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Can Devil Exist?—A Contribution from the Scientific Study of Religion to Religious Studies

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I

Whether God exists is a question which has agitated the minds of several people, all the way from the man in the street to the scholar, throughout the ages. The existence or otherwise of the Devil has not attracted the same degree of attention. The purpose of this paper then is twofold: (I) to broaden the question of the existence of entities such as God to include that of the Devil and (2) to indicate that the scientific study of religion may provide a basis for doing so.

II

The point of entry is provided by the work of the clinical psychiatrist, Eugene D. d'Aquili, which takes up the question of what could be considered real. This is what D'Aquili, a psychiatrist, has to say about a question most would think belongs to the province of philosophers: "Reality is a concept which probably can never be defined without begging the question. We can state that reality is a very strong sense of what is, but we probably cannot go much further than that. A sense of reality is equivalent to what I call a primary epistemic or knowing state."¹ He goes on to say: "These states are primary because they are not derived from sense perception but rather define the form of what is perceived. Hence they are *a priori* states. What makes them define reality for a particular person is the individual's sense, when he is in one, that what he is experiencing is fundamentally and ultimately what is, and that any other perception of reality is illusion or deception."²

On the basis of his research d'Aquili draws up a model of primary sensory states, which represent "primary epistemic states" or "primary senses of reality".³ This model classifies these primary sensory states into nine categories, on the basis of the following parameters: "(1) perceptions of either unitary or multiple discrete being ; (2) relationships that are either regular or irregular; and (3) affective valences that are either positive, negative or neutral."⁴

The following nine primary sensory states can thus be logically derived "without involving internal contradiction".⁵

1. multiple discrete reality—regular relationships—neutral affect
2. multiple discrete reality—regular relationships—positive affect
3. multiple discrete reality—regular relationships—negative affect

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4. multiple discrete reality—irregular relationships—neutral affect
5. multiple discrete reality—irregular relationships—positive affect
6. multiple discrete reality—irregular relationships—negative affect
7. Unitary being —neutral affect
8. Unitary being —positive affect
9. Unitary being —negative affect

III

I think it will be useful to mention at this stage that it is the ninth of these nine states which will ultimately concern us most in relation to the question posed in the paper. However as it is embedded in a broader scheme, it seems wise to briefly indicate what the other states involve, before the last one is taken up for special consideration.

State 1 basically corresponds to our normal daily state, the “state most readers are in at this moment.”⁶ It is also called the baseline state. State 2 is one permeated by a feeling of joy and elation, associated with ‘conversion experience’ or ‘cosmic consciousness’. State 3, by contrast, is one of depression, a state so “profoundly negative”,⁷ as to be dubbed *Weltschmerz*. States 4-6 are the kind one might associate with “dreams and various drug experiences”.⁸

It is in the discussion of states 7-9 that d’Aquili makes his major contribution to our understanding, first by insisting on their “reality” and second, by providing an explanation of these states in terms of the hemispherical structure of the brain,¹⁰ and third, by associating state no 7, characterised by ‘unitary being, neutral effect’ with the experience of Void in Buddhism¹¹ and of no. 8, characterised by “unitary being, positive effect” with theistic and absolutistic mystical experiences.”¹²

IV

This brings us to a consideration of the ninth state: “no. 9, unitary being—negative affect”.¹³

Two observations made by d’Aquili regarding this state are highly significant. The first is that of [nine] logically possible primary sensory states it appears that only eight actually exist. I have been able to find no evidence either from the literature or in my practice that the state of unitary being with a negative valence exists.¹⁴

The second is that

The ninth sense of reality AUB [Absolute Unitary Being] suffused with negative affect, has only theoretical existence, so far as a I can tell. I am not familiar with any examples from traditional religious literature, and I have certainly never come across such an example clinically. If this ninth sense of reality exists it would be the AUB analogue of *Weltschmerz*. But such an intensely negative experience may simply be incompatible with physiological homeostasis. In any case, unless positive evidence can be brought forward to demonstrate the existence of this ninth theoretical sense of reality, I must assume that it is just that, theoretical.¹⁵

It seems to me, however, that it is possible to go beyond d’Aquili in two ways. First of all, accounts of a negative response, such as blankness, or even madness, to the experience of what appears to be “absolute being” are not unknown in mystical literature. But the second point is

potentially even more significant. Before it can be made, however, it is important to recall that, according to d'Aquili, the experience of God is an interpretation of the eighth state: "In the post hoc description the experience may be translated as a personal God or as a totally nonpersonal experience of total being."¹⁶ And again: "Whether or not the phenomenon is interpreted as the experience of God or as the experience of a philosophical absolute tends more or less to depend on the *a priori* conceptual frame of the subject."¹⁷

In other words, if the accounts of the experience of unitary being with negative affect are credible, then there is no reason why, in a manner analogous to God, they may not be perceived as experiences of the Devil.

NOTES

1. Eugene G. d' Aquili, "Senses of Reality in Science and Religion: A Neuroepistemological perspective", *Zygon* 17:4 (December 1982) p.361.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 362
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, p. 364
8. *Ibid.*, p. 365
9. *Ibid.*, p. 366-367
10. *Ibid.*, p. 372-376
11. *Ibid.*, p. 376, 380
12. *Ibid.*, p. 377.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 362
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, p. 367
16. *Ibid.*, p. 377
17. *Ibid.*