Religious experience as seeing-as

The arguments about God’s existence operate as though we don’t actually experience God, that God is absent from our experience – which is why we need to prove his existence. For example, you would say you ‘believe that’ the book is red more naturally if you can’t see it; otherwise, you would simply say that you can see it is red. So what about religious experience?

By ‘religious experience’ here, I don’t mean some unusual or mystical experience of ‘communing’ with God, but something more ordinary:

religious differs from non-religious experience, not as the awareness of a different world, but as a different way of experiencing the same world. Events which can be experienced as having a purely natural significance are experienced by the religious mind as having also and at the same time religious significance and as mediating the presence and activity of God’. (John Hick, ‘Rational Theistic Belief without Proofs’)

PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCING-AS

In ‘Religious Faith as Experiencing-as’, Hick develops an analogy between perception and experience of God. He starts with the idea that perception is not simply registering what is ‘out there’ neutrally. There is a well-known phenomenon (the Necker Cube) in which one set of lines can be seen in two different ways. We can also see patterns in natural objects, as when we see a face or a fish in a cloud. We don’t just see, we ‘see-as’ or ‘see-in’. We see the lines as a cube facing this way or that; we see a face in the cloud (we can also say we see the shape of the cloud as a face).

We can argue that all seeing involves seeing as. This is hard to accept at first. Do you see this book as a book? But consider what someone who has never seen a book, whose culture has no books, would experience. They wouldn’t see the book as a book. For example, if they don’t have the concept BOOK, they can’t. And we can extend this idea from seeing to all experiencing – we hear a sound as bird-song, smell a smell as coffee, and so on. Perception, on this account, always involves recognition (or mis-recognition), bringing experience under a concept.

Sometimes, as with the Necker cube, we can only see something as this or that, e.g. we see the cube as facing one way or the other. But with other seeing-as, we can add layers of perceptual recognition – you can see the object in the sky as a bird and as a hawk and as a hawk hunting.

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Hick then argues that religious experience is a kind of experiencing-as. The religious person experiences human life and history as an encounter with God, as well as an encounter with the physical world and other people. It is an additional layer of
experiencing-as, a perspective on life and the world that the non-religious person doesn’t have.

But is religious experience really analogous to perceptual experiencing-as? Or is it a subjective projection of religious meaning onto natural events? Hick accepts that there are disanalogies, e.g. religious experience isn’t sensory perception and we aren’t perceiving types of object but the significance of events. But, he argues, there is an important continuity.

First, all perception involves making sense of what is perceived (through seeing-as, through applying concepts). Part of this involves how we respond to what we see. To see x as y – e.g. this object as a fork – involves an appropriate response in how we are disposed to act in relation to it, e.g. use it to eat with, not to write with. We shouldn’t think, then, that we can contrast religious experience as a projection with ‘neutral’ perceptual experience. No experience is neutral.

Second, we don’t just recognise objects, we recognise situations, as shown by our immediate appropriate responses to them. For example, seeing someone hanging off the edge of a cliff in fear initiates a moral response – of helping them. We recognise this a situation of moral significance.

Religious experience is a matter of recognising the religious significance of events or situations, e.g. having a sense of God in the vastness or beauty of the natural world. This involves a change in how we are disposed to act; Hick argues that all religious experience disposes us to the ‘service of God’. For Christians, this is indicated by Jesus’ moral teaching. This response is not an optional extra – it is just as much part of experiencing human life and history as an encounter with God as using a fork to eat with is part of seeing it as a fork.

However, we can object that the analogy still doesn’t work. While Hick is right that all recognition involves applying concepts to experience, we don’t need to accept that all recognition is similar to perceptual recognition. If recognising the religious significance of a situation was analogous to recognising a fork, then we can ask ‘Which sense do we use? Is there a “religious sense”? How does this religious sense detect religious significance (eyes detect light from the fork)?’. Hick doesn’t suggest we can give answers to these questions.

Talk of ‘recognition’ or ‘experiencing-as’ in these contexts is not analogous to perception; it is metaphorical. So we shouldn’t defend the claim that religious experience is experiencing the world as an encounter with God by analogy with perception.

**DISCUSSION**

Hick wants to emphasise with the analogy is the contrast between something ‘experiential’ and beliefs that we form by argument or inference. To see something as a fork is to disposed to use it to eat with; we don’t infer we should use it this way. In the situation of the person hanging off the cliff, we don’t infer that we should help, we see that help is needed. So, he argues, the religious person doesn’t infer that God exists, but experiences life as an encounter with God. It is immediate, like perception, not inferred, like theoretical beliefs.
But we can object that with perception, we all experience the natural world. Religious experience is much less common and religious people come to different beliefs on the basis of their experience. If God was ‘there’ in the same way the natural world is ‘there’, we would all have the same religious experience, just as we have the same (or very similar) perceptual experience. So religious experience may feel immediate, but differences in religious experience suggest that actually it is inferred.

We can reply that this simplifies perceptual experience. People who are experts at recognising birds ‘see’ or ‘hear’ hawks, eagles, chuffs, woodcocks, and so on; they don’t have some perceptual experience we could all share and then ‘infer’ the species. Once one has learned to recognise an object, one recognises it immediately – but first one must learn. So, Hick argues, not everyone recognises events as an encounter with God. Furthermore, if God was as unmistakable as the natural world, this would completely change religious faith – for the worse. So God gave us ‘cognitive freedom’ in being able to recognise or not recognise life as an encounter with him. Once one has freely opened oneself to this perspective, then (as with recognising birds) the experience is immediate.

But could it not all be an illusion? After all, someone who is mad might experience the world in a way that shows that they are being persecuted telepathically by aliens who want to conquer Earth. Hick responds that religious faith does not seem like a madness. The religious person gives no signs of psychological breakdown or an inability to function in the world. In fact, some religious teachers have a very high degree of psychological integration and maturity. So, as yet, we have no reason to think that experiencing the world religiously is irrational.

This is not meant to convince anyone of the existence of God. Hick is only arguing that experiencing the world in this way is legitimate; for someone who has this experience, it is rational for them to believe in God. Someone who doesn’t have this experience is unaffected by the argument. They need not arguments, but different experiences, a different perspective on the world.

What about the different religious beliefs that people hold? Either, in time, someone’s experience of the world will make particular religious beliefs irrational and unsustainable – and perhaps, in the long run, just one religion will be justified by religious experience; or this won’t happen, and no one religion will be better supported by religious experience than any other. In that case, we should argue that there are many ways of experiencing God.