

**Chrtc 390 Module 11 Slides  
by Heather Looy and Paul  
Flaman: Ordinary Religious  
Experiences**

# Dr. Heather Looy's Slides adapted by Paul Flaman: Ordinary Religious Experience

- Extraordinary: rare   Ordinary: common
- Scientifically accessible dimensions of religious experience:
  - **cognitive:** rational assent to beliefs, doctrines, moral rules
  - **social/behavioral:**
    - acting according to doctrines, moral rules
    - participation in traditions, sacraments, rituals
    - teaching/learning
    - prayer/meditation
  - **emotional:**
    - numinosity: sensing the sacred/divine
    - warmth & connection in community
    - peace, joy, conviction, awe, guilt, disgust, shame, anger, fear
  - **effects of religious commitment, participation**



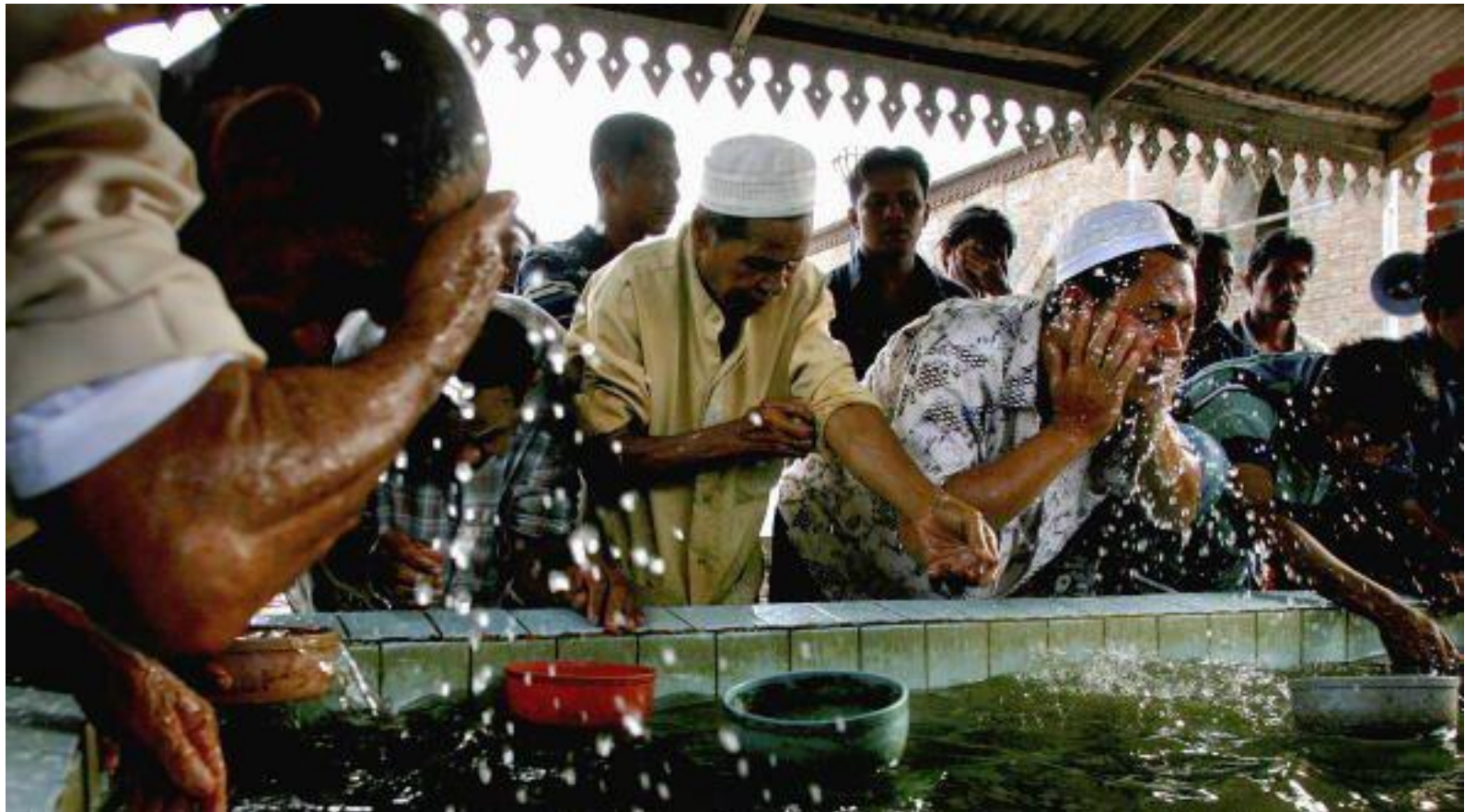
Jewish Family celebrating a Passover Meal

Jews praying at the Wailing Wall—remains of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem



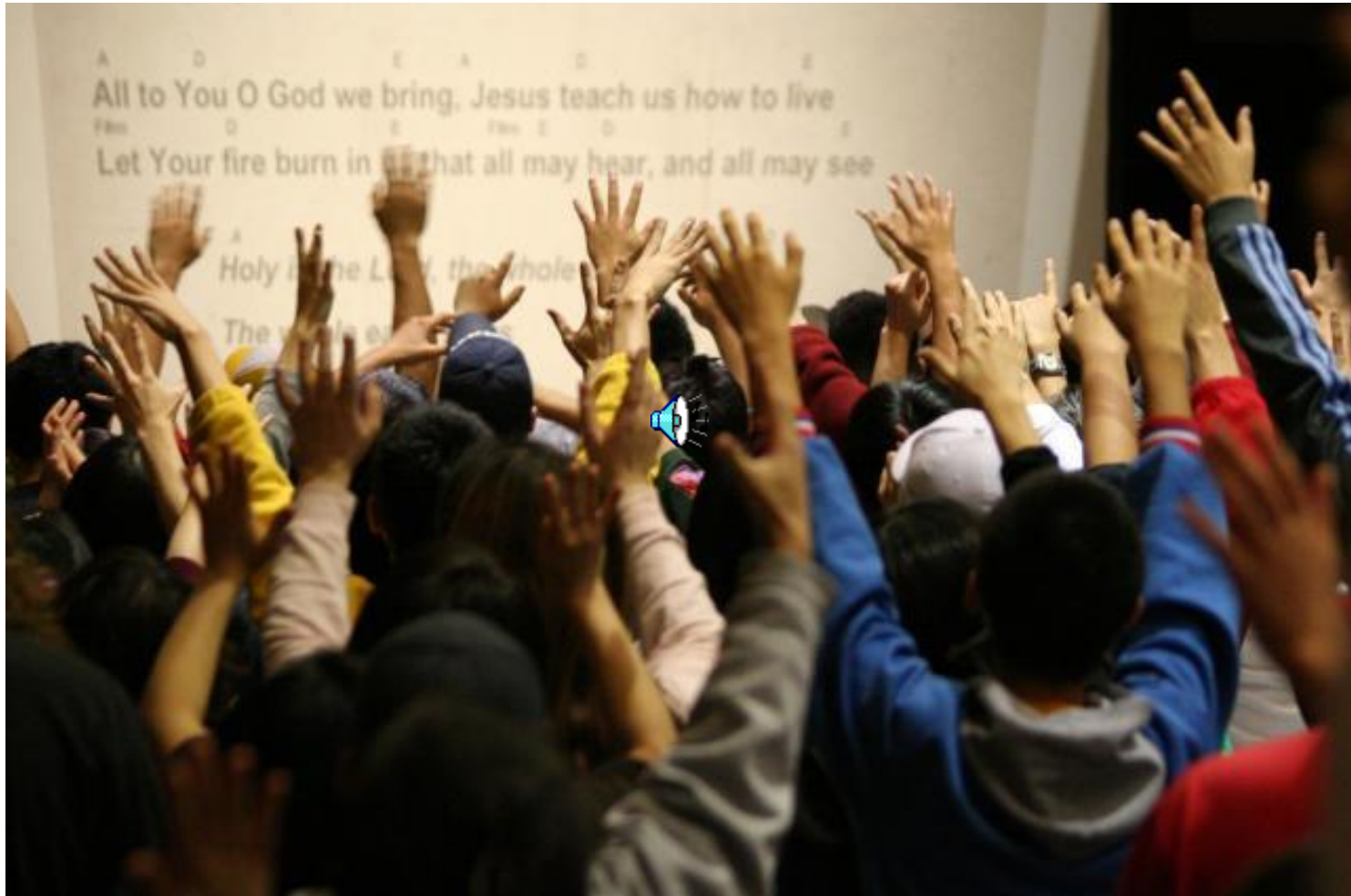
## Muslims at Pilgrimage in Mecca





Ritual Purification Washing—common with Muslims

## Christian Pentecostal Prayer: Raising hands in praise to God



## A Black Gospel Christian Choir





## Buddhist Monks



## A Buddhist Meditating





Hindus in the Ganges River in India



North American Indigenous People Smudging



A Catholic Priest using Incense symbolizing prayer,  
raising one's heart and mind to God



An elderly person praying the Rosary, a traditional Catholic form of Prayer



An infant receiving Christian Baptism



Pope Benedict XVI distributing Holy Communion (Eucharist)



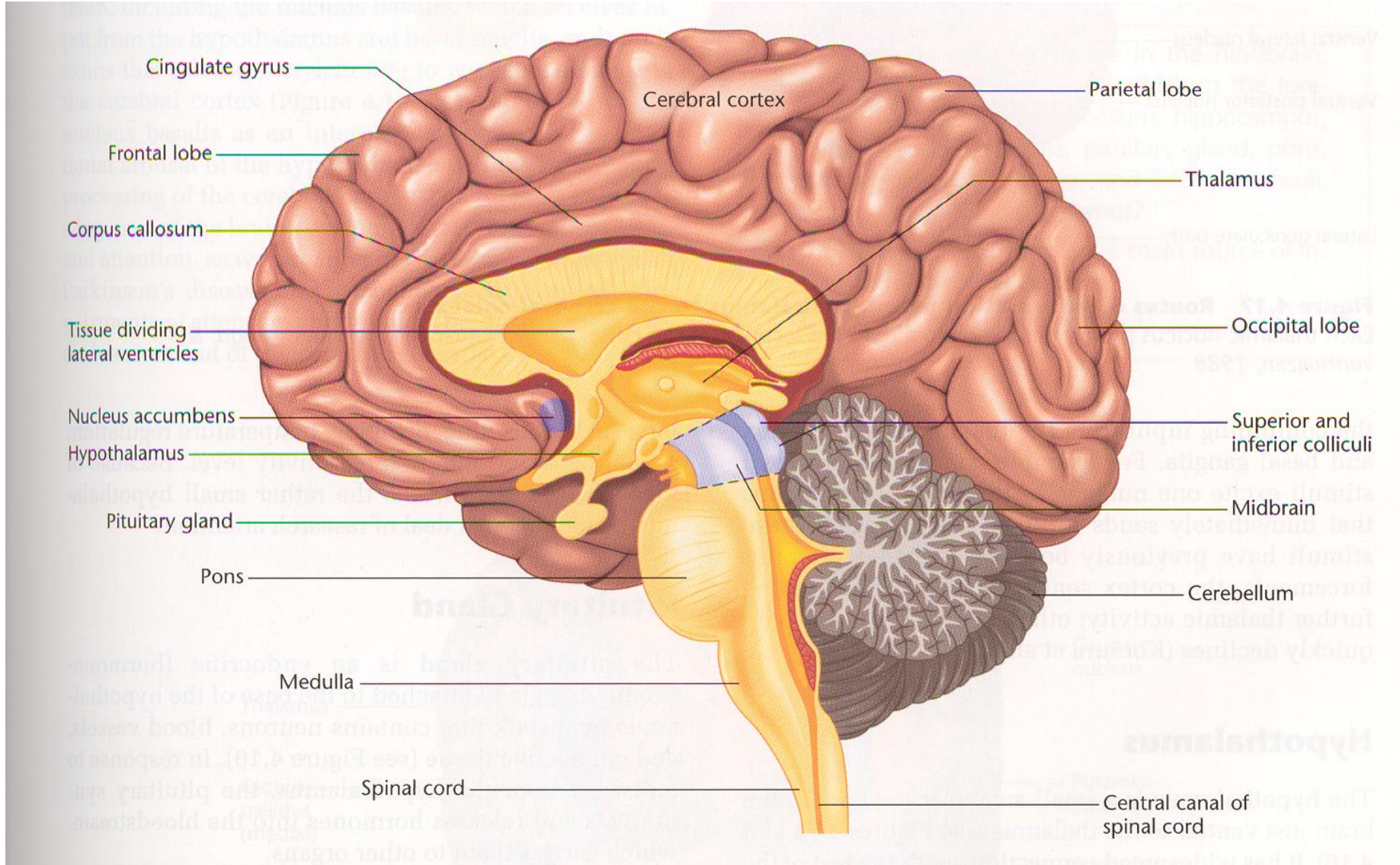
# Ordinary Religious Experience

## BIOPSYCHOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS OF ORE:

### ■ music:

- produces euphoria, peace, connection
- contains information targeting rational processes
- chanting, drumming, singing, instruments
- Expect individual and communal religious practices to be reflected in the body including the brain
- Normal psychological & neural processes are involved:
  - temporal lobe: auditory, memory, emotion
  - limbic system (emotional responses): amygdala, hypothalamus
  - brain stem: arousal
  - via hypothalamus: autonomic arousal or quiescence
  - endorphin release results in a feeling of well-being: produced by pituitary gland and hypothalamus

**(See the following slide regarding the related parts of the brain)**



# Ordinary Religious Experience

## Music (cont'd):

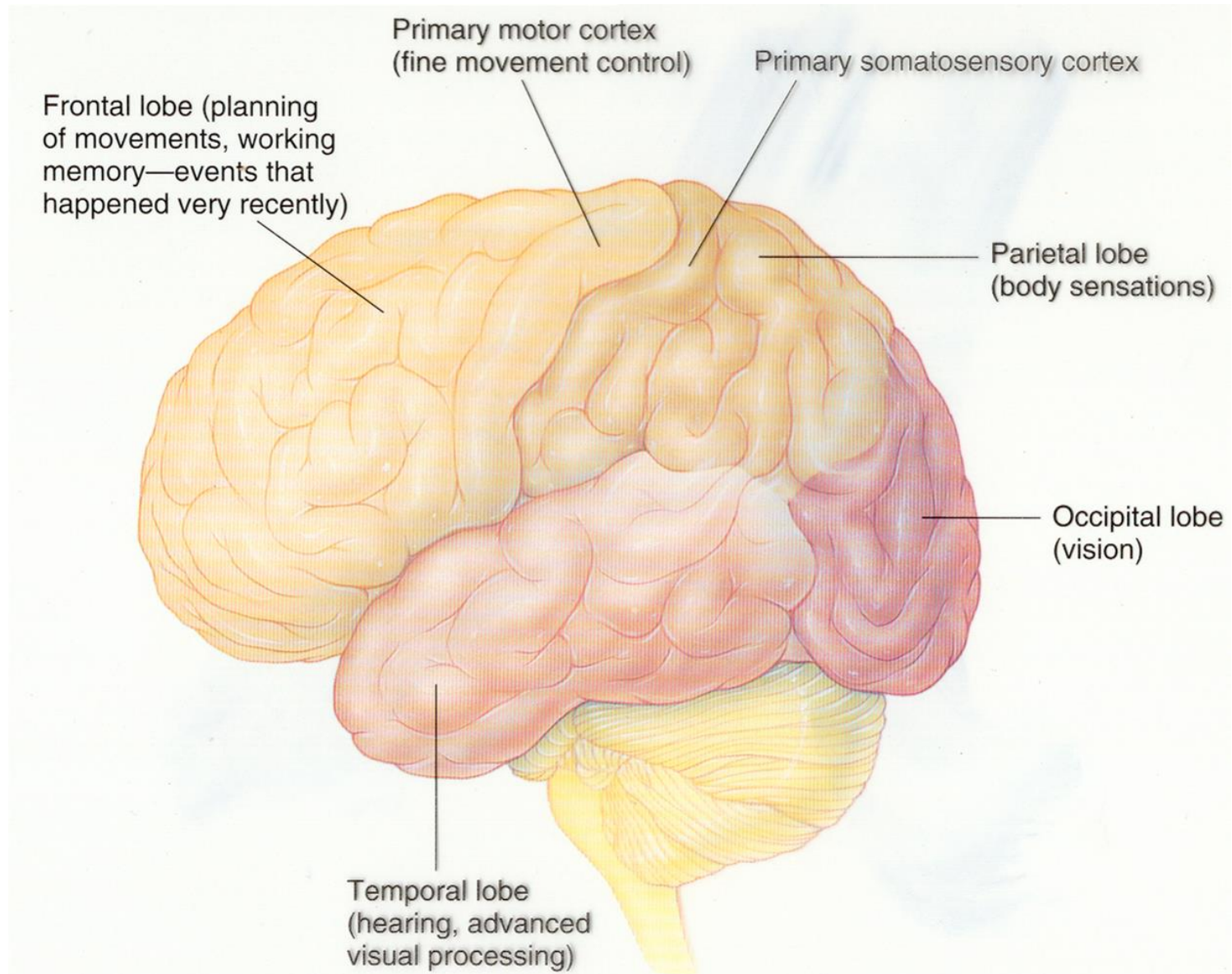
- are effects of music *wrongly* viewed as the result of genuine spiritual connection?
  - Music creates responses regardless of context
  - But context alters interpretation of response
- do religious persons *claim* that music's effects come from a genuine spiritual connection?
  - Yes: forms of chant used to alter consciousness and connect to God/divine
  - No: recognized as human attempt to:
    - give praise to the divine
    - deliberately bond the community
    - persuade/manipulate people into conviction/commitment

# Ordinary Religious Experience

## Connection:

- sensing divine presence/relationship, communal connection
  - Newberg: experience of unity (with God, community) lies on a continuum
    - can be deliberately induced via ritual, meditation, prayer
    - associated with alterations in brain activity:
      - increase in prefrontal cortex (focusing)
      - decrease in posterior superior parietal lobe (losing “self”)

**(See the following Slide re the related brain parts)**



# Ordinary Religious Experience

## Emotion & Altered Consciousness:

- autonomic nervous system: sympathetic and parasympathetic branches
  - sympathetic: arousing, energy-releasing
  - parasympathetic: relaxing, energy-conserving
- ANS shifts with worship experiences:
  - high sympathetic: release, arousal, excitation: “soaring”
  - high parasympathetic: quiescence, deep relaxation, peace
  - high sympathetic with parasympathetic spillover:
    - orgasmic, rapturous, a “rush” surging into trance-like state, sense of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi)
  - high parasympathetic with sympathetic spillover: oceanic bliss within which one experiences sense of deep power
  - both high: may be related to extraordinary religious experience

# Ordinary Religious Experience

## ■ Biopsychological Studies:

### □ Glossolalia:

- Speaking in tongues (common in some groups)
- Christianity, Oracle of Delphi, shamanism, voodoo
- Foreign language or “spiritual language?”
- Unpatterned reorganization of phonemes
- Not associated with mental illness
- May be learned (by many? all?)
- Newberg (2006): language regions decrease activity, emotional centres increase activity

# Ordinary Religious Experience

## Interpretations:

- “ordinary” religious experiences have a strong emotional component
- connecting emotional response with rational thought is *essential* for good judgement and moral action
  - thus, no surprise that following a religion involves emotion as well as cognition
- but thoughts and emotions can be manipulated
  - sin may distort the normal healthy interplay of thought & feeling
    - relying solely on one or the other is inappropriate in judging validity of a belief
    - what is the difference between inappropriate manipulation and wise use of human nature?



# Ordinary Religious Experience

## Interpretations:

- religions are practised by embodied beings: practices utilise bodies and are reflected in their function
- did we evolve to develop religion(s)?
  - If so, why?
    - Designed by God to connect to spiritual reality?
    - Functions to provide cohesion and stability in large communities?
    - Both?
- More data:
  - people within religious communities are generally healthier (physically, psychologically), happier, have more stable relationships, less likely to engage in crime, than those outside of such communities
  - is it *religion* that produces these effects or simply being in *community*?

# Ordinary Religious Experience: Paul Flaman

## Christian Experience & Theological Interpretation

### □ **Apostle Paul, 1 Cor 13:**

- without love (*agape*) the charismatic gifts and extraordinary religious experiences are nothing; love is the greatest gift of God and endures.

### □ **St. Therese of Lisieux (1873-97--died at 24)**

- A French cloistered nun who wanted to do many things
- She found her vocation in love, to be the “heart” of the Church
- Her “little” or “ordinary” way: doing little things, listening, being attentive, patient ... with “extraordinary” love
- [Compare Jean Vanier: none of us is called to do great things]
- By faith she appreciated God’s love and presence in every detail of her life, whether felt or not--compare the sun which is always there, even when we do not sense its light & warmth.
- Her mature spirituality has been appreciated by millions; she is not a “mystic” (von Balthasar); was declared a doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II.

# Ordinary Religious Experience

## **Christian Experience continued:**

### ■ **St. John of the Cross (1542-91)**

- A Carmelite & great Spanish mystical theologian
- God often draws people from sin initially with stronger spiritual pleasures, but then leads the person to a more mature love & unity with God, via trials, dark nights ... (Compare Mt 5:48 and Jesus' call to love perfectly).

### ■ **Henry Nouwen (1932-96):**

- A Dutch Catholic priest, university professor, lived the last part of his life in L'Arche near Toronto with mentally disabled adults.
- A very popular spiritual author (over 40 books)
- Reading: *agape* (divine love) drives out fear and leads us into intimacy (our home) in God ...

### ■ **Christian Spirituality today: holistic and relational**

- See the Class Notes regarding my course Chrtc 292 Spirituality for Today's Christians.

# Ordinary Religious Experience

## Christian Experience continued:

- **Joint Lutheran/Catholic 1999 document on justification**
  - N. 15. .... Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works. [cf. Mt 25 re responding to the needs of people]
  - N. 16. All people are called by God to salvation in Christ. Through Christ alone are we justified, when we receive this salvation in faith. Faith is itself God's gift through the Holy Spirit who works through word and sacrament in the community of believers and who, at the same time, leads believers into that renewal of life which God will bring to completion in eternal life. [cf. Eph 2:11-21 re reconciliation]

# Ordinary Religious Experience

## Non-Christian Religious Experiences

- See the Class Notes regarding the October 25-28, 1999 Interreligious Assembly organized by the Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue which met in Vatican City.
- Consider Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*:
  - His observations in Nazi concentration camp (some prisoners gave up; some became hard; some grew...) and development of logotherapy (meaning therapy)
- Consider the Apostle Paul, Rm 1 and 2:
  - non-Christians can know something about God's nature and morality; many fall into idolatry ...
- Consider the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 14-16 re God's salvation, Christians and non-Christians
- Consider religious experience, phenomenology and scientific study including neuroscience ....
  - What questions do these raise? E.g., are Buddhist & Christian experiences and mysticism the same and/or different? Cf. Nirvana vs. Heaven.