

Godless Mystics? A qualitative content analysis of the mystical-type experiences of atheists

Abstract

Twenty-nine self-identifying atheists wrote accounts of their spontaneous experiences that were transformative, enlightening and/or of a mystical-type. Using directed content analysis their accounts were analysed against codes taken from the psychological literature on these types of experiences, in order to see if the atheist accounts were recognisable in terms of the existing literature. It was found that they were similar in terms of content, context and legacy. There was insufficient data to ascertain whether they conformed to the BSM model of religious experience. The main area of difference was that these atheists tended to attribute the experience to rational or neurological causes in contrast to believers who are likely to attribute them to a divine or supernatural cause.

1 Background

In the atheist critique of religion, inevitably the argument must be addressed that some people believe in God because of their direct experience of the divine, and that for religious individuals personal experience can be stronger evidence for the existence of God than any counter-arguments that atheists can produce through reason. Spilka, Brown and Cassidy (1992) noted that after such an experience the individual makes attributions to both the deity and the self in his interpretation of the experience. It is undoubtedly the case that these mystical-type experiences appear real to the people experiencing them. Many atheists do not

know how to respond to this apparently incontrovertible proof for the existence of God. There is often an unspoken assumption, both on the part of atheists and the part of religious believers that atheists do not have mystical-type experiences, that these experiences are the preserve of the religious. Some argue that without a religious interpretative framework, atheists cannot have this type of experience.

In this study the mystical-type experiences of self-identifying atheists are examined and it is asked whether their experiences are recognisable in terms of the existing psychological literature on mystical-type experiences.

A number of terms are used in the literature to describe these types of experiences, and what follows is by no means an exhaustive list. Terms used include: revelatory or prophetic experiences (The Abrahamic religions), Enlightenment/Satori/Nirvana experiences (Buddhism), Samadhi/God-Realisation (Hinduism), cosmic consciousness (Bucke 1901), mystical experiences (James 1902), peak experience (Maslow 1961), rapture and ecstasy (Greely 1974; Mayer-Gross 2000; Beer 2000), mysticism (Hood 1975), religious experience (Hardy 1979), spiritual experience (Hay 1994), benign schizotypy (Jackson 1997), spiritual emergency (Grof and Grof 2000), psychism (Laubach 2004), transcendent experience (Levin and Steele 2005), exceptional human experience (Kohls and Walsh, 2007), epiphanic experiences (McDonald 2008), suffering-induced transformational experiences (Taylor 2011), out-of-the-ordinary experiences (Heriot-Maitland, Knight and Peters 2012), while psychiatrists consider them, in some instances, to be first rank symptoms of schizophrenia (Jackson 1997).

We can see from this list that there are a wide range of perspectives underlying these terms. Conceptualisations range from seeing them as the pinnacle of human achievement, to a

symptom of mental illness. Each one is defined differently and different features must be present in the experience to merit inclusion. There is, nevertheless, considerable overlap among these terms. It appears that the different definitions are tapping into a related, though diversely conceived, dimension of human experience. In this paper the term ‘mystical-type experience’ is used, or where the work of a particular researcher is referred to, the term s/he uses is used.

In recent years, with the increase in numbers of those claiming to have no religion and the rise of a more assertive form of atheism, academics have started to study non-belief in more depth and have identified a number of ways to be non-religious. The word ‘atheist’ can have different meanings to different people. It can mean those who actively reject any notions of God, Gods or indeed any supernatural agency, what Martin (1990) describes as ‘positive atheism’. It can also include those who reject the idea of a personal God, but who do believe in an abstract all-controlling power (Fuller 2001). There are the ‘spiritual but not religious’ who are not aligned to any mainstream religious group but may still hold some attitudes and beliefs considered religious, such as life after death and belief in supernatural powers or agents (Saucier and Skrzypinska 2006; Roof 1973). The word can also include those who simply have no interest in anything religious and may not have thought a great deal about what they do believe (Fuller 2001). There are those who don’t care about religion and are not interested in it, but do not align themselves with atheists either (Kay and Francis 1995). Agnostics do not have a rigid position on the whether there is a God or not (Horning et al 2011). Voas (2009) introduces the term ‘fuzzy fidelity’ to describe people who are not regular churchgoers but are not self-consciously non-religious. These people retain a casual loyalty to tradition, but religion plays only a minor role in their lives. And there are those sometimes described as militant atheists: that is, they take a political stance of opposing what they

perceive to be religious privilege and power, and may actively oppose religion per se (Kitcher 2011). In his study of American atheists, Silver found six distinct types of atheists, (Silver 2013).

Even among atheists, there are a wide range of commitments to atheism – perhaps this should not be surprising among people who describe themselves as ‘free thinkers’ (Cimino and Smith 2007). This wide diversity of people who are not religious means that it can be unreliable to make generalisations about them or to categorise all nonbelievers as having the same psychological profile, when they may hold quite different attitudes towards religion and religious beliefs, a point which must be borne in mind.

In most psychological studies of mystical-type experiences, atheists constitute only a small percentage of the participants; they can be considered outliers and are not always included in the analysis. Some research findings suggest that atheists are unlikely to have these experiences, while other research suggests that they do have them:

1.1 Evidence against atheist having these experiences

Drawing on the literature relating to ‘nontheism’, Schnell and Keenan (2011) in their study of meaning making in an atheist world, propose a continuum of what they call ‘vertical transcendence’, or openness to the numinous, with atheism at one end and mysticism at the other end of the scale, suggesting they are polar opposites.

This conceptualisation is consistent with the findings of Granqvist and Larsson (2006). They attempted to assess the effect of prior religious beliefs on the prediction and interpretation of mystical experiences. In an experiment placing participants in an acoustic and visual isolation chamber, an environment known to facilitate mystical experiences, they found that theology students had mystical experiences with a religious quality, while

psychology students had mystical experiences without a religious quality. They surmise that religious individuals are not more prone to anomalous experiences in general, but are more likely to interpret them in a religious way. However, the effect size of the relationship between level of religiosity and mystical experience was relatively modest, explaining only 16% of the variance, leaving a large part of the variance unexplained.

The influence of culture was recognised in a theory proposed by Sunden, a Swedish psychologist. Using role theory he posited a hypothesis about the internal processes involved in religious experience. His translator, Holm (1995), describes Sunden's view as suggesting that religious traditions, texts and rituals provide templates for religious roles that an individual can adopt. This leaves him in a state of preparedness for a religious experience, both in terms of how the event will be perceived, and how the 'Other' will act. He suggests that on an unconscious level the trigger occurs when one or more senses are stimulated (the event). This is interpreted according to the subject's preparedness and familiarity with religious roles. The brain looks for patterns, and when it discovers one, the solution enters into consciousness in the form of an 'experience'. According to this theory a person who has no familiarity with religious roles cannot have a religious experience. Mythical or fictitious roles can function in a similar way, which he suggests could explain other anomalous experiences that are not religious.

This theory would therefore suggest that atheists, without a religious framework, are unlikely to have a religious experience, although we cannot assume that atheists will not be familiar with religious roles and religious interpretative frameworks, as these are pervasive in Western culture, even for non-believers.

Sunden's theory was partially tested in an experiment by Van der Lans (1987). The control group were subjects who had a weak or non-existent religious framework, and they

were told of the therapeutic function attributed to meditation. The experimental group, who did have a religious framework, were told of the function attributed to meditation in mystical traditions. They all participated in a four week meditation course. At the end of the course none of the control group claimed to have had a religious experience, while half of the experimental group reported such an experience. Van der Lans suggests that the subjects' religious frameworks were activated by the explanation at the start of the study, leaving the religious group with the expectation that they would have an experience together with a pre-existing familiarity of what it might be like and how to interpret it. The experiment would have been even more interesting if there were two additional groups included: those with little religious framework, who were given the mystical benefits briefing, and those with a religious framework given the health benefits briefing. This might help distinguish the priming effects of the briefing from the effects of pre-existing religious framework.

The above research refers primarily to religious experience. However, the following study looked at a wider range of experiences. Farais, Underwood and Claridge (2012), in their study looking at mental health indicators in spiritual individuals, found support for the idea of benign schizotypy, finding that unusual experiences and ideas are the major predictor of engagement in spiritual practices, although they stress that the direction of the causation is not clear. Their findings suggest that those who have these types of experiences are less likely to be atheists.

1.2 Evidence for atheists having these experiences

If a broad definition of mystical-type experience is used, that is, one that excludes exclusively paranormal or distressing psychotic experiences but includes the other experiences described at the beginning of this review, then there is considerable evidence that atheists do at times have these experiences.

As one of the most prominent new atheists, Sam Harris (2006), in his article on the ‘10 Myths and 10 Truths about Atheism’ addresses Myth No 7: ‘Atheists are closed to spiritual experience’. He argues that atheists do experience love, ecstasy, rapture and awe and that these experiences are valued and sought by atheists. He accepts that lives have been changed through prayer and reading of sacred texts, but suggests it is through the discipline of attention and the following of prescribed behaviours that lives are transformed. Richard Dawkins (2007) and Daniel Dennett (2006) have expressed similar views. Harris, Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens can be heard discussing their views on spiritual experience on YouTube (Dawkins et al 2007).

In her study into the well-being, awe and magical thinking in America self-identified atheists, Buddhists and Christians, Caldwell-Harris et al (2011) found that 71% of the atheist participants answered positively when asked if they had: ‘ever felt wonderment or felt as if you were part of something greater than yourself?’ Nature, science or the arts were the main prior contexts and triggers for these experiences. This corroborates Harris’s view above, but leaves open the question of whether this alone constitutes a mystical-type experience of the type found in the literature.

During the late 1970’s David Hay carried out two studies which indicated that atheists and non-believers also have mystical-type experiences and that these experiences are not always seen as religious.

In a study of nearly 2,000 people, a National Opinion Poll into ecstatic, paranormal and religious experiences, Hay and Morisy (1978) found that about 43% of religious believers and 14% of non-religious people claimed to have had some kind of spiritual experience, however, since only 37 individuals from the sample identified themselves as atheist and 44

individuals identified themselves as agnostic, using these percentages as typical of these populations would be unreliable.

More usefully, perhaps, in a second study (Hay 1979) investigated the religious experiences of 100 post-graduate student teachers. They were chosen randomly from a UK University. Of the 94 students who identified their religious position, 59 did not claim any religious adherence, and 48 of these claimed to be either atheist or agnostic. From these 48 individuals, 25 answered positively to the Hardy question, *“Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?”* That is, 52% of those claiming to be either agnostic or atheist claimed to have had some kind of spiritual experience. 34% of all the participants, both religious and nonreligious, said that their experience occurred at a time of severe distress or decision, and the experiences brought about relief from it. 39% felt the experience had made them a happier or better person, and 28% felt it gave depth or direction to their life. Those who did not believe in religion tended to say their experience was not religious, others said it did not fit with their understanding of religion, suggesting that where there is no readily available interpretive framework, or credible belief system, the experience is not seen as religious. This clearly has implication for how researchers phrase questions and interpret results. Hay concludes that since these experiences occur even among agnostics and atheists they are a particular type of human experience, which although overlaid by cultural forces, remain a biological potential in man.

Bullivant (2008) is one of the few current researchers who have made initial attempts to examine the spiritual experiences specifically of atheists. He uses the term ‘irreligious

experiences', a term borrowed from the sociologist Colin Campbell (1971), to describe intense and unusual spiritual-type experiences among atheists.

He gives an account of these types of experiences taken from historical documents, particularly noting the documented experiences of freethinkers on the late 19th – early 20th century.

His contemporary case studies are taken from atheist websites, such as *Positiveatheism.org* and *Richarddawkins.net*, and describe deconversion experiences, mainly of Christians becoming atheists. A small percentage of these deconversion experiences describe experiences similar to the more commonly recorded accounts of sudden conversion experiences where non-Christians converted to Christianity. Most of these experiences were positive, often using religious language such as “epiphany”, “enlightenment” and “road to Damascus experience”. They tell of the subjects having a weight lifted from their shoulders and the sense of freedom they experienced. Apart from the direction of the conversion, it would be hard to distinguish these descriptions from some religious conversion experiences.

These studies all suggest that the assumptions underlying Schnell & Keenan's contention that atheists and mystics are at opposite ends of a continuum of what they call 'vertical transcendence' may not be as straightforward as we might at first assume.

2 The Study

The current study is part of a larger qualitative grounded theory study into the mystical-type experiences of atheists, in which self-identifying atheists were asked to write an account of their mystical-type experience prior to being interviewed.

Potential participants were asked two filter questions: *'Are you an atheist?'* and *'have you ever had a sudden, spontaneous experience that could be described as transformative, enlightening and/or of a mystical-type'*. If they answered positively to both questions they were accepted as participants. During the later interview stage of the grounded theory study, the participants were asked in more depth about their beliefs

The word 'mystical' can have different meanings for different people beyond the meanings accepted by researchers. While those who study psychology of religion may share a common idea of what the word means, for the participants in this study, who might know little about religion, there was the possibility that they might have a completely different understanding of the word and might include any unusual experience including those normally considered outside the boundaries of mystical-type experiences, such as experiences perceived to be of an occult nature, or simply anything mysterious or unfamiliar.

By studying such a nebulous group as self-identifying atheists who claimed to have had a mystical-type experience, there was the possibility that the types of experiences the atheists described would be of a completely different nature to the types of experience described in the psychological literature on spiritual and mystical experiences, which are frequently taken from a religious context. If this was the case, then any findings from the grounded theory study would be hard to reconcile with existing psychological research in this area.

Grounded theory is an inductive methodology, starting with observations and working up towards theory. However, it was desirable to check whether the openness of the questions had led participants to produce data on matters that were tangential or irrelevant to the core concerns of the study. For pragmatic reasons therefore, and a rather unusual decision for a

grounded theory study, it was decided to carry out a preliminary deductive analysis of the written accounts using directed content analysis, before starting the main grounded theory analysis.

3 Methodology

The methodology chosen for this study was directed content analysis as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). Directed content analysis is a qualitative methodology, a form of deductive thematic analysis. This was chosen in order to check the content of the participants' accounts against the findings from the existing psychological literature on mystical-type experiences. The aim was to highlight areas of commonality and difference in order to ascertain whether the atheists' written accounts of their experiences were recognisable in terms of the existing literature, or whether they were quite different from the experiences described in the psychological literature.

Hsieh and Shannon suggest using it where an existing theoretical framework can benefit from an extension of its conceptual underpinnings, or for validation purposes. They recommend that in directed content analysis, the researcher identifies key themes from existing theory or research on the subject, to create coding categories. This forms a framework for analysing the data set against these predetermined codes. In addition to codes from previous research, codes should be created for features that are not included in the pre-set codes should be analysed using thematic analysis. This would enable areas of departure from existing research, and possibly unique to atheists, to be identified.

3.1 Coding

Four areas were chosen for analysis: content, context, legacy and process. Firstly the content of the experiences in the written accounts was analysed. The codes chosen for the directed content analysis are taken from Spilka et al (1992) in their review of the central features of mystical and spiritual experiences emerging from the literature. They suggest that these seven features are the key components of mystical experience: a sense of presence of the divine; feelings of unity and completeness; impressions of reverence, sacredness and holiness; awareness of new knowledge and spiritual enlightenment; positive emotions of happiness, joy and peace; a variety of strong emotional and physical reactions; some evidence of extreme sensory stimulation and possibly hallucinatory behaviour.

The next category looked at was the context, or the trigger, for the experience. This refers to the circumstances immediately prior the experience. In this case the principal triggers described by Alister Hardy (1979) were chosen. In his book he describes the results of his extensive research into the religious experience mainly among the British population. The codes chosen are most common ones discussed in Chapter 6 of his book: *Triggers and Consequences*. They are: depression/despair (including death of others and crisis in personal relationships); a sacred place; prayer/meditation; religious worship; the various arts, music, art and literature; nature; solitude, drugs and creative work.

The legacy of these experiences was analysed next. These codes are taken from Taylor (2012). In his study of people who had experienced positive psychological transformation following spiritual experiences he identified the following features: increased well-being; intensified perception; a sense of connection; improved relationships; a less materialistic and more altruistic attitude and reduced fear of death. These were chosen as codes, except for 'sense of connection' which was considered covered by 'unity/completeness in the content

section. To these I added ‘cognitive restructuring’ which is highlighted in the work of Jackson (1997).

Finally, the process of the experience was looked at. One suggested theory that is often referred to in the psychological study of these experiences is the Batson-Schoenrade-Ventis (BSV) theory of religious experience. It suggests a stage model of religious experience (Batson and Ventis 1982). It is derived from the four-part Wallas model of creativity: preparation, incubation, illumination and validation. In the BSV model of religious experience, during the first stage the individual undergoes an existential crisis. Unable to resolve the crises the individual moves to the second stage and abandons the search for answers. She may experience despair and lose touch with normal reality. In the third stage the individual undergoes a religious experience which provides her with a new vision. In the last stage the individual’s life is lived in a reformed way and the tensions of the existential crises are resolved. Although there have been few empirical studies to test the model, the general literature on religious and spiritual experiences mentioned above lends a degree of support for it. These four stages were selected as codes for the process of mystical type experience: crisis; abandon search for answers; spiritual experience/new vision; crisis resolved. The number of participants who referred to each of these codes is shown in *Table 1*.

Those parts of the written accounts that did not fit any of the pre-selected categories were examined to see whether they represented a new category or sub-category of an existing code. When they appeared to represent a new category they were given a new code. These were later examined using thematic analysis to see whether they supported or contrasted with existing research.

3.2 Participants

Participants were sourced in various ways: editors of humanist and secular newsletters and magazines were contacted and requested to display details of the study and an appeal for participants. This included the newsletters and magazines of organisations such as The National Secular Society, The British Humanist Association and The Psychology of the Paranormal Network. An article about the project was published in The Skeptic Magazine together with an appeal for participants. The wording of the appeal asked specifically for those who identify themselves as atheists, and who had had this type of experience at least once in their lives to take part in the study.

A lecture about the project was delivered at Conway Hall, London as part of their Sunday Morning Lecture Series, and after the lecture members of the audience were asked to take part in the project if they met the participant criteria. Conway Hall in London has historically been a central meeting place for atheists and non-religious groups. Posters were created and leaflets for display around the University.

In all communications with atheists, the language used to refer to the reported experience avoided words like ‘spiritual’, or ‘religious’ as previous research indicated that atheists do not relate these words to their experience (Caldwell-Harris et al, 2011). They found that atheists scored low on questions that were framed in spiritual or religious language. For this reason those words were avoided. Rather than focus on the content of the experiences, the structural and outcome features of the experience were emphasised, such as ‘sudden’, ‘enlightening’, ‘transformative’ or ‘a mystical-type experience that had a lasting impact on you’. These words do not presume any pre-existing belief system.

Twenty nine self-identifying atheists volunteered to take part, (16 male). Ages ranged from 19 – 70. The group were highly educated. Eleven of the participants had a post-graduate qualification, including several with doctorates, nine had a degree, four had a diploma and the remainder had completed high school. The length of time they had been atheist ranged from four to seventy-four years. Fuller details can be seen in *Table 2*.

3.3 Data Generation

The participants did not answer a questionnaire relating to the above codes as the data was gathered primarily for the grounded theory study. They were simply asked to give written responses to three open-ended prompts:

- 1. In your own words please describe your experience. Give as much information as you find necessary to convey what the experience was like*
- 2. Please additionally give some idea of what you understood the experience to mean at the time.*
- 3. Please describe any long-term impact you believe the experience has had on your life.*

4 Findings from Directed Content Analysis

Some of the written accounts were less than 200 hundred words in length, while others were long essays of many thousands of words. The shorter responses gave only a limited representation of how the experience was remembered by the participant. All the written accounts were coded using the selected codes and the number of participants who referred to each code was noted. Because they were not specifically asked about any of the

codes, the recorded numbers of participants who claimed to experience each of these features is therefore almost certainly an under-estimate. The results can be seen in *Table 1*.

The results are not an exhaustive study of whether the participants experienced any of the features listed above, but the aim was to look at areas of overlap and difference to help make a judgement as to whether they could be considered part of the family of experiences described in the literature.

The most common features of their experiences mentioned by the participants, using criteria from general literature, were:

- Unity/completeness (15)
- Knowledge/spiritual enlightenment (13)
- Sensory/hallucinatory stimulation (14)
- Cognitive restructuring (12)
- Crisis (10)

According to Hood et al (2009), ‘unity’ is the key feature of mystical experiences, and this was also the most common feature mentioned by these participants, with over half mentioning it.

It should be noted that, ‘unity’, ‘sensory/hallucinatory’ and ‘crisis’ were not directly referred to in the prompts given to the participants, but were nevertheless included in many of the responses. The list of pre-determined codes, taken from existing research, the only features not mentioned by any participants were ‘less material/more altruistic’, and ‘creative work’.

Only one participant, Gerry, had few of the features on the list. Before becoming an atheist, Gerry wrote that he was brought up in an evangelical Christian home where he was taught how to have mystical experiences. He later rejected this faith. He told how his later experiences as an atheist were sometimes while on drugs and/or listening to music, and he felt that he was having the same types of experiences he was taught to have in his earlier religious upbringing. He did not give much description of the experiences he had, which is why he did not mention many of the codes above, but he was included as a participant as he appeared to be familiar with mystical-type experiences and was aware when they were being triggered.

4.1 Content of the Experiences

The most common reference in the content of the experiences was to ‘unity and completeness’. Yasmine wrote of how she had an experience of unity while she was on a Buddhist retreat when: *‘After about 5-10 minutes of raising my awareness of my surroundings, and really enjoying the sunlight on my body, the peace of the rural area, the relaxation I felt, and the beautiful countryside, I felt an overwhelming sense of peace and connection to the universe. It lasted for about 10 seconds ...’*.

Andrew wrote that he had his experience of knowledge and spiritual enlightenment while meditating more than twenty years earlier: *‘Something in me then realised that I must therefore be separate from it (from the body) in some important sense. I’m not sure what that sense was, but the fact that I was not my body was as clear as day and I have to say that even now it seems like a rock solid deduction.’*

Angela was only fourteen when she had her hallucinatory experience. She wrote that at the time she had rejected the Christian idea of God, but still believed in some supernatural entities: *‘As I walked through the front door, I became aware of an angelic presence at the*

other end of the hallway. This was usually a dark corner of the hall, but on this occasion it appeared to be very bright, with light radiating from top to bottom. There appeared to be an enormous male figure, dressed in what I would describe as ancient army dress (I suppose something like Roman images - huge feathery head-dress, metal breast-plate and so on). The figure was only present in light, i.e. not solid, but as if made of light. The presence was terrifying in a powerful, but not menacing sense. It stopped me in my tracks, and for a moment felt rooted to the spot. I was then overcome with emotion (although I don't remember the specific emotion, only feeling overwhelmed). The image only lasted for a few seconds (if that?) - it was a very transient experience, yet it felt both real and not real all at the same time.'

4.2 Context of the Experiences

Most of the participants mentioned the context in which they had their experiences. These were spread fairly evenly across the codes, apart from 'creative work' which was not mentioned by any of the participants. Meditation (rather than prayer) was the most common context of the experience, with six participants mentioning it. They described the experience as occurring either during or immediately after meditation. Buddhist meditation was the most common type of meditation mentioned. Buddhism as a belief system does not require a belief in a deity, so these atheists found practicing Buddhist meditation techniques compatible with their atheism, although they did not identify themselves as Buddhist.

Five participants mentioned that they were in a place considered sacred when they had their experience. Charles wrote: *'The one experience I remember was listening to someone playing a Bach Toccata (?) in an empty church. I went to xxxxx, a boarding school run by monks. It struck me as an odd phenomenon because this was the reverse of my usual*

experience, since while the rest of the school was singing during church services, I was wandering around the empty school as I excluded from the choir for being tone deaf. I found the experience quite comforting as I was miserable at school.'

4.3 Legacy of the Experiences

Several of the participants mentioned that the experience had a lasting legacy and beneficial effect. For example, Daniel's description of the days following his experience indicate increased wellbeing, intensified perception and a sense of connection: *'The next day I told no one of what had transpired the night before. In fact the next day was not unlike any other day in my life. Except what seemed like a heavy rucksack filled with stones had now been lifted from me. As the days passed, and whilst still able to function quite normally, I seemed to have no sense of time passing. No sense of the ordinary pressures in the world. Just an extraordinary sense of presence. Without wishing to sound dramatic I often watched the day pass through the changing light as I sat quietly in my room. I walked in woodland and observed every leaf on the tree seemed to have its own distinct identity. The world was vibrant and alive with colour. It was as if I had never really seen it before. I walked in a sea of a pulsating reality all around me. Felt the wind on my face and watched the clouds race across the sky. I felt more alive than I had ever felt.'*

Twelve of the accounts indicated a cognitive restructuring had taken place and the participant claimed s/he now saw the world in a different way. While in most cases they felt this cognitive restructuring was beneficial, Edward was an exception and wrote that the experience heralded a disturbing phase in his life. He described how he felt suddenly nauseous and lay in bed where: *'I lost sight of the room around me and all was replaced by black, except, in plain white capital letters, the word "GOD" laid before me. As the nausea*

increased I began to experience the sensation that I was moving towards the "O". At the point where I was about to go through it, it all ended: the vision disappeared, and I was released from the grip and anxiety of the increasing pain..... After this my life was dramatically different. This event marked years of what I now understand to be psychosis. At the time I imagined that my burning desire to grasp the meaning of life, the universe and everything, had been given into my understanding, Throughout almost twenty years I was aware of a force directing my life, and I even found ways of divining it. ... At the time I felt unable to share what I was going through with anybody at all including doctors, so I had no diagnosis. It is my current understanding that I was suffering with psychosis.'

4.4 Process of the Experiences

The Batson-Schoenrade-Ventis model for the stages of the experience was not clearly supported from the accounts. This is possibly because there was insufficient data in them to be certain that the participants had gone through each, or even most, of the four stages. The 'spiritual experience' and the 'crises' stages had most support with twenty-nine and ten participants respectively mentioning them. However, only one mentioned abandoning a search for answers before their experience.

Patsy wrote that she had a number of experiences over several years. Some could be described as inspiring transcendent experiences while others were disturbing. She told of a crisis in her life prior to her first 'out-of-body' experience, where she felt part of herself being drawn out of her body: *'This experience happened to me when I was 20 years old. At the time I was underweight (anorexic) and recovering from an emotional breakdown. No one knew what I was going through inside, and I had no medical intervention so no medicinal/psychiatric drugs were involved.'*

Oscar also told of a crisis prior to his experience where he had an overwhelming experience of his deceased brother's presence: *'My younger brother was killed on 18th November, 2003, the night of his 44th birthday. He was returning from late duty as a detective, in xxxxxx. His car was forced from the road and he hit a tree, dying instantly'*.

However, in neither of these cases was the crises resolved through the subsequent experiences, so they did not conform to the BSV model.

Overall, the content, context and legacy of the experiences described by this group of atheists in their written accounts suggest that the experiences they described were similar in nature to those found in the psychological literature on these experiences.

In addition to the features that corresponded with the pre-determined codes, two further themes were identified from the written accounts. These themes are not widely referred to in the literature, and further research is needed to ascertain if they are unique to atheists. These were:

4.5 Non-rigid Belief Systems

Many of the participants had changed their belief system at least once in their lives, and a few had changed several times. Most had a Christian upbringing and became atheist either in adolescence or as adults. In some cases their change in faith was associated with their mystical-type experience, but in other cases it was independent of the experience. While most appeared currently to be quite established in their atheism, the data suggest that earlier in their lives they were more open to change in their belief identity. Others admitted that they were still open to change in the future. The most extreme example of this was Angela who wrote: *'I have through my life held Roman Catholic and other Christian beliefs, various*

kinds of spiritual and other New Age beliefs, considered Buddhism, read about Judaism and Islam, been actively interested in UFO stories and various conspiracy stories. I would now describe myself as an atheist, with a general & skeptical interest in all forms of religion, myth and human narrative. Nonetheless, I am aware that the 'certainty' with which I consider myself an atheist today, could also change, as I experience the rest of my life that is to come!'

More typical was Brian, who wrote: *'I was brought up to think that there was no question that there was a god, that one of the worst things one could do was to doubt it, and that worries about the logical paradoxes and the problem of evil were "none of my business I can still remember that when I first considered there not being a god as a resolution of the paradoxes, it was like the proverbial "bolt from the blue" very similar to the conversion experiences described by believers My experience was, I think, similar to religious conversions I have read descriptions of, ie like "A bolt from the blue". I do not say this was a "conversion", just similar to one. ... It meant I no longer had to try to reconcile ideas about god with reality. I could continue finding out about the world without that constraint.'*

4.6 A need to Understand and Explain

There was a clear attempt by many participants to make sense of their experience in rational terms. Several participants went on to further formal or informal academic study in an attempt to understand what had happened. Others had read widely around the subject of anomalous and mystical experiences as a result of their experience, and referred to various books which they thought explained the neurology of the experience. Still others had developed their own theories to explain the experience. They did not have a religious interpretative framework for explaining their experience, so they had worked out their own

way of explaining it. This contrasted with Spilka's description of those who have had such experiences making attributions to the deity and the self. In the case of the atheists, the most common explanation was to describe it as a neurological mistake.

Valerie devised her own theory to explain the 'belief in God' experience she had while attending a church service while on holiday in Barbados. It had a strong impact on her. She tried to make sense of it and was searching for ways that she might have it again. She wrote: '*... I consider myself to be a militant atheist. ... I am interpreting my experience as my unconscious trying to fulfil my desire for a better connection with myself and other people. ... in the past being in churches has often made me feel repulsed, uncomfortable, alone and overpowered by what I feel is silliness and madness. However, I want to have that feeling again and I am really pissed off that it appears that I need to go to a religious institution of all places to get it, considering how anti-religion I am.... However, I am very much hoping that I will find secular ways of having the same experience although I have no idea where that might be.*'

Gerry, who was brought up in a fundamentalist family had worked out his current understanding of these types of experiences: '*... now that I have gotten older, matured, and taken on a much different set of standards and guidelines. I have determined that many of these feelings weren't associated with God at all. When I attended a concert I would feel the same pull that I felt in chapel. It's an amazing feeling to be at a concert and let go of inhibitions and stress and just listen and dance to the music. These feelings were the same as the ones when I thought God was touching me in church. ...*'

5 Discussion

Directed Content Analysis stepped outside Grounded theory methodology, as it is a top-down deductive approach. It was helpful insofar as it was a straightforward way of ascertaining that the self-identifying atheists in this study described experiences that were similar to those found in the literature in terms of content, triggers, and legacy. There was insufficient data to determine whether they followed the BSV model of religious experience. It also provided an example of how using a mixture of methods can provide a fuller picture of the object of study than may be the case with sticking only to one methodology.

Analysing themes identified as outside of the predetermined codes suggest that although the experiences were similar to those of believers, the attributions the participants gave to the source of the experiences were based on scientific logic rather than religious explanations. It was not clear whether the search for rational explanations is a feature of atheists particularly. It is possible that those believers who accept rational explanations for their experiences tend to be ignored in research because of the way research questions are framed. This group of atheists also appeared to be open to changes in their understanding of what constituted truth, at least at certain periods of their lives, again it is not clear if this is a feature of atheists or if it is also the case with believers.

Directed content analysis did not give us much more that was new, such as insights into individual meaning-making nor the participants' individual theories of what the experience was. It did not tell us when atheists report experiences of a spontaneous, transformative, enlightening or mystical type, given that they do not believe in supernatural agency:

- How do they interpret them?

- What meaning do they give to them?
- What effect (if any) do they have on the participants' sense of identity?"

These questions will be explored and hopefully answered through Grounded Theory analysis.

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