What is Religious Experience?

- The term ‘religious experience’ can conjure up a wide and diverse series of images.
- We might assume that it can mean anything from saying a prayer, to attending a service at a place of worship, to ‘hearing the voice of God’.
- However, our understanding of the term is important in investigating the concept.

Definition of Religious Experience

- A religious experience is a non-empirical occurrence, and may be perceived as supernatural.
- It can be described as a ‘mental event’ which is undergone by an individual, and of which that person is aware.
- Such an experience can be spontaneous, or it may be brought about as a result of intensive training and self-discipline.
- Recipients of religious experiences usually say that what has happened to them has ‘drawn them into’ a deeper knowledge or awareness of God.
- It is very important to remember that the experience itself is not a substitute for the Divine, but a vehicle that is used to bring people closer to the Divine.
- The experience that each individual has is absolutely unique and cannot be shared with anyone.
- Finally, genuine religious experiences see to be encouraging; they do not condemn the individual, but help them to live a better life, or help others, for example.

The Types of Religious Experience
Richard Swinburne talks of there being five different types of religious experience.

The first two are within the 'public' realm, and the next three within the 'private'.

Public

1. You see 'God's action' in a public object or scene. For example, the sunset is really the 'hand of God', or the blooming of a flower is a 'miracle of God'.

2. A breach of natural law. Miracles often come under the category of public religious experiences. For example, where water turns into wine or Jesus raises the dead.

Private

3. A personal experience that can mostly be described through normal language. There are many other example of this form of experience: Moses and the burning bush, Saul on the road to Damascus, visions of the Virgin Mary, and Mohammed's vision of the Angel Gabriel.

4. A personal experience that cannot be described in normal language. That is, it is ineffable. For example, such 'mystical experiences' that can only be explained by using negatives (saying what it is not) or metaphor. This is more common with the more mystical elements within religious tradition.

5. No specific experience, but more of a constant, or regular, feeling that God is simply 'there'. His presence can be sensed. In all cases, there is an experience of God, or some kind of Absolute force or being.

Characteristics of Religious Experiences
• There is an infinite number of different religious experiences, as each one is unique, but there have been attempts to classify them based largely upon the results of the experience.
• The main classifications of religious experience are:
  ▪ Visions
  ▪ Conversion
  ▪ Numinosity
  ▪ Mystical Experience

**Visions**

• A religious vision occurs when an individual believes that they have seen or heard something supernatural or a supernatural being.
• There are 3 ways in which the individual may experience a vision:

  1. An **intellectual** vision brings knowledge and understanding such as a revelation from God.
  2. An **imaginary** vision where something that strengthens faith is seen with the mind’s eye such as Jacob’s vision of a ladder to heaven (Genesis 28: 10-22)
  3. A **corporeal** vision is where the figure is externally present such as St Bernadette’s visions of the Virgin Mary.

**Example of an intellectual vision:**

• Julian of Norwich, the 14-15th century mystic, is a particularly good example of someone who received visions.
• In *The Revelations of Divine Love*, she recounted one vivid experience:

  ‘And he showed me more, a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, on the palm of my hand, round like a ball. I looked at it thoughtfully and wondered, ‘What is this?’ And the answer came, ‘It is all that is made’. I marvelled that it continued to exist and did not suddenly disintegrate it was so small. And again my mind supplied the answer, ‘It exists, both now and forever, because God loves it. In short, everything owes its existence to the love of God.’

  *Julian of Norwich, The Revelations of Divine Love*

**Example of an imaginary vision:**

• Sometimes dreams are considered by individuals to have been visions.
• For example in Matthew’s Gospel Joseph is warned in a dream to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt to protect them from Herod.
**Example of a corporeal vision:**

- St Bernadette was 14 years old when she had visions of the Virgin Mary over several months.
- At first the figure she saw did not even speak to her but later Bernadette was given instructions by ‘The Immaculate Conception’ (The Virgin Mary), that the spring water at Lourdes had healing powers and that a chapel was to be built on the site.

**The Numinous**

- The numinous is often described as the feeling of being in the presence of something greater.
- Many testimonies from those claiming to have had a religious experience refer to a sense of being in the presence of an awesome power, yet feeling distinctly separate from it.
- The word given to describe this feeling is numinous.
- While many regard numinosity as a feature of religious experience, some classify it as a ‘type’ in its own right and contrast it with mystical experience.
- The German theologian Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) used the term ‘numinous’ in *The Idea of the Holy* (1936), in referring to being in the presence of an awesome power.
- He suggested that religion must derive from a being that is totally separate from this world.
- It is in the presence of such a being that numinosity is experienced.
- Otto claimed that many of the visions recorded in the Bible, such as Moses’ vision of the burning bush, are experience of the numinous.

**Conversion**

- Conversion is the adoption of a new religious belief that differs from a previously held belief.
- This is when the effects of a religious experience are life-changing.
- The result of a conversion on a personal level is usually a greater understanding of faith.
‘Religious conversion’ is the process that leads to the adoption of a religious attitude or way of life.

These effects can be permanent or temporary.

**Types of conversion**

- There are basically two forms of mental occurrence which lead to a difference in the conversion process:
  1. A conscious and voluntary experience – volitional type (Gradual conversion)
  2. An involuntary and unconscious experience – self-surrender type (Sudden conversion)

- The volitional type features a gradual change and consists of the slow development of new moral and spiritual habits.
- It may be the case that the person suddenly ‘becomes aware’ of the change one day.

**Features of conversion**

- As a rule, there are two things in the mind of the candidate for conversion:
  1. The present ‘wrongness’ in their life – their sins, perhaps – that they want to change.
  2. The positive changes they wish to make.

- While a majority of conversion are clearly gradual, the sudden experience would appear to be the most significant and profound.
- It often affects people who have no religious faith whatsoever before the experience.
- In turn, what is most significant about the gradual conversion is the process involved.
- It would appear that to begin with a person rejects any notion of religious faith, for whatever reason.
- He or she then reaches a position in which some elements seem acceptable.
- This continues until such time as there is a ‘climax’, at which point complete conversion occurs.

**Examples of conversions**

- Religious conversion is likely to include a change in belief on religious topics, which in turn leads to changes in the motivation for one’s behaviour within the social environment.
- As a result, it is appropriate to speak of **intellectual, moral** or **social conversions**.
- **Intellectual conversions**: A change in the way of thinking about something.
- **Moral conversions**: A change in behaviour so that the individual does what is thought to be right.
• **Social conversions**: acceptance of a different way of life or worship.

**St Paul:**

• St Paul heard the voice of Jesus – ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’
• This is followed by a declaration that the speaker is ‘The risen Christ’.
• After this vision on the road to Damascus, Paul converted to Christianity.
• Paul spent the rest of his life spreading the Christian message and is believed, according to Christian tradition, to have died a martyr’s death in Rome.
• The name change from Saul to Paul is significant to show the conversion of Saul/Paul to Christianity.

**Davey Falcus**

• Davey Falcus was a renowned criminal from Newcastle upon Tyne.
• During his teenage years and early twenties Davey was involved heavily in the drug scene and was a very violent man.
• At the age of 29 Davey was a drug addict and alcoholic.
• In 1995 Davey picked up a Bible and from that point his life changed.
• A bright light filled the room where he was sat; it was brighter than the sun.
• Wave after wave of pure bliss rolled over my body, I looked up and Jesus was standing over me shining in all His Glory, He said; ’Son, your sins are forgiven, go now and sin no more’.
• At that moment a 15 year drug habit was broken instantly, also my desire for alcohol left me.
• The voices became silent for the first time in many years and a beautiful peace entered my body.

**Nicky Cruz**

• Nicky Cruz was the notorious gang leader of the Mau Maus (named after a bloodthirsty African tribe)
• Not long after becoming leader of this vicious gang, Nicky met David Wilkerson, a Christian preacher.
• The preacher told Cruz that Jesus loved him and would never stop loving him.
• A shocked Cruz responded by slapping Wilkerson and threatening to kill him.
• Wilkerson looked Cruz in the face and said that he could cut him into a thousand pieces, but every piece would still say Jesus loves him.
• That afternoon the preacher showed up at the Mau Mau's headquarters to repeat his message, and was slapped again by Cruz.
• Wilkerson just smiled, and then prayed for Nicky.
• Two weeks later Cruz attended a meeting led by Wilkerson intent on teaching the preacher a lesson.
• Instead, Cruz felt overwhelmed by guilt and collected money for Wilkerson.
• Wilkerson prayed with Cruz, and Cruz asked for God’s forgiveness.
• Cruz began to study the Bible and became a preacher himself.

How permanent is conversion?

• In many cases the person experiencing sudden conversion may know very little about what they have come to believe and testify in!
• Their knowledge may amount to little more than what they have read in a series of leaflets, or what they have heard from a local preacher.
• As such, there is far more chance of their deciding at some future point that there are inherent problems in what the preacher has told them, or that there are flaws in the literature they have based their ‘new outlook’ upon.
• Gradual conversion is always more likely to be permanent than sudden conversion.
• This is probably because a slower procedure is more likely to be more thorough.
• For example, a well-planned essay will always be more thorough than a quickly scribbled effort!

Mystical experiences

• Mystical experiences are experiences where the recipient feels a sense of ‘union’ with the Divine.
• Mysticism involves the spiritual recognition of truths beyond normal understanding.

William James

• William James is, arguably, the most famous commentator on religious experience.
• James was an American doctor (Harvard graduate), not a theologian.
• He had a deep interest in philosophy, and an equally profound interest and specialism in psychology.
His famous work The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) was originally a series of lectures (The Gifford Lectures) given at Edinburgh University at the beginning of the 20th century.

**William James’ four characteristics of mystical experiences**

- James recognised that the term ‘mystical’ is used in a wide variety of contexts, but suggested that using it to refer to a person was has had a religious experience is too ambiguous.
- Therefore, in his book ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’, he offers four characteristics which he claims will enable us to identify mystical experiences:

**Ineffability**

- The experience of God goes far beyond the human powers of description.
- The person feels like they are unable to describe the experience or not do it justice.
- St Teresa of Avila states, ‘I wish I could give a description of at least the smallest part of what I have learned, but, when I try to discover a way of doing so, I find it impossible …’

**Noetic**

- The person receives knowledge of the divine which is not otherwise available.
- The experience is therefore a direct revelation from God.

**Transient**

- Religious experiences are described as transient which means they are not permanent.
- A transient appearance may appear to last for a long period of time whereas it may have actually been very short.
- The effects of the transient experience are however, long lasting and involve a changed view of the universe.

**Passive**

- Religious experiences were found to be passive, which means the person was not in control of what happened to them.
- Instead the experience just happens and is from God.
- James saw this as evidence that a religious experience can be explained by saying a person willed it.
F C Happold - Types of mysticism

- F C Happold tried to provide some sort of context in which to think about and discuss mystical experiences.
- In *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (1963), he suggests that we can divide mysticism into two types:

1. The mysticism of love and union
2. The mysticism of knowledge and understanding.

The mysticism of love and union

- This is the longing to escape from loneliness and the feeling of being ‘separate’.
- Happold believes that there are two urges that govern all of us.
- The first is to be an individual.
- The second is to be accepted in some way.
- These two urges are constantly in conflict with one another.
- Happold believes that these urges have their origin in the fact that we are in some way sharers in what we could call ‘the Divine Life’.
- This suggests that, despite our need to be individuals, we are always trying to get back to God – hence the desire to be part of something bigger than ourselves.

The mysticism of knowledge and understanding

- Happold says that people have another ‘urge’ which is in all of us.
- We need to try to find out the ‘secret of the universe’ (‘the meaning of life’, in other words).
- Importantly, he says that we do not seek this in sections, but want to know ‘the whole story’, as it were.
- The way that we can look for answers to such an ultimate question is through experience of God.

Aspects of mystical experience

- Further to his separation of mystical experience into two types, Happold says that there are three aspects of mystical experience:
  1. Soul-mysticism
  2. Nature-mysticism
  3. God-mysticism

Soul-mysticism
• Mystical experiences in this context is the idea of finding the soul and, therefore, complete self-fulfilment.
• This form of mysticism does not deal with the God of classical theism, although it does relate to certain Buddhist and Hindu philosophers.

**Nature-mysticism**

• Nature-mysticism is found in the belief that God is immanent.
• He is everywhere, and can therefore be ‘united with’ in many aspects of nature.

**God-mysticism**

• God-mysticism is the idea that humans want to return to God.
• There are suggestions that mystical union with God requires the human soul to become like God.
Religious experience as an argument for the existence of God

• Many people are more likely to believe something if it has been experienced.
• Our experience of God is the best evidence we have that God exists.

Richard Swinburne’s argument

• His basic conclusion: ‘On our total evidence theism is more probable than not.’
• Swinburne defines religious experience as “an experience of God or of some other supernatural thing”
• This is a very important definition, as many people have rejected the testimony of religious experiences on the basis that they have not actually featured ‘God’, but an angel, a messenger or other religious figure (e.g. Virgin Mary).
• If we accept the definition we must accept the involvement of such beings under the category of ‘some other supernatural being’.
• After defining religious experience, Swinburne’s argument effectively takes the form of two areas: the principle of credulity dealing with the ‘four key challenges’; and, the principle of testimony.

The principle of credulity

• The basic principle states “If it seems to a subject that X is present, then probably X is present; what one seems to perceive probably is so”
• Therefore, we should accept what a person experiences unless you can prove otherwise.
• Swinburne offers the four possible challenges in his argument.
  1. The circumstances in which the experience occurred generally produce unreliable results (e.g. intoxication from drugs or alcohol), or the recipient of the experience is unreliable (e.g. a notorious pathological liar).
  2. The recipient of the experience did not have the ability to interpret the experience (e.g. if the recipient is very young or has some sort of barrier to general understanding)
  3. It is possible to show that whatever/whoever the recipient is claiming to have experienced was not there.
  4. It is possible to show that whatever/whoever the recipient is claiming to have experienced was there, but was not involved in/responsible for the experience.

The principle of testimony
• Swinburne appeals to a basic rational and verifiable idea - that people usually tell the truth.
• Again he accepts that there will be ‘special considerations’ which may reject this principle i.e. the existence of positive grounds for rejecting what we are being told.
• The principle of testimony suggests that I should accept your statement of what you experienced unless I can demonstrate positive grounds showing it to be mistaken.

William James’ argument

• William James offers a classic version of this argument in his influential *Varieties of Religious Experience*.
• He argues that all normal persons have religious experience and, since experience is the final arbiter of truth, then God — as the object of religious experiences — must be accepted as factually true.
• James further observes that the religious experiences in question tend to have a profound effect on the lives of people and even whole societies, implying that such effects cannot reasonably be attributed to hallucinations.
• Instead, it is much more reasonable to believe that a real God is responsible for religious experiences than to attribute the profound effects of those experiences to a mere imaginary being.
• James was aware that many people in the late 19th / early 20th century were happy to dismiss alleged religious experiences as the product of a ‘faulty’ mind.
• This is a view that remains popular today, of course.
• Instead of rejecting this view, James accepted it – but saw no obvious problem with it.
• He spoke of ‘religion and neurosis’ as perfectly compatible and, to a degree, necessary partners.
• In a later lecture, entitled ‘The Reality of the Unseen’, James considers many testimonies of people who have claimed to have had religious experience.
• It is the sheer certainty of these testimonies that is most compelling.

The conclusions of William James

• In turning to James’ conclusions, we can find out how he saw people’s religious experiences as potential ‘evidence’ for the existence of God.
• The cause of the experiences which people seem to have and are undoubtedly affected by is real; if that cause is believed to be God, then God exists.
• This does not prove the God of classical theism, but just God in the sense of the source of the religious experience.
• Finally, James noted that things that are true tend to lead to ‘consistency, stability and flowing human intercourse’.
• Put another way, if something is real and true it is likely to improve a person’s life, whereas that which is false is more likely to restrict and damage a person’s life.
• Significantly, James noted that those who claimed to have had religious experiences seemed to be generally more fulfilled and purposeful in their understanding of the world and their place in it, than those who subscribed to atheist theories.

The challenges to religious experience from philosophy

Can the finite experience the infinite?

• The problem arises of how you can distinguish God from other possible objects of experience.
• E.g. God is said to be the Creator – how would you recognise that attribute?
• God is also said to be omnipresent, infinite, omnipotent and eternal – but how, simply by virtue of an awareness of an object of experience, can anything be recognised to be that?
• To recognise omniscience, you would have to be omniscient yourself!
• It takes one to know one!!

• God has no body, he is not material, yet is said to be one being.
• Therefore an encounter with God is radically different from an encounter with a person.
• According to the Bible, God is not a person, e.g. ‘God is Love’.
• How can we experience God if God is not material?

• People argue that just as you can encounter a table, you can also encounter God, but the two are very different.
• E.g. God is not material, nor does he have a definite location.
• Also, claims can be checked of encounters with objects, but when the object is God, they are not verifiable.

• Direct experience of God is impossible.
• We interpret every experience in ways we understand.
• It could be argued that the religious person interprets experience according to a religious framework of life, whilst the atheist interprets it as purely natural events.
• The finite cannot experience the infinite – so we cannot experience God.

**Problems of verifying religious experience**

• Individuals rather than groups undergo religious experiences.
• As a result, we only have one person’s testimony as to what has happened.
• E.g. St Bernadette testified that the Virgin Mary had spoken to her.
• Witnesses to the experience stated that they did not see or hear the Virgin Mary and only saw Bernadette talking to an ‘unseen’ someone.

• Religious experience is very like emotion – it is a personal response, which means that any form of empirical testing is useless.
• Religious experiences are regarded as subjective because no objective criteria can be applied to them in order to judge to their merit, authenticity or anything else.
• A subjective experience cannot be offered as ‘scientific’; that is, as empirical or intellectual proof.
• This is basically because experiences happen to people, and will always be open to interpretation.

• It would appear that those who encounter these experiences portray the Being revealed to them quite differently.
• In some cases it is clearly the God of their respective faith.
• In other cases it would appear to be a deity quite distinct from the God of formal or organised religion.
• For some, it is simply the force of nature.
• How can we then verify the authenticity if the experiences are so different?

• In many cases, drugs or alcohol can produce very similar effects to a religious experience.
• In The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) James refers to experiments using nitrous oxide and anaesthetics.
• He suggests that, when mixed sufficiently with air, these substances ‘stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree’.
• If this is the case can we rely on people’s accounts?

The challenge to religious experience from science

Sigmund Freud

• Sigmund Freud was an Austrian psychiatrist.
• Freud believed that people were completely material.
• In other words, if we could understand everything there is to understand about the physical / biological side of life, we would fully understand human beings.
• Also, he suggests that the urge some people felt towards religion was no more than psychological obsession.

• Freud saw religious experiences as, essentially, illusions.
More particularly, he believed that they were projections of the ultimate, oldest and most profound ideas that people had.

For example, if someone claimed to have experienced the suffering of Jesus, a religious person may accept this.

Freud, on the other hand, would claim that the recipient of this experience was simply projecting his or her ultimate beliefs about suffering, helplessness and separation, along with salvation, hope and desire to be reunited with one’s parent (in this case portrayed as God.)

Freud refers to religion and religious experience as a mass delusion or paranoid wish-fulfilment.

In turning away from reality and putting a wishful reality in its place the person makes use of magical thinking.

In some ways this brings religion closer to science.

Freud had often said that paranoid delusions are like philosophical systems or scientific theories - they are all trying to make sense of the world, and our place in it.

V S Ramachandran

Ramachandran is a neurologist best known for his work in the fields of behavioural neurology.

He carried out extensive research related to temporal lobe epilepsy from which he has concluded that there is important evidence linking the temporal lobes to religious experience.

He set up an experiment to compare the brains to people with and without temporal lobe epilepsy.

He decided to measure his patient’s changes in skin resistance, essentially measuring how much they sweated when they looked at different types of imagery.

What Prof. Ramachandran discovered to his surprise was than when the temporal lobe patients were shown any type of religious imagery, their bodies produced a dramatic change in their skin resistance, much greater than people not suffering from the condition.
He concluded from his research that famous religious figures such as St Paul could also have been people who had the condition.

So what we suggested was, there are certain circuits within the temporal lobes which have been selectively activated. Their activity is selectively heightened in these patients, and somehow the activity of these specific neural circuits is more conducive to religious belief and mystical belief. It makes them more prone to religious belief.

**V S Ramachandran, God on the Brain, BBC Horizon programme, 2003**

Ramachandran is not unwilling to accept that it may be that God exists and has placed the temporal lobe within the brain as a means of communication with humans.

What is beyond doubt is that the origins of religion are even more complex than had been thought. The science of neurotheology has revealed that it is too simplistic to see religion as either spiritually inspired or the result of social conditioning. What it shows is that for some reason our brains have developed specific structures that help us believe in God. Remarkably it seems whether God exists or not, the way our brains have developed, we will go on believing.

**V S Ramachandran, God on the Brain, BBC Horizon programme, 2003**

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**Michael Persinger**

- Michael Persinger is a cognitive neuroscience researcher who agrees that the temporal lobes have a significant role in religious experiences, and argues that religious experiences are no more than the brain responding to external stimuli.
- Persinger claims that by stimulating the temporal lobes with a unique machine he can artificially induce in almost anyone a moment that feels just like a genuine religious experience.
- Persinger has developed a helmet which produced weak magnetic fields across the hemispheres of the brain, specifically the temporal lobe.

- Over 900 people who have taken part in the experiments claim to have had some form of 'religious' experienced.
- It is thought that this happens because when under the influence of the helmet, the brain is deprived of the self-stimulation and sensory input that is required for it to define itself as being distinct from the rest of the world; the brain ‘defaults’ to a sense of infinity.
This sense of self expands to fill whatever the brain can sense, and what it senses is the world, so the experience of the self simply expands to fill the perception of the world itself.

One experiences becoming 'one with the universe.'

However, as soon as the electromagnetic field is turned off then the experiences cease.

Persinger has been able to reproduce this by electrically suppressing activity in the superior parietal lobe using his helmet.

When he performed this experiment on Tibetan monks and the Franciscan nun, they all reported that the experiment was identical to what they experience in their own meditative practice.

Can religious experience show that God probably exists?

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William James observes that religious experiences tend to have a profound effect on the lives of people and even whole societies, implying that such effects cannot reasonably be attributed to hallucinations. Instead, it is much more reasonable to believe that a real God is responsible for religious experiences than to attribute the profound effects of those experiences to a mere imaginary being.

James also argues that all normal persons have religious experience and, since experience is the final arbiter of truth, then God — as the object of religious experiences — must be accepted as factually true.

There are a countless number of people throughout the world claiming to have had a religious experience. For many, the sheer amount of testimony is proof that God is responsible for the experience and therefore probably exists.

In many cases, drugs or alcohol can produce very similar effects to a religious experience. We also have physiological problems such as temporal lobe epilepsy. Therefore, it is difficult to prove the source of the experience to be God.

People argue that just as you can encounter a table, you can also encounter God, but the two are very different. E.g. God is not material, nor does he have a definite location. Also, claims can be checked of encounters with objects, but when the object is God, they are not verifiable.

Richard Swinburne has argued that many religious experiences can be described as public which means many people are able to share the experience. You may not have had the experience directly yourself but you are able to it e.g. a statue crying or Hindu statues drinking milk.

Richard Swinburne, religious experiences are ineffable. That is they go beyond the bounds of explanation. If this is true, then we cannot gain a full understanding as the person who underwent the experience is unable to describe the event or do justice to the experience.

Religious experiences are said to be subjective and are often likened to emotions. A feeling of the numinous, for example, can leave someone, according to Rudolf Otto feeling scared, anxious and in awe. For this type of experience, it is almost impossible to firmly describe what a person actually experienced.

St Theresa of Avila is an example of someone who underwent an experience and felt unable to cannot corroborate the account so cannot accept if it is true.

Certain forms of religious experience which we can gain an understanding. For example, conversion experiences can be assessed objectively as people can clearly see the results of the experience. The conversion of Davey Falcus for example, shows a man changing from a life of crime to following the teachings of Christianity and putting the needs of others first.

Religious experiences contain natural features and as such can be explained to others. If someone

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communicate the event: ‘I wish I could give a description of at least the smallest part of what I have learned, but, when I try to discover a way of doing so, I find it impossible …’

In order to fully understand something you must experience that something yourself. In your experience of learning new information, the learning often comes when you apply it and use it. This could be true of religious experience also as each event is said to be unique it seems only possible that the recipient of the experience will understand what happened to them.

Individuals rather than groups undergo religious experiences. As a result, we only have one person’s testimony as to what has happened. E.g. Bernadette in Lourdes had a vision of Mary whereas others around claimed to have no vision. This implies that religious experiences are personal.

| How successful are the challenges to religious experience from philosophy and science? |
|---|---|
| **Successful** | **Unsuccessful** |
| Scientific challenges are very successful as they offer a far more reliable and realistic explanation for the unusual events rather than claiming it was God. They rest on certain facts such as medical problems as well as drugs & alcohol. | Experience is the strongest form of evidence. If a person has a vision of a religious figure or hears the voice of God then they will firmly believe that they have had that experience, so no challenge from philosophy or science will make them change their mind. |
| Freud offers a very credible psychological challenge to religious experience. Freud linked religion with neurosis because he noticed that many patients he treated who suffered from mental illness displayed obsessive behaviour. These patterns of behaviour were remarkably similar to some religious practices such as formal prayer and worship. For Freud, religious experience is an illusion that derives from people’s psychological needs – in some ways this makes religious experiences very similar to wishful thinking. | Richard Swinburne’s principle of credulity states “If it seems to a subject that X is present, then probably X is present; what one seems to perceive probably is so” Therefore, if person believes God was present we should accept what a person experiences unless you can prove otherwise. |
| Ramachandran and Persinger offer a credible alternative for religious experience. Ramachandran’s experiments have shown the effect temporal lobe epilepsy has on people and experiences God within nature or as a vision they can describe how they felt and what they saw. St Bernadette was able to explain her visions of the Virgin Mary to others and tell them what the Virgin said. | Swinburne’s principle of testimony Swinburne appeals to a basic rational and verifiable idea - that people usually tell the truth. The principle of testimony suggests that I should accept your statement of what you experienced unless I can demonstrate positive grounds showing it to be mistaken. |
how they interpret their seizure. Perisnger has also shown that he was able to induce religious experience which shows that it is a product of the brain rather than God.

Kant suggests it is impossible for a finite being to experience an infinite being. It is perhaps even more difficult then to prove that someone has had this experience. This therefore highlights the main weakness of religious experience which is the difficulty in trying to prove that they actually took place.

The problem arises of how you can distinguish God from other possible objects of experience. God is said to be omnipresent, infinite, omnipotent and eternal – but how can anything be recognised to be that? To recognise omniscience, you would have to be omniscient yourself!!

William James was aware that many people in the late 19th / early 20th century were happy to dismiss alleged religious experiences as the product of a ‘faulty’ mind. Instead of rejecting this view, James accepted it – but saw no obvious problem with it. He spoke of ‘religion and neurosis’ as perfectly compatible and, to a degree, necessary partners.

James also said as emotion/feeling is an integral part of religion it is therefore perfectly reasonable to accept it as ‘evidence’ in this regard. We should not worry about the subjective criticism.

Temporal lobe epilepsy cannot be the solution to each and every religious experience. There are far too many experiences and individuals to accept this as a credible argument against the validity of religious experience.

Conclusion

- The key advantage to the religious experience argument for the existence of God is that it relates to people in a much more direct way than some of the other traditional families of arguments.
- The approach is much more accessible and, to a degree, understandable.
- The key disadvantage is that we are dealing with something akin to emotion, not something empirical and verifiable.
- Perhaps the most persuasive element of the entire approach is Swinburne’s insistence that while it may be possible to isolate each element of ‘proof’ offered and find problems with it, such elements have far greater cumulative worth.
- Atheist philosopher Anthony Flew who was keen to dismiss the cumulative approach, said: ‘If one leaky bucket will not hold water that is no reason to think that ten can.’
- Caroline Franks Davis agreed, but pointed out that it may be possible to arrange the buckets inside each other so that the holes do not overlap.
- In other words, while individual arguments regarding religious experience may be flawed, it is possible to take elements from each and to end up with a fairly powerful argument for God’s existence.

- It is perhaps appropriate to conclude that the argument is probably of value to the non-believer only in as much as it points to another area of human life that might involve a divine being.
- There is no clear answer to the question of whether one can demonstrate God’s existence as a result of religious experience.
Essay Questions

June 2011

1. Examine the main characteristics of both visions and conversion experiences. (A01 = 30 marks)

You should refer to the three different types of vision: intellectual, imaginary and corporeal. You should give a clear explanation of what each one is and to examine them fully examples should be given to support each of them.

You should also make reference to the main characteristics of a conversion experience e.g. such features as: gradual (volitional) and sudden (involuntary). You should refer to the types of conversion: intellectual, moral and social. You can use examples to highlight the different characteristics i.e. St Paul or Davey Falcus.

If you only cover one of visions / conversion then the answer can achieve a maximum Level 5 (23 marks).

2. ‘All religious experiences have natural explanations’ Assess the claim. (A02 = 15 marks)

Arguments in favour:
You could refer to challenges from science and temporal lobe epilepsy. Focus on the arguments from Ramachandran and Persinger. Freud also suggests that religious experience is a form of mental illness and therefore has a natural explanation. Drugs and alcohol can bring about similar effects therefore they can be explained away.

Arguments against:
Religious experiences are often ineffable and cannot be described or explained. This implies that they are supernatural events. You could mention that conversion experiences have had remarkable life changing effects on their recipients e.g. Davey Falcus/St Paul.
Visions such as Bernadette at Lourdes or the Shrine of Knock were supernatural as they differed from everyday occurrences.

**January 2011**

1. ‘I have had a religious experience.’ Explain what this means for a religious believer. (A01 = 30 marks)

You may focus on the various definitions of religious experience to explain what a religious experience is. You could refer to Richard Swinburne and his Public and Private experiences. Include examples from the different types of experience e.g. mystical/vision/conversion identifying key features/characteristics.

You could also focus on the more subjective elements. For example those elements of a religious experience that may have an affect on them in terms of their religious life and religious understanding. This is linked with conversion and the moral/intellectual dimension it contains.

2. ‘It is necessary to have a religious experience in order to understand fully what a religious experience is.’ How far do you agree? (A02 = 15 marks)

**Agree:**
Mention how religious experience have a subjective nature and the problems caused by this. You could also refer to the fact that they can’t be fully communicated, they are personal and ineffable (William James). Give some examples to illustrate (St Theresa of Avila)

**Disagree:**
Many people have shared experiences such as miracles or the visions of Knock. Also refer to the argument that some experiences have objective features such as conversion where we can witness the change in a person.
For level 7 expect some discussion of “fully”.

**June 2010**

1. **Examine how religious experience might be challenged by philosophy and by science. (A01 = 30 marks)**

You must make reference to both the challenges from philosophy and science to move beyond level 5 in this essay. The main scientific challenges come from Sigmund Freud and Ramachandran/Persinger. You could explain them both or one in detail. The main philosophical challenges are more general and you should choose at least two and explain how they challenge. The main challenges are:

- How can we experience God when He is different to us (Kant)
- The Bible says God is spirit or love – how can we experience this?
- Can the finite experience the infinite?
- How can we verify the experience?

2. **How successful are these challenges? (A02 = 15 marks)**

**Successful**
You should focus your discussion on the strength of the challenges identified in the question above. Why is a scientific challenge a successful one? Freud was able to base his ideas on research he had carried out and conclusions from his experiments. Persinger and Ramachandran have medical evidence to support their challenges. The philosophical challenge can also be considered successful as we have real difficulty in proving the philosophical concepts such as religious experience.

**Not successful**
You could reply directly to the challenges and / or offer some positive arguments to support the validity of religious experiences. Experience is the strongest form of evidence. Swinburne’s principles of credulity and testimony. Surely not everyone is suffering mental illness or temporal lobe epilepsy.
You could weigh up philosophy challenges and science challenges separately. You must make reference to the trigger ‘how successful’ to reach level 7.

**January 2010**

1. **Examine the main characteristics of conversion and mystical experiences.**  
   *(A01 = 30 marks)*

   You could offer some descriptive accounts of relevant religious experiences (e.g. Saul’s / Nicky Cruz’s conversion or Teresa of Avila mystical experience). You must make reference to the main characteristics, e.g. such features as:

   **Conversion**: gradual / sudden, intellectual, moral and social. Is conversion permanent?  
   **Mysticism**: William James - ineffability, noetic, transiency, passivity and F.C. Happold

   To give an in-depth account include illustration of characteristics or wide range of characteristics.

   For conversion expect different types of conversion including from one faith to another.
   For mysticism expect wider than William James, e.g. different types of mysticism (nature mysticism, God mysticism and soul mysticism).

   If only one of conversion / mysticism answered, maximum Level 5 (23 marks).

2. **‘It is impossible to verify a religious experience.’ Assess this claim.**  
   *(A02 = 15 marks)*

   **Support claim**
   Make some reference to the subjective nature of the experience or the difficulty of establishing the source of the experience. The experiences often happen to individuals rather than groups meaning verification is more difficult. Similar effects with drugs and alcohol/hallucinations/fame/mental illness/epilepsy – all of these mean there are a variety of possible explanations

   **Challenge claim**
   Make some reference to criteria that would add weight to validity, Swinburne’s Argument – the principles of credulity and testimony. Corporate religious experience – more than one person has had the experience.
January 2009

1. Explain the argument from religious experience for the existence of God.
   \( \text{(A01 = 30 marks)} \)

You will only achieve a maximum of Level 2 if you offer a summary of types of religious experience with no reference to argument for God. The two main arguments for the existence of God are from William James and Richard Swinburne. You could explain both or one in more detail.

Swinburne’s Principles – you should explain Swinburne’s principle of credulity and the 4 main challenges he accepts. You should then outline the principle of testimony.

William James – he offers a classic version of the argument. Focus should be made on experience being the final area of truth; therefore, if we experience God then God exists. Also highlight the profound effect the experiences have on peoples lives and how it is likely that God is responsible.

Level 7 for one fully developed argument, or two that are less developed.

2. To what extent can religious experience be viewed as a proof for the existence of God? \( \text{(A02 = 15 marks)} \)

**Proof:**
Experience is the best thing we can have to prove something therefore if we experience God then God exists. You could also focus on Swinburne’s principles as clear arguments and William James by looking at the positive impact it has.

**No Proof:**
Look at some of the philosophical issues – can the finite experience the infinite. Also argue that there are alternative reasons for religious experiences which make them difficult to call proof. You could also mention the issues regarding verifying them and their subjective nature.

An appropriate evaluation should be in terms of “to what extent”.
1. Examine the variety of forms of religious experience. (A01 = 30 marks)

You could choose from the variety of experiences we have studied (visions, conversions and mystical experiences). Your examination may include discussion of illustrations that highlight different elements of the particular form e.g. the different types of vision or conversion.

You should use examples to support your examination especially when mentioning visions and conversion.

Maximum Level 5 if only one form of religious experience fully examined.

2. ‘Only those who have had a religious experience can fully understand what a religious experience is.’ Assess this claim. (A02 = 15 marks)

**Agree:**
Mention how religious experiences have a subjective nature and the problems caused by this. You could also refer to the fact that they can’t be fully communicated, they are personal and ineffable (William James). Give some examples to illustrate (St Theresa of Avila)

**Disagree:**
Many people have shared experiences such as miracles or the visions of Knock. Also refer to the argument that some experiences have objective features such as conversion where we can witness the change in a person.

For level 7 expect some discussion of “fully”.