"Don't tell me this is only taking place in my head"

Dialogues between theology and psychology on anomalous experiences

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Introduction

I will begin this article by presenting a fictive dialogue. The dialogue is an excerpt from the Broadway play "Freud's Last Session,"[1] in which the scriptwriter imagines a conversation between an old Sigmund Freud and a younger C.S. Lewis in London in 1939. Freud and Lewis likely never met in real life, but the writer of the play envisions what a discussion between them might have entailed:[2]

> ***Freud:*** *I have spent much of my life studying fantasies. In the time I have left, I have decided to try to understand reality as best as I can. As I have heard, you are a person with high intelligence and you have a talent for analytical thinking. I heard that you, until recently, had shared my view that the idea of a Creator is infantile.*
> ***Lewis:*** *That's right.*
> ***Freud:*** *So you are, like Paul, either a victim for a total conversion or a hallucinatory psychosis.*
> *Lewis: Paul was struck by lightning while riding his horse on the way to Damascus. I was struck by a thought when sitting in the side-carriage to my brother's motor-bike on our way to the zoo. It's not as dramatic.*
> ***Freud:*** *That depends on the thought.*
> ***Lewis:*** *When I left, I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God. When I arrived, I did. It's so simple.*
> ***Freud:*** *Thoughts are only simple as long as one chooses not to investigate them.*
> (St. Germain, 2009; Bang-Hansen, 2013)

This small part of the play contains three elements I wish to discuss in the following article: (1) a possible *anomalous experience;* (2) a *theological voice,* represented by C.S. Lewis, despite the fact that he was not a theologian but a literary scholar; and (3) a *psychological voice,* represented by Freud. Further, there is a dialogue between the psychological and theological voices regarding the interpretation of anomalous or extraordinary experiences.

The play is based on ideas from more than 75 years ago. Much has happened in the fields of theology and psychology since then. However, both disciplines still discuss anomalous experiences, asking whether these experiences are "real" or "imagery," whether they appear on the "inside" or "outside" of human beings, and to what extent they are "healthy" or "non-healthy" (Watts, 2002). More recent phenomenological studies suggest that perceivers of anomalous experiences engage in dichotomous discourses about mental health versus pathology and reality

versus illusion, which are linked to both psychological and religious voices (Austad, 2015; Bennet & Bennet, 2000; Steffen &Coyle, 2012). The title of this article, which is taken from a qualitative study about individuals who experience the presence of dead family members (Klass, 1999, p. 41), expresses exactly that kind of negotiation. Expecting to meet someone who believes that the visions of her dead son are mere illusions, the participant says to the interviewer, "Don't tell me this is only taking place in my head!"

Method

I will proceed in this article by presenting empirical research from within the social sciences, mainly the psychology of religion, on anomalous experiences. The research accounts are taken partly from my study of "post-death presence experiences" (Austad, 2015) and partly from literature on a wider variety of anomalous experience (Austad, 2014). Further, the research findings will be reflected upon and discussed from the perspectives of theology and psychology in order to examine how the dialogue between these two disciplines can contribute to a wider—and hopefully more nuanced—understanding of anomalous experiences. In the dialogue, psychology is not only approached in terms of empirical research findings, and theology is not only approached in terms of reflection upon those findings. Since psychological research findings can be placed within a broader context of theories, which themselves arise from general research paradigms (Watts, 2002), I will also discuss psychological paradigms that either agree or disagree with theological paradigms related to anomalous experiences.

Anomalous experiences

Although it is difficult to clearly define anomalous experiences, it is helpful to make a circumscription as a starting point for discussion. However, before this, I will mention that I have opted to use the term "anomalous" instead of "paranormal," (Henriksen & Pabst, 2013) "extraordinary," (Parker, 2005) or "exceptional" (Braud, 2012). "Anomalous" has been increasingly employed in recent years. This could be to avoid the concept of the paranormal, as the term "paranormal" may be associated not only with paranormal experiences but also with explaining paranormal experiences via paranormal phenomena,[3] thus indicating that paranormal phenomena do exist (Irwin & Watts, 2007). The term "exceptional" is often employed when unusual perceptions are meaningfully interpreted and have significance, while the term "exceptional human experiences" is used to denote experiences that not only are meaningful and significant but also foster authentic growth (Braud, 2012). Thus, the term "anomalous" carries less ideological baggage than some of its alternatives. Although "extraordinary" can serve as an alternative in some cases, I will mainly use "anomalous" in this article.

The word anomalous derives from the Greek anomalos, meaning irregular, uneven, or unequal. The term "anomalous experience" is thus used to denote an experience that is seen as irregular or different from cultural norms. In their large anthology *Varieties of Anomalous Experiences,* Cardeña, Lynn, and Krippner (2000) state the following: "Anomalous experiences are assumed to deviate from ordinary experiences or from the usually accepted explanations of reality" (p. 4).

Such experiences are, according to Cardeña et al., anomalous to our generally accepted cultural storehouse of truths, and they cannot be fully explained by the conventionally accepted standards of science. The latter point is more explicitly stated in the following definition: anomalous experience is "... an unusual experience that cannot be explained in terms of conventionally recognized physical, biological, psychological, or sociological processes" (Braud, 2012, p. 110).

Anomalous experiences can include mystical experiences,[4] experiences with, for instance, angels, UFOs, saints, Jesus, Mohammed, or an inner guide,[5] as well as unusual death-related experiences, such as near-death experiences, a sense of the presence of the dead, or communication with the dead. They can also be unusual healing or peak experiences[6] (White & Brown, 2000, as cited in Braud, 2012).

Using definitions and examples is the first step for circumscribing anomalous or extraordi-

nary experiences. However, some of the terms used in the definitions require further discussion, such as the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary in culture and self-perceptions, as well as the conventional and unconventional ways of researching those experiences.

First, the notion that anomalous or extraordinary experiences deviate from ordinary experiences does not necessarily mean that they are experienced by very few people. On the contrary, some anomalous experiences have been widely reported. For instance, 40–50% of the bereaved population has reported a sense-of-presence experience (Klugman, 2006; Rees, 2001; Steffen & Coyle, 2010). However, other anomalous experiences are less common; for example, visions of UFOs and experiences of alien abductions (Apelle, Lynn, & Newman, 2000). A vivid experience is also rarer than vague variants. Very few people report full mystical experiences, but there are findings that suggest that between one-third and one-half of the population of the US and Great Britain have had at least one experience that qualifies as mystical (Wulff, 2000). A large-scale study from Great Britain suggests that up to 70% of the population report one or more anomalous experiences if this is broadly defined (Jane & Breen, 2006, as cited in Schofield, 2012). However, although anomalous perceptions are experienced by many, they are usually not part of our daily experiences because they most commonly happen only a few times in life.

Thus, the first part of the circumscription, relating anomalies to deviations from ordinary experiences, can be discussed in terms of commonality and the norms of particular cultures. The next section, which focuses on anomalous experiences that cannot be explained in terms of conventional science, also requires a preface. Saying that the experiences cannot be fully explained by conventional science does not mean that they are not studied conventionally. In psychology there are theories and research that attempt to understand these experiences, although these are very limited compared to most other research areas. However, theories cannot fully explain why these experiences happen. For instance, some theories about grief claim that experiences with the dead are caused by a reaction to grief and can be simply explained as searching for the dead in the first phase of bereavement. However, those theories do not account for similar experiences that occur without grief (Austad, 2015). Likewise, personality studies have found that those who have extraordinary experiences score high for personality traits such as complexity, openness to new experiences, innovation, tolerance for ambiguity, and creativity (Thalbourne & Delin, 1994, as cited in Wulff, 2000). Yet, this correlation does not scientifically explain why and how anomalous experiences happen. So far, various sub-disciplines of psychology have only given partial interpretations and explanations (Watts, 2002). For instance, studying the phenomenology of anomalous experiences, investigating the personality characteristics of perceivers, correlating their relationships with stress and coping mechanisms, and studying brain activity, biological markers, and the patterns of psychopathology all only result in partial explanations (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000; Wulff, 2000). Certainly, this provides a larger frame than the single psychological voice presented by Freud in the play, which explains anomalous experiences as hallucinatory psychosis. Nevertheless, the mentioned psychological theories do not fully explain the experiences. The notion that those experiences deviate from current conventional scientific explanations does not, however, preclude the idea that they could be explained by conventional science in the future.

Dialogues between psychology and theology – positions and voices

Now, I will turn to the dialogues between psychology and theology. Because both disciplines are heterogeneous not only in terms of sub-disciplines but also in terms of paradigms, there are several ways of relating them to one another. When discussing various dialogical approaches, I use the terms "voices" and "positions" (Hermans & Gieser, 2012). Put simply, "voice" indicates what one is saying, and "position" indicates where one stands when saying it.

Theology and psychology can be distanced

from one another, as their positions are sometimes voiced dualistically or defensively. In such positions, the two disciplines claim they are too different to find any contact useful, or they are too critical towards the other to enter into dialogue. A theology that emphasizes the objectivity of its doctrines while remaining suspicious of the influence of psychology may cause the doctrine to be subjectivised or relativised. The same can be said of a subset of psychology with a strong materialist and reductionist position that considers theology to be scientifically illiterate or irrelevant (Watts, 2012). However, there are other positions in which the two disciplines are closer and their relationship is voiced as complementary or dialogical. Voices from these positions tend to minimize the difference in character between the disciplines to establish a basis for dialogue, although they are not necessarily assimilated into the other (Watts, 2002). When they stand in complementary positions, scholars of theology and psychology recognize that they can give different perspectives to the same phenomena. Dialogical positions take the relationship between the disciplines a step further and investigate whether they can mutually influence each other.

In terms of dialogical position, how the dialogue should be executed remains to be seen. A key issue is whether either of the disciplines is dominant, or if it is possible to begin an impartial dialogue (Watts, 2002). Some see theology as a broad discipline because it relates to everything concerning the divine, whereas a discipline like psychology is seen as narrower; thus, there should be a hierarchical relationship between the two, in which psychology is subordinate. Others tend to see psychology as a scientific discipline and therefore the dominant partner. Theology, which does not give scientific explanations in the same way, should be adjusted to be consistent with the findings of psychology. In practice, the latter approach is more common. That is, theology has developed its discipline in changing circumstances and in dialogue with science, while psychology has not refined its dialogue with theology in the same way. Therefore, it is more difficult to determine the contribution of theology to psychology than the contribution of psychology to theology (Watts, 2002). Further, psychology is one of the most secular sciences in that it has one of the lowest percentages of religious persons of all academic disciplines (Reme, 2014). This may also contribute to psychologists' low interest in theology and religious science.

When psychology was first introduced by the likes of William James and Carl Gustav Jung, there was great interest in religious and anomalous phenomena. Yet, as psychology developed as a science, it defended against the "superstitious" tendencies of society (Teigen, 2004) and refrain from studying religious and anomalous experiences. However, some say that this is about to change (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000; Reme, 2014).

The discipline of *psychology of religion* is certainly interested in religion. However, it has had little dialogue with theology thus far (Watts, 2002). In a strict sense, the psychology of religion is placed alongside psychology as it uses psychological instruments (such as theories, concepts, insights, methods, and techniques) to analyze and understand religion (Belzen, 2010). Because it has no apologetic concerns, the psychology of religion has aimed to emancipate itself from theology (Westerink, 2012). This has to do with the history of the discipline; it has been important to free the psychology of religion from the interests of some organizations, foundations, and individuals that fund, guide, or perform research, as they might question whether the results are too much in favour of Christian beliefs (Belzen, 2010). The psychology of religion is certainly interested in religious studies, as it gives context for the religious phenomena under examination (Belzen, 2010). However, theology is not considered as often.

The psychology of religion can be distinguished from *practical theology,* which also performs psychological investigations but aims to facilitate the practices of churches (Belzen, 2010). In practical theology, theologians can study psychology or use psychological investigations in their practical theological projects as intra- or interdisciplinary enterprises. Another relationship between psychology and theology is *psychology and religion*. This field is a subfield of

theology and religious studies and investigates phenomena and discuss contributions of common interest to both disciplines (Belzen, 2010). These distinctions are only heuristic (ibid). Thus, when discussing the dialogue between psychology and theology regarding anomalous experiences, I will draw on literature from both the psychology of religion and psychology and religion. From a theological point of view, it is also possible to regard the dialogue as part of practical theology.

Psychology and theology in dialogue on anomalous experiences

A dialogical position holds that psychology and theology are not the same, but that they have a common ground. If theology and psychology are to be in dialogue with one another regarding anomalous experiences, it is reasonable to focus on the common concern of the study of human experience. The American Psychological Association states that "psychology is the study of the mind and behaviour. The discipline embraces all aspects of human experience" (American Psychological Association). For theology to begin a dialogue with psychology that gives more than just context for religious societies, theologies must relate to the study of human experience. Thus, the following statement from a theological program is relevant: "Theology is basically reflection on the religious attempts to interpret human experiences; it is also about articulating new possibilities for experience. Theology explores possible interpretations of such experiences, rather than explaining them in scientific terms" (Henriksen, 2014, p 13). Once a common focus is established, the two disciplines can study the same anomalous experiences in different ways. They can provide complementary perspectives and ask one another questions, which can lead to further refinements.

I will now enter into two debates in theology and psychology. First, I will discuss the way in which anomalous experiences can be interpreted as spiritual or religious experiences.[7] Second, I will discuss how anomalous experiences relate to mental health. Both discussions addresses perceptions of spiritual/non-spiritual and healthy/non-healthy experiences at the intersection of "inner" and "outer," thus relating explicitly to the title of this article: "Don't tell me this is only taking place in my head."

Psychological and theological voices on spiritual anomalous experiences

In what way can anomalous experiences be understood as spiritual experiences? Within the psychology of religion, there have been discussions between perennialists and constructivists regarding the way in which religious context can shape anomalous experiences as well as the relationship between immediate experience (which often is understood as "pure" and unmediated) and interpretation (which often is considered as influenced by context and a constructive mind) (Watts, 2002).

Phenomenological studies show that anomalous experiences often are ambiguous and can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, if someone hears a voice without any visible person speaking, he or she may interpret it to be the voice of Jesus or another religious figure. However, invisible voices can also be interpreted as an inner guide, or the voice of a deceased father or mother. Such occurrences may or may not be understood as religious or spiritual experiences. Two cases from my research on post-death presence illustrate this ambiguity (Austad, 2015). The first case is a man who reported sensing the presence of his dead father as well as a near-death experience. When asked about his interpretation of the experiences, he replied, "I don't need religion to have a relationship with these phenomena" (p 238). Despite his anomalous experience, he maintained an atheistic worldview. By comparison, a woman with the same type of experience interpreted her perceptions as a transcendent reality that provided "proof" of an afterlife. The woman believed that her experience was spiritual, and she aligned it with her religious beliefs.

In contrast to these cases, some anomalous experiences have a distinctive phenomenology related to a religious character: a vision or voice that can be recognized as a divine being. For instance, in Paul's experience, which was alluded to in the play, the voice identified itself

as Jesus. Such experiences give less room for interpretations in religious terms than do the more ambiguous post-death presence experiences.

In a study on religious visions in Sweden, Geels (1991) considered the relationship between visions and weak, moderate, and strong religious socialization. He questioned how the content of the visions related to the participants' religious traditions and culture. The study found that those who had experienced weak or moderate religious socialization had more abstract visions, such as a light, than those who had strong Christian socialization, who more often had visions of Jesus (Geels, 1991). Thus, the study indicated that religious affiliation played a role in how experiences were shaped and interpreted. Yet, religious socialization and interpretations were not necessary to have such experiences in the first place; participants experienced visions and voices regardless of religious affiliation. The shaping of the experiences related, however, to their worldview.

There are several other studies that address the same issues, but I will not discuss those now. Instead, I propose my view: that "pure" religious experiences are unattainable. Experiences are always mediated by culture and context. However, I acknowledge that some anomalous experiences exceed the frame of reference and may arrive relatively spontaneously (Austad, 2015; Henriksen & Pabst, 2013), making them "less dependent on established constructions than most other experiences" (Watts, 2002, p 100).

The debates concerning the interpretation of religious or spiritual experiences are also addressed in psychology within the study of the cognitive construction of experience. Cognitive research has increasingly been aware of how active our mind is in constructing an experience. Accordingly, this has led some researchers to think that anomalous experiences are not genuinely religious; they are just a result of social and mental processes (Watts, 2002).

Responding to these psychological approaches from theology, it has been asked if the personal, social, and cultural construction of religious experiences goes against understanding them as gifts from God or as divine providence. The logic behind that way of thinking is: because religious experiences can be seen as arising from social and cognitive processes there is no room for God to actively work with the world. God is accordingly only present as creator of the human being, but not taking actively part in their apparently religious experiences. However, as argued by Watts (2002) this does not have to be the case. Human interpretation and social processes can also be theologically interpreted as divine action. If one regards both the physically constructed brain and the socially constructed world as creations of God, there is no reason to believe that God would bypass them when acting in the world (Watts, 2002). This position can further be kept without reducing God to human processes if one keeps a double aspect in which complementary discourses can exist as interpretations of the same phenomena.

Henriksen (2014) distinguishes between four realms of experience: the physical, the cultural and social, the inner, and the spiritual. According to Henriksen (2014), anomalous experiences take place in the spiritual realm. However, they are not completely separate from other realms; for instance, spiritual experiences require language and symbols from the social realm to be articulated and interpreted. Thus, anomalous experiences in the spiritual realm are not the only religious experiences – all experiences in all realms relate to God. Therefore, as Lewis pointed out in the play mentioned in the introduction, being struck by a thought can be understood as a religious experience, although it is not necessarily anomalous. Distinguishing but not totally separating different realms of experience blurs the distinction between the natural and supernatural. Thus, religious anomalous experiences can be seen as part of creation "breaking in without breaking the ordinary world" (Henriksen, 2014, p 46). Miracles can further be seen as "events in which the laws of nature operate in a special way rather than being overturned" (Watts, 2002, p 106).

In keeping with this theological view of seeing God's actions both as immanent through psychological constructions and as entering from outside, one can reject a reductionist and dualist

understanding of anomalous experiences. This may buffer psychological understandings which assert that religious anomalous experiences are nothing but the product of cultural influences (constructivism), a reflection of personal needs (psychoanalysis), cognitive misattribution (cognitive psychology), or brain processes (neuropsychology). Further, it may buffer a dualist theological version that holds a sharp distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Remaining open to the ontological status of the source of the religious experience, one may provide complementary perspectives from both psychology and theology. For instance, the phenomenon of speaking in tongues can according to this complementary view be investigated from a social psychological perspective, in terms of what happens in groups where this experience is prominent, or from the perspective of social constructions, and neural aberrations, as well as from a theological perspective, in terms of divine actions or interactions (Watts, 2012). There is no theological reason to assume that God does not interact through psychosocial processes, and there is no reason for human sciences to claim that they provide the sole explanation for religious phenomena. Complementary perspectives are also used by the perceivers themselves trying to understand their anomalous experiences as both going on in their head and simultaneously coming from outside (Austad, 2015).

Psychological and theological voices on anomalous experiences and mental health

Often, perceivers of anomalous experiences try to "normalize" their perceptions. As previously mentioned, this normalization means that the experiences are described as common or culturally accepted. Many perceivers further describe their experiences as non-pathological, stating that they "are not mad or crazy" (Austad, 2015, p 196).

There is relative agreement among researchers that anomalous experiences are not the same as abnormal experiences (Berenbau, Kerns, & Raghavan, 2000). However, although psychopathology usually is not part of anomalous experiences, it can sometimes be part of the cause or effects of such experiences. Anomalous experiences can further be understood as symptoms of a disease; for instance, hallucinations in individuals suffering from schizophrenia. Most often, however, these experiences occur for healthy individuals (Berenbaum, Kerns, & Raghavan, 2000; Wulff, 2000). Certainly, the line between the "normal" and the "abnormal" is not always clear; there are many nuances, and professional practice and research should investigate the healthiness of such experiences. However, as accumulated research suggest, a good starting point both in research and professional practice is remaining open to the understanding of anomalous experiences as "normal" and the possibility that they have a positive effect on mental health. (Austad, 2014; 2015; Steffen & Coyle, 2012; Wulff, 2000). In this complex landscape, phenomenological studies are important for providing nuanced interpretations that move beyond the dichotomy of healthy and unhealthy. For instance do phenomenological studies on voice-hearing experiences show that such experience can be interpreted both as negative if the voices communicate destructive messages (Hayes, 2014), as positive attributing positive emotions to the perceptions, and as ambivalent (Austad, 2015)

Theology can contribute to the dialogue by relating the anomalous experiences to certain religious worldviews. As such it can "normalise" the process by understanding it as common within that particular religious context. Theology can further reflect a nuanced understanding of the valuation of anomalous perceptions by acknowledging that even though these experiences are part of God's creation, this does not mean they always turn out the way God intended (Henriksen, 2014).

As previously mentioned, empirical research on anomalous experiences has suggested that the ability to integrate an anomalous experience into one's worldview often is beneficial and foster personal growth (Austad, 2015; Steffen & Coyle, 2012). However, not all anomalous experiences can be easily and positively integrated into theology. For instance, certain representatives of the Protestant Church do not consider experiences with the deceased to provide sound

faith or mental health (Austad, 2015; Henriksen & Pabst, 2013). This form of theology conflicts with a substantial body of phenomenological research and some psychological understandings that consider these experiences to assist in the grieving process, increase spirituality, and foster personal growth.[8] This debate contains many other aspects, which I cannot discuss here. However, the conflict is worth mentioning, as it illustrates that the dialogue between psychology and theology has many facets, some of which do not agree.

Related to the understanding of anomalous experiences as non-pathological and spiritual, some researchers question whether the experience should be considered as "outside" or "inside" linking "outside" to reality and "inside" to "non-reality." One woman I interviewed related to this discourse in reflecting on her post-death presence experience:

> I *would* say that it comes from the outside even if that's absurd. But I will say that it comes from outside. Yes, I believe I will say that it is an inquiry. You know, I have many voices in my head, but I'm very clear about when I speak with myself with all these different voices, if you understand, but it's not like that. It's qualitatively different... It is *his* voice. It is *not* mine. These are not my thoughts, if you understand. These are not my thoughts speaking with my thoughts. No. It is his voice." (Austad, 2015, p 178)

From this extract one can see that the experiencer struggled to find the right words to describe the perceptual space of her experiences. Our present way of sensing and conceptualising things makes a sharp distinction between the inner and the outer and the available words tend to refer something inner or something outer, but not to both (Watts, 2002). However, religious anomalous experiences are often perceived between the "inside" and "outside," linking the inner to the outer (Austad, 2015; Jones, 1996; Watts, 2002). Some "double-aspect" terms, such as light, may function both as inner and outer reality in religious discourses (Watts, 2002). Yet, to a large extent there is a sense of separateness from the environment which also is reflected in language making the anomalous experiences difficult to articulate.

However, there are psychological theories that attempt to bridge the gap between the outside and inside by proposing a more "porous" self and a hybrid transitional world relating the "inner" and "outer" (Hermans & Gieser, 2012; Winnicott, 1971). In this transitional world, anomalous experiences which we cannot name in other ways than both inner and outer may be understood. One example of articulating this relatedness of both inner and outer, imagination and reality is Rizutto who based on Winnicots theories states that God is a "physically created object that is also found" (Rizutto, 1979, p 87). Rizutto thus "tries to chart an intermediate course between psychological reductionism (God as created) and a kind of theological objectivity (God as found)" (Jones, 1996, p 143).

Similarly, theology can acknowledge the work of God as simultaneously transcendent and immanent, thus allowing for different and related "realities" of both the "inside" and "outside" (Watts, 2012). Thus, psychology and theology may provide complementary and more nuanced explorations of statements such as "don't tell me this is only taking place in my head."

Implications for professional practice

A sound dialogue between psychology and theology regarding anomalous experiences is not simply a theoretical enterprise, nor is it merely an interesting discussion about the philosophy of science; it has to do with real people. What is really at stake is how people who are sometimes in vulnerable states will be received by psychologists and theologians when they present their experiences. A positive dialogue between psychology and theology is one of several ways that both disciplines can be attentive to nuances in these stories. Additionally, it reduces the danger that people who have had anomalous experiences feel unheard or misunderstood in psychotherapy or pastoral care. Psychotherapy may be just as narrow as religious indoctrination if its practitioners neglect their clients' anomalous experiences and their possible religious components. Likewise, pastoral care may be limited as a diagnostic system if it only considers these experiences in terms of whether they are inside or outside the accepted theological dogmas. A

mutual dialogue between theology and psychology can pave the way for new, broader, and deeper understandings, thus helping contribute to a culture in which people are better served in professional practices and all other situations where anomalous experiences occur.

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Notes

1 "Freud's last session" was staged by the Norwegian National Theatre in 2013 and was titled "Freuds siste møte."

2 The dialogue is my English translation of the Norwegian text (Bang-Hansen, 2013), not the original English text (St. Germain, 2009).

3 For example, psi phenomena, which describes extrasensory experiences (clairvoyance, clairaudience, precognition, retrocognition, and telepathy) and psychokinesis

(mind over matter) (Irwin & Watts, 2007).

4 Mystical experiences involve a feeling or sense of unity with the divine or the universe.

5 These are often auditory, visual, or tactile perceptions of something or someone that could not exist according to conventional science.

6 Peak experiences are profound self-actualizing moments in which one experiences all that one can be and are often accompanied by a sense of enhanced perception or understanding (Braud, 2012).

7 Although the terms "spiritual" and "religious" may have different meanings, the point here is not to make that distinction. I recognize that a common yet debatable distinction is to view spirituality as "a personal or group search for the sacred" and religiousness as "a personal or group search for the sacred that unfolds within a traditional sacred context" (Zinnbauer & Pargement, 2005, p. 35).

8 I am referring to newer grief theories, including the continuing bonds paradigm, which are open to evaluating post-death presence experiences as helpful in the grieving process. However, other parts of psychology are more skeptical about the helpfulness and mental health benefits of such experiences (Klass, 1999).

Abstract

This article discusses how aspects of anomalous experiences can be understood in theology and psychology and investigates the premises on which dialogues between the two disciplines may facilitate more nuanced interpretations of such experiences. Two key issues are focused on: how anomalous experiences can be interpreted as religious experiences, and how they are connected to mental health. By relating empirical studies of anomalous experiences to interdisciplinary theoretical reflections, it is argued that there is a potential in the dialogue to buffer reductionist tendencies in the two, separate disciplines. Holding a repertoire of different interpretations on these issues is further considered to be beneficial in professional practice when encountering people with anomalous experiences.

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