Michael Martin’s
A Critique of Religious Experience

Outline of “Critique of Religious Experience”

- Definition of Religious Experience
- The types of religious experiences
  - Do these support claims of the existence of supernatural entities?
- Mystical Experiences
  - Do these support claims of the existence of supernatural entities?
- The Principle of Credulity (PC)

- Type 1: Experiencing a non-supernatural object as supernatural
- Type 2: Experiencing a supernatural being in a way that this being would be perceivable to any other ordinary observer and able to be described coherently
- Type 3: Experiencing a supernatural being in a describable manner but this being would not be perceivable to any other ordinary observer
- Type 4: Experiencing a supernatural being in such a way as to be unable to adequately describe the experience (ineffable experiences). It is also of a non-public object. These are mystical experiences.
- Type 5: Experiencing a supernatural being in a way that does not involve sensations in any straightforward way (see St. Teresa’s first experience of Christ by her side). It is also of a non-public object.”

* From p. 69
(1') Under certain conditions $C_1$, religious beliefs of type $K_1$—that is, beliefs generated by religious experience—are likely to be true.

(2') Condition $C_1$ obtains.

(3') My religious belief that God exists is of type $K_1$.

(4') Hence my religious belief that God exists is likely to be true.

Two theories of what might be causing religious experiences

Hypothesis 1 ($H_1$): There is an external cause for religious experiences

Hypothesis 1' ($H_1'$): God is the cause of mystical experiences

Hypothesis 2 ($H_2$): There is an internal cause for religious experiences (the psychological hypothesis)

Hypothesis 2 is most likely

Religious experiences can be incoherent

Religious experiences conflict with those in other religious traditions

Thus religious experience is more like a drug-induced hallucination than an experience of an external object

From page 71L
Teresa's tests don’t work
- A scriptural test assumes that God exists
- A “moral improvement” test doesn’t adequately rule out the possibility that an internal cause could also result in moral improvement or that a veridical experience might nonetheless result in no moral change.
- From page 71R

Cases of religious experience which support H₁
- Martin doesn’t know of any
- Jesus’ resurrection is not non-controversial
- Even if he were resurrected, that would not entail that the god of western tradition existed since his resurrection is compatible with a number of explanations
- From page 72R

An argument for God’s existence based on mystical experience
- (1) All mystical experiences are basically the same.
- (2) This similarity is better explained in terms of H₁ than in terms of H₂
- (3) The most adequate version of H₁ is that God causes the mystical experience (which is H₁')
- (4) Therefore, mystical experiences provide inductive support for H₁'
- From p. 73L
Swinburne’s Principle of Credulity:
- If it seems (epistemically) to a subject S that x is present, then probably x is present.
- Compare to “If it seems (comparatively) to a subject S that x is present, then x might be present.”
- If it seems to you that I am present, then I’m probably present, right?
- Unless what?
- Without the PC, we’d be crippled by skeptical doubt

Martin’s Negative Principle of Credulity (NPC)
- If it seems (epistemically) to a subject S that x is absent, then probably x is absent.
- So, the fact that it seems to atheists that God is absent would mean that God probably is absent. (Non-existent.)

Behold?
Martin’s main objection

- Religious experiences are systematically incompatible
- There are theistic, pantheistic, and nontheistic experiences
- Experiences of unity with the divine and separateness from the divine
- Following the PC then would lead to a whole host of entities/realities ‘probably’ existing

Short essay due next time

- What causes religious experience? Can it be used to justify religious belief? Use Martin and/or Swinburne to support your views.