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ISN'T CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE ONLY PSYCHOLOGICAL?

The sixth question is subtle and can become rather personal: "Isn't it possible to explain Christian experience in purely psychological terms?"

Some people suggest that we have faith only because we've been conditioned, since our early childhood, to this way of thinking and living. They think we've been raised like Pavlov's dogs. But they oversimplify the situation. Anyone who has traveled widely and met other Christians knows that preconditioning can't explain many conversions, for Christians have been converted from every imaginable background. Thousands of them had no childhood contact with Christianity. Yet each one will testify that a personal encounter with Jesus Christ transformed his life.

In his studies, the psychologist tries to keep all but one or two factors constant. To verify his conclusion he must eliminate as many variables as possible. But in comparing the lives of Christians, the Lord Himself is the only constant factor. From one case history to the next all other details may vary. Only He remains the same. He alone in His power makes a thief honest, a profligate pure, a liar truthful. It is He who can fill a hate-ridden heart with love.

Other psychology-minded people assert that ideas of spiritual reality are essentially wish fulfillments. All religious experience, they contend, can be traced to man's feeling a need for God, creating an image in his mind, and then worshiping the mental projection. His supposed spiritual reality, of course, lacks any objective reality. Again and again we hear religion called the crutch of people who can't get along in life. This view raises a valid issue which we must consider.

How can we know that we haven't hypnotized ourselves into believing what we want to believe? If our spiritual experience is just a result of wishful fulfillment or positive thinking, we should be able to regard any object, an organ for instance, as God. If we think about the organ as God long enough it will become God to us; then lo and behold, we have a subjective experience. But what is our objective evidence for this subjective experience?

Let's try another situation. Suppose someone wanders into your room with a fried egg dangling over his left ear and says, "Man, this fried egg is the most! I get joy, peace, satisfaction, and purpose in life from it. Tremendous, man—this fried egg is really it." What do you say? In the final analysis you can't argue with experience. That's why a Christian's testimony is so effective; no one can argue with it. And you can't argue experimentally with this fried-egg guy.

But you can investigate his experience by asking him several crucial questions (the same questions that every Christian should be prepared to answer about his experience).

How do you know it's the fried egg and not auto-hypnosis that's giving you this satisfaction and peace?

Who else has gotten the same benefits out of the egg?

To what objective fact is this experience tied?

Christianity differs from auto-hypnosis, wishful fulfillments, and all the other psychological phenomena in that the Christian's subjective experience is securely bound to an objective, historical fact, namely the resurrection from the dead of Jesus Christ.

A professor in semantics from the University of California in Berkeley recently attended a series of meetings where I was the speaker. He was a complete relativist in his thinking. Right in the middle of my talks he would stand up in the audience and interpret (and briefly refute) what I had said. I'll admit it was all done in good spirit, but it was a bit unnerving, too. He advanced the popular idea that what we believe is true to us but not necessarily true for other people, and he used this illustration: A man may be tied on a railroad track in a fraternity hazing. When the train whizzes by on the next track, he dies of a heart attack because he doesn't know that it's not on his track. As far as he's concerned the train might as well have been on the first track. He believed it was and so it became true for him.

You see, what's true for you may not be true for me. Time and time again we tried to show this professor the significant difference in Christianity, the fact of the resurrection. About the fourth time around the penny dropped. Standing at the blackboard with a piece of chalk in his hand, he suddenly stopped in the middle of a sentence and said, "Hmm . . . , yes, that would make quite a difference," and sat down.

If the resurrection is true, it makes all the difference in the world. It is confirmation of God's revelation in Christ, an absolute truth, an historical fact outside of ourselves, an objective fact to which our subjective experience is tied. We need to hold these two facts, the objective and the subjective, in proper perspective. The fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead means nothing to me personally or experientially until I receive Him as Lord and Savior in my own life. On the other hand, if I have only my own experience, I'll sooner or later begin wondering if it is real or merely self-suggestion. I need to recognize that my experience is based on the solid foundation of an objective fact in history.

For a brief and helpful summary, read the Inter-Varsity Press booklet, *Evidence for the Resurrection* by J.N.D. Anderson, a professor of oriental law at London University. He discusses the evidence and the various alternatives that have been advanced to try to explain away the resurrection, showing why, in the light of the data, each explanation is inadequate.