all-perfect and all-knowing God!

Sensing that God would not abandon us to our sins [16] is sensing he must have done something to set us free from them and the impossible burden of having to atone for them. God will have to reach down to us to save us for we cannot reach up to him.

If the perfect wife could suffer and sacrifice to mend the marriage she would. God was able to become incarnate in Jesus to make right what we could not make right. The experience of needing salvation involves sensing and recognising the love of God.

The Cross

If we sense how grave our sins are even despite their veneer of fun and mild mischief, we will see that if they are really bad then they are intolerable. They are part of us meaning that they make us intolerable too as long as we persist in sin [17].

The Christian believes that sin deserves punishment and death [18] and that Jesus took our punishment and died on the cross so that we would be free from the penalty our sins have earned.

Pagans who never heard of Jesus can still sense that somebody is offering them salvation.

Before we receive salvation from our punishment, we will sense that God has done something to achieve it. But we may not work out the details or how unless God reveals it to us. So God reveals in the Bible how Jesus died for sins. He reveals it in the text and when we read the text he tells us what it means in our hearts and his Spirit testifies that it is true.

Finally

We never really come to God without experiencing something of what he is like.

True Christianity is not just about belief but about experiencing and enjoying a personal relationship with Jesus Christ based on trust and love. This relationship is sustained by the supernatural power of God when he enlightens our minds and heals the weaknesses in us that arise from human nature. It's not a prideful and unsatisfactory human effort to reach God but is about God reaching down to save us.

The Christian's personal experience of conversion helps us see what the gospel should be and religious experience under the guidance of the Holy Spirit validates the gospel [19].

CRITIQUE

The essay could be summarised as "Personal experience of Jesus Christ arouses faith in us. Even if we have difficulty with some biblical and Christian teachings, the experience is what we hold on to and it can drive us to seek answers or simply settle for trusting God."

This is really turning you into an infallible authority on religion. It is about trust in yourself disguised as trust in God.

As for experiencing God's love, correct theism does not define God by what he is but by what he is not. Thus God strictly speaking is not love. The God experienced by Christians is their own imagination.

Religious experience is a very subjective way to judge the truth of a faith. Hindus experience Hinduism as true though it denies that there was anything special about Jesus. Christians claim an experience in which they find that Jesus alone matters.

Most devotees of religious experience care little for careful testing to check the truth and validity of the experience. Some argue that the experience is true if it fits into a plausible and sensible worldview and reflects that worldview. They argue that you should not depend on the experience of Jesus having forgiven your sins even if he has. They say you must look at the evidence that he really was the revelation of God and sent to save sinners. So what you do is you do not depend on the experience alone. It should motivate you to check it out. Genuine faith has nothing to fear from investigation. Most religious experience is really just a selfish experience without a healthy regard for truth. We must be sceptical if a person claims their experience is holy. After all they are asking for praise if they claim such a thing!

Christians believe that religious experience is misleading if it contradicts the Bible. So if you have an experience you check it out against the Bible and you must check out the Bible to make sure its message is good and sensible and does not contradict any historical or scientific or psychological facts. So religious experience is declared in one way to be less important than the Bible. And yet as the Bible is no good to anybody who has no experience of God the experience is in a sense more important. For the Christian, religious experience is only valid if it is endorsed by scripture. That is how it reconciles the need for a divinely inspired guide such as the Bible and religious experience. But the fact remains that Christianity trivialises the historical and philosophical evidence against the Bible.

It is not true that we all suffer from a crisis of meaning, that we think our lives have no purpose. And if we do, Christianity promotes itself as a solution for that problem. What is that but exploitation of the vulnerable?

The scheme given by Christians looks logical but it is not. It assumes for example the validity of punishment. We are supposed to see we deserve punishment and plead with God to make somebody else pay the debt for it. It also presumes that it is fair for an innocent person to suffer for the guilty. What is to stop somebody assuming something different? Why assume the atoner has to be anybody like Jesus?

Devotees of religious experience allege that they have experienced that the heart of reality is a personal being or conscious God - a God who experiences things happening in the universe. They think their experiences confirm that a conscious mind is at the heart of reality. But in fact to accept the validity of experience is to accept the design argument as true. In other words, God designs the experience he gives you so the experience cannot be separated from the question of if the design argument is true.

"Drugs give you the illusion of getting closer to God, but ultimately kill you" says Madonna. Obviously religious experience is overrated! People thinking they can get close to God is no good if it leads to too many using drugs to find him.

Bibliography

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McGrath, A. Bridge-Building (Inter-Varsity Press, 1954)

[1] Reid, A. Apologetics (Moore Theological College, 1996), p. 23, “Christian conversion can only take place through the work of the Spirit of God who takes the word about Christ and turns it into an encounter with Christ”

[2] 1 John 4:8, Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

[3] James 2:19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

[4] John 10:10, I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

[5] Jeremiah 10:23 Lord, I know that people’s lives are not their own; it is not for them to direct their steps.

[6] Theology Matters (A Publication of Presbyterians for Faith, Family and Ministry, Vol 10 No 5 • Nov/Dec 2004) p. 12

[7] Ephesians 2:8-10 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

[8] McGrath, A. Bridge-Building (Inter-Varsity Press, 1954), p. 70

[9] Proverbs 28:2 Those who trust in themselves are fools, but those who walk in wisdom are kept safe.

[10] Acts 17:11 Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

[11] McGrath, A. Bridge-Building (Inter-Varsity Press, 1954), p. 57

[12] Romans 1:19-21, “Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

[13] Luke 10:27

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind and

Proverbs 3:5-6, Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

[14] Is 59:1,2 Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

[15] Gal 2:16 know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.

[16] 1 Timothy 2:4, God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

[17] Romans 8:10 And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. KJV

[18] Romans 6:23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord

[19] Romans 8:16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.

[20] p.81, ibid

[21] p. 82, ibid

[22] p. 244, Questioning Evangelism