

What Really Happens With Group Visions

Several people on the blog have pushed back on my claim that group hallucinations (what I've called non-veridical visions) can occur. Psychologically, is that really possible? How is it actually possible that a group of, say, twelve people could have the same mental breakdown leading them to see exactly the same thing at the same time?

First, some people have objected to my term "vision" since psychologists don't use that term. They talk instead about "hallucinations." OK, I'll concede the point. Religious studies scholars, though, use the term visions, since visionary experiences are very much a part of what it is scholars of religion study (visionaries are stock and trade of the religious studies scholar), and when it comes to the study of the Bible – my own field of expertise – it is common to talk about visions of heaven, or visions of God, or ... visions of Jesus after his death. No one talks about the hallucinations of Jesus, since that prejudices the issue of whether Jesus really appeared to people or if they were just having a strange brain phenomenon.

But could multiple people have the same vision all at once?

Can the very same internal mental activity caused by the firing of certain neurons (or however it happens) occur independently in numerous people all at the same time? OK, in case anyone hasn't figured it out, no, of course I don't think that's possible. Then why do I keep saying that group visions are possible? I've actually tried to word what I've wanted to say carefully, even though I'm sure someone can go back and find places where I haven't been careful. What I usually try to say are things such as the following (I'm lifting these quotations from my earlier blog post):

That something led people to think they saw Jesus when in fact they were seeing something else

How is it people thought they saw Jesus alive again after his death if in fact Jesus did not really appear to them?

That's actually what I mean. Groups of people do indeed claim to have had visions of Jesus and probably actually think they saw Jesus. I'm calling that a group vision. But I do not think personally that they saw Jesus. You can call those hallucinations. But I think it's even a bit more nuanced than that, since I don't think everyone had the same vision all at once.

What I think is this: groups of people often *claim* to have seen the same thing at once, even though none of them actually saw that thing. I'll explain how it works by giving a psychological study in which – in a realm outside of religion – this kind of thing happens. I've taken the example from my book Jesus Before the Gospels.

On October 4, 1992, an El Al Boeing 707 that had just taken off from Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam lost power in two engines. The pilot tried to return to the airport but couldn't make it. The plane crashed into an eleven-story apartment building in the Amsterdam suburb of Bijlmermeer. The four crew members and thirty-nine people in the building were killed. The crash was, understandably, the leading news story in the Netherlands for days.

Ten months later, in August 1993, Dutch psychology professor Hans Crombag and two colleagues gave a survey to 193 university professors, staff, and students in the country. Among the questions was the following: "Did you see the television film of the moment the plane hit the apartment building?" In their responses 107 of those surveyed (55%) said Yes, they had seen the film. Sometime later the researchers gave a similar survey with the same question to 93

law school students. In this instance, 62 (66%) of the respondents indicated that they had seen the film. There was just one problem. There was no film.

These striking results obviously puzzled the researchers, in part because basic common sense should have told anyone that there could not have been a film. Remember, this is 1992, before cell phone cameras. The only way to have a film of the event would have been for a television camera crew to have trained a camera on this particular apartment building in a suburb of Amsterdam at this exact time, in expectation of an imminent crash. And yet, between half and two-thirds of the people surveyed – most of them graduate students and professors – indicated they had seen the non-existent film. Why would they think they had seen something that didn't exist?

Even more puzzling were the detailed answers that some of those interviewed said about what they actually saw on the film, for example, whether the plane crashed into the building horizontally or at vertical and whether the fire caused by the plane started at impact or only later. None of that information could have been known from a film, because there was no film. So why did these people remember, not only seeing the crash but also details about how it happened and what happened immediately afterward?

Obviously they were imagining it, based on logical inferences (the fire must have started right away) and on what they had been told by others (the plane crashed into the building as it was heading straight down). The psychologists argued that these people's imaginations became so vivid, and were repeated so many times, that they eventually did not realize they were imagining something. They thought they were remembering it. They really thought that. In fact they did remember it. But it was a false memory. Not just a false memory one of them had. A false memory most of them had.

The researchers concluded: "It is difficult for us to distinguish between what we have actually witnessed, and what common sense inference tells us that must also have been the case." In fact, commonsense inference, along with information we get by hearsay from others, together "conspire in distorting an eyewitness's memory." Indeed "this is particularly easy when, as in our studies, the event is of a highly dramatic nature, which almost by necessity evokes strong and detailed visual imagery."

This was a memory of a large group of people who all remember seeing the same thing (or nearly the same thing) at the same time, even though none of them saw it. If you don't want to call that a group vision, that's absolutely fine with me. What I'm saying is that a group of people thought they saw something they didn't see. (The difference in this example, of course, is that the people in this study were not all standing together at the time when they had the vision – but we have records of that sort of thing happening as well.)

As I said in my earlier post, I don't actually think groups of people all at one and the same time saw Jesus after his death, any more than I think groups of people actually see the Blessed Virgin Mary at one time today. What I think does happen is that someone has a vision (non-veridical – that is, a hallucination or, as one reader of the blog has suggested, possibly an illusion). He tells someone else who tells someone else (e.g., someone else who was there at the time) who tells someone else, and soon they all remember seeing it. Only one of them saw it. But the entire group remembers seeing it. Vividly remembers it.

The thing about false memories is that they are just as firmly implanted in our brains as real memories – sometimes even more firmly implanted. There is no way to differentiate between true and false memories. Our brains can't do it. Once you remember seeing Mary, you really remember it. When numerous individuals report having seen her at the time, even if they

didn't see her, that's what I mean by a group vision. In their heads, that's what they all saw.

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