

## The Trace of God

*The Trace of God* is an exposition (445 pages) employing both philosophical investigation and social science research. The book analyzes and discusses a huge body of empirical research that has up to this point been primarily known only in circles of psychology of religion, and has been over looked by theology, apologetics, philosophy of religion and more general discipline of psychology. This body of work needs to be known in each of these interested groups because it demonstrates though hundreds of studies over a 50 year period, the positive and vital nature of the kind of religious experience known as "mystical." Even though most of the studies deal with "mystical" experience, linking studies also apply it to the "born again experience" as well as "the material end of Christian experience."

The book opens with a discussion as to why arguments for the existence of God need not "prove" God exists, but merely offer a "warrant for belief." It discusses why there can't be direct empirical evidence for God and why that is not necessary. It also lays out

criteria for rational warrant. In Chapter Two it presents two arguments that are based upon religious experience and then shows how the various studies back them up. This is not an attempt to present directly empirical evidence for God but to show that religious experiences of a certain kind can be taken as "the co-determinate" or God correlate. A direct empirical view of God is not presented, but rather the "God correlate" that indicates God just as a fingerprint or tracks in the snow indicate the presence of some person or animal. Religious experiences of this kind are the "trace of God."

These studies demonstrate that the result of such experiences is life transforming. This term is understood and used to indicate long term positive and dramatic changes in the life of the one who experiences them. People are released from bondage to alcohol and drugs; they tend to have less propensity toward depression or mental illness; they are self actualized, self assured, have greater sense of meaning and purpose, generally tend to be better educated and more successful than those who don't have such

experiences. These studies prove that religious experience is not the result of mental illness or emotional instability. The methodology of the studies (which includes every major kind of study methodology in the social sciences) is discussed at length.

One of the major aspects of the book is the discussion of the "Mysticism scale" (aka "M scale") developed by Dr. Ralph Hood Jr. at University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. This "M scale" (which is a test of 32 questions) serves as an important control on the validity of religious experience. One can know through the score on the test if one's experience is truly "Mystical" or just "wool gathering." Without a control we can't know if one has had a true experience and thus we can't measure their effects. Being able to establish that one has had true "mystical experience", one can determine that the effects of that experience are positive and long term. Thus that sets up the rationally warranted arguments for God.

It is also vital to know if the experience is valid because those who seek to discredit religious belief and claim to have produced such experiences

by stimulating the brain don't use controls to determine if the experience is valid or not. They must make assumptions that anything to do with God talk is a religious experience then claim to have produced it by stimulating the brain.

The M scale works by comparing theories of British philosopher W. T. Stace with current modern mystics (research began in the 1970s on American campuses and went international in the 80s). It is statistically extremely remote that false mystics would be able to accidentally hit upon the right combination of questions to reflect validation of Stace's theory. They have to agree with Stace's theory on all 32 points.

It's even harder to imagine they might lie. In the international studies Iranian, Indian, and Japanese peasants were questioned. Most of them could not read English, so it's absurd to think they could tell what Stace's theory was, much less what they had to lie about. Most of them would know nothing about W.T. Stace or his theories. The studies showed that modern mystics in Iran, India, Japan, Sweden, the UK all

experience exactly what Stace said they would experience. Thus that creates the ground for comparison. It gives us a control for the experience.

The book also discusses the theories of Wayne Proudfoot a philosopher who tried to disprove mystical experience by reductionism, re-labeling and losing the phenomena. Studies of brain chemistry are analyzed as well as the Placebo effect. The question all comes down to a tie between naturalistic brain chemicals vs. the idea that the naturalistic neurological route is just the way God created for us to communicate with him, and that stimulation of those chemicals is just opening the receptors that also receive God's presence. The problem is resolved by eight tie breakers that are presented at the end of the next to the last chapter.

The last chapter deals with philosophical and theological problems surrounding language and faith.

The book provides a ground breaking fortification of the arguments for God from religious experience, that has been lacking since the days of Father Frederick C. Copleston and his debate with Bertrand Russell. Copleston didn't

have these studies to back his argument. This body of work has been growing for 50 years and it's time it was known to the theological world. These studies, especially the M scale, establish that religious experiences are the same the world over. There may be other kinds, but of those kind known as "mystical" when we control for the names being different, we look at the experience itself they are all the same regardless of doctrines of various faiths. This implies that all these people around the world in different faiths are experiencing a reality external to their own minds. It also implies that God is working in all faiths.

The Author, Joseph Hinman, is a Christian and he does believe in the exclusivity of Jesus Christ but he also recognizes God's *prevenient* grace to all people.