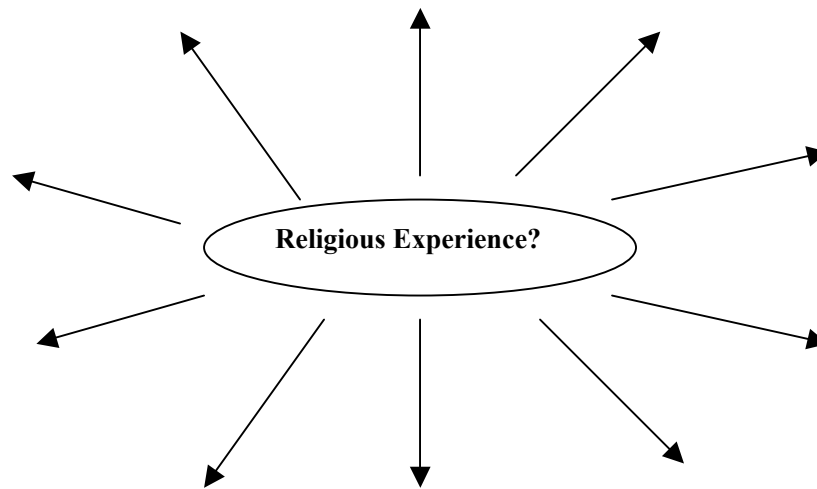


ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

One argument for the Existence of God that has come to recent prominence is the **Argument from Religious Experience**. Theologians like **Richard Swinburne** (*The Existence of God*, 1979) and **Caroline Franks Davis** (*The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, 1989) have lent greater impetus to this argument. Early in the last century, **William James**, an American Philosopher and brother of the writer Henry James, wrote an influential work on mysticism called *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).

Activity

- *Brainstorm the varieties of experience that might be called 'religious'.*
- *Try to categorise the experiences listed.*
- *What problems can you already foresee in trying to use religious experience as a proof for God's existence?*



Possible problems

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Five Types defined by Richard Swinburne

Public Experiences

- 1 An individual sees God or God's action in a public object or scene. For example, a believer might look at a sunset or at the vastness of constellations and see God or God's work in them.

However, this religious experience hinges on the believer's *interpretation* of what would be for others a scene of natural beauty.

- 2 A very unusual public event involving what appears to breach known laws of nature. For example, someone walking on water before witnesses or someone changing water into wine.

Here, the interpretation of the believer is not likely to differ from that of others: something remarkable would be evident to all. However, a sceptic might on reflection say that such happenings have a basis in ordinary workings of nature; it's just that this basis is not at present evident.

Private Experiences (less verifiable than public experiences)

- 3 Experiences that an individual can describe using normal language. For example, Jacob's vision of the ladder going up to heaven or Mary's vision of the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation.

An obvious response from a sceptic would be that such experiences have a psychological rather than divine explanation. The early empiricist Thomas Hobbes remarked that *when a man tells me that God has spoken to him in a dream, this is no more than to say he dreamed that God spoke to him*. Note the reductionist attitude.

- 4 Experiences that can't be described in normal language, but remain nonetheless very real to the one experiencing them. The mystical experiences of certain prophets of the OT and some saints through the ages often fit into this category. Often the language they use to get across the ineffable resorts to contradictions.

The sceptic's response would be similar to that made for any private experiences: their cause is psychological rather than divine.

- 5 In the fifth case, there may be no specific experience for the believer to latch onto, but he or she has the sense of God's providence and action in his or her life in the past. 'God's hand has guided me,' a believer might say.

Again, this relies on an *interpretation* of past events, something a sceptic would reject.

Swinburne argues for the basic reliability of religious experience based on two principles:

1 Principle of Credulity

How things seem to be is a good guide to how things are. ... If it seems ... to a subject S that X is present; what one seems to perceive is probably so. (R. Swinburne, The Existence of God)

Some would argue that this argument works fine *except* for the special claims made in religious experiences. Then, the likelihood that X is real should be considered dubious.

Swinburne himself puts forward four reasons for caution:

- if subject 'S' was unreliable
- if similar perceptions are shown to be false
- if there is strong evidence that X does not exist
- if X can be accounted for in other ways.

2 Principle of Testimony

In the absence of special considerations the experiences of others are (probably) as they report them ... In general there are no special considerations for doubting what subjects report about their religious experiences. (ibid)

Compare this to Hume's test of the credibility of miracles, when a miracle's credibility hinged on the likelihood of false/mistaken reportage being 'more miraculous' than the miracle itself.

Mysticism

This type of religious experience fits Swinburne's fourth category above. A mystic claims a direct apprehension of an ultimate reality which he or she finds difficult or impossible to put across in words. Thomas Aquinas, shortly before death, reported such an experience. He felt all that he had written hitherto was 'so much straw' compared to the mystical experience. He wrote no more.

Mystics often report a sense of an underlying whole behind all things. Some writers distinguish between *extrovertive* (outward-looking) and *introvertive* (inward-looking) mystical experience.

The extrovertive is one where the plurality of objects in the world are transfigured into a single living entity. In contrast, the introvertive mystic speaks of losing their identity as a separate individual and slowly merging into the divine unity. (Jonathan Webber, Revelation and Religious Experience, 1995).

In the box beside is an example of what might be termed an extrovertive mystical experience.

Our Lord showed me a spiritual sight of his homely and familiar love. I saw that he is everything that is good and comforting to us; he is our clothing - wrapping and enfolding us. He embraces and encloses us in tender love, and he never leaves us. I saw that he is everything that is good, as I understand it.

He showed me a little thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as round as a ball. I looked at it and thought, "What can this be?" And I was answered, "It is all that is made." I wondered how it could last, for I thought that being so small it might suddenly fall apart. And I was answered in my understanding, "It lasts, and always will, because God loves it". And so everything has its being through the love of God.

Julian of Norwich, Revelations of Divine Love, 14th C.

‘Near-Death Experiences’

There has been growing interest in the field of so-called ‘near-death’ experiences. People hovering close to death – or experiencing a ‘temporary shut down’ like death – sometimes report what appear to be mystical experiences. They may use the images of light, tunnel, meeting, peace, floating, awareness of a divine presence, angels, and so on. More rarely, some mention experiences that might be judged ‘hellish’.

Some scientists have been attracted to this phenomenon; there are aspects of it that might be testable – namely the claims of the bed-bound to be ‘floating’ and able to see what would ordinarily be beyond their sight. If such claims are established through careful testing, then the phenomenon as a whole might be taken more seriously. Other scientists reject the experiences as none other than the results of oxygen depletion in the brain.

William James and Mysticism

James listed four main characteristics of mystic experience:

1. Ineffability

The experience defies description.

2. Noetic Quality

Though ineffable, the mystic experience provides insight into truths not apprehensible by ordinary reasoning. As such they are special revelations – universal and eternal truths.

3. Transiency

The mystic experience is often over within half an hour or so. Though remembered, they are imperfectly recalled, but are then recognised if they recur.

4. Passivity

Mystics often feel captive to the experience and the power it contains. Unusual phenomena sometimes produced during such experiences (prophecy, glossolalia, and so on) are not within the mystic’s ordinary capabilities.

Positive Criticisms

- 1 Religious experience lies at the heart of (mainly monotheistic) religious faiths and of their scriptures and tradition.
- 2 Major faiths all have a tradition of mysticism. Prominent saints in the Catholic tradition have had a mystical dimension to their lives. For example, Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, the Spanish Mystics St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross, the Stigmatic Padre Pio, and so on. (Cf. Cabbalism and Sufi Mysticism)

A philosopher and lifelong atheist was close to death – his heart had stopped beating for four minutes. During this time he said, ‘I was confronted by a red light, exceedingly bright, and also very painful, even when I turned away from it. I was aware that this light was responsible for the government of the universe.’

The Philosopher was Alfred Jules Ayer, the writer of *Language, Truth and Logic*, who wished to establish all questions of metaphysics as being literally meaningless, since they failed the verification principle of logical positivism. He died some months after his experience.

In the OT:

- Abram’s experience of God’s commands and providence.
- Moses and the Exodus story.
- Prophetic tradition ...

In the NT:

- Annunciation & Incarnation.
- Miracles.
- Resurrection encounters ...

Qur’an

- Muhammad’s experience of hearing the Word of God through Gabriel ...

- 3 Belief in the veracity of religious experience does not imply indiscriminate acceptance of all experience claimed as religious experience.
- a) For example, there has always been the awareness of false prophecy in the OT, of spirits in the NT that are of Antichrist, one who may act through deceiving signs.
 - b) **Three** important criteria that must surround religious experience that is to be taken seriously:
 - i) Must not conflict with other ways of knowing God. For example, the Church acknowledges its apostolic teaching, its doctrines and the public revelation of the Gospels and so on. If *private* revelation contradicts public revelation, the former must be held untrustworthy.
 - ii) The results of the religious experience must make a noticeable difference for the better in the life of the person. Cole cites Teresa of Avila's words: *Though the devil can give some pleasures – only God-produced experiences leave the soul in peace and tranquillity and devotion to God.*
 - iii) The person should be regarded as someone who is not suffering from any kind of psychiatric disorder.

4 Though David Hume suggested that reports of the miraculous (a particular kind of religious experience) were often associated with 'barbarous peoples'; those who claim to have had religious experiences may often feel an acute sense of unease (occasioned by their own sense of the validating power of science) when describing their experiences. (See box above.)

5 **William Alston**, an American Philosopher (and Christian), pointed out that to judge religious experience by the standards and modes of ordinary experience is to be guilty of 'epistemic imperialism'.

He argues that there is no external basis for establishing the certainty of *any* experience. For example, the very basic belief that I am in a spatio-temporal world containing other things is established by 'perceptual practice' (seeing/experiencing things in the world). The rationality of the basic belief is established by practices *within* the field of experiences it opens up to me.

Similarly, he argues that 'theistic experience' validates *internally* its underlying basis: God. Alston maintains: *'Once we confront this issue squarely, we will realize that we proceed in this fashion only because we are so thoroughly immersed in perceptual practice that we are irresistibly led to take it as our measuring stick for other experiential sources of belief.'*

6 C. S. Lewis, among others, has noted the *numinous* sense that seems part of what it is to be human. Consider going into a dark room in which you were told a venomous snake might be present. Consider going into a dark room in which you were told there may be unseen presence. Consider the different kind of fear in each case.

The Alister Hardy Research Centre in Manchester was set up to, *'make a disciplined study of the frequency of report of firsthand religious or transcendent experience... and to investigate the nature and function of that experience'* (Hammond p.206). A poll conducted in 1985 suggested that 15,000,000 Britons would say that at least once or twice in their lives they have been aware of, or have been influenced by, a presence or power. A further survey in 1986 suggests that nearly half of the UK population have had a transcendental experience with nearly 80% of people claiming this was an experience of God. From these positive respondents over half never attended a place of worship and many have never told anyone of their experiences. Many felt that if they did tell anyone they would be thought of as mad or stupid but this stereotype is not reinforced by the poll result which showed that those who did report their experiences were, *'better educated, happier and better balanced mentally than those who did not report them'* (Hammond p.205).

Alston on 'Theistic Experience'

I mean it to range over all experiences that are taken by the experiencer to be an awareness of God (where God is thought of theistically). I impose no restrictions on its phenomenal quality. It could be a rapturous loss of conscious self-identity in the mystical unity with God; it could involve "visions and voices"; it could be an awareness of God through the experience of nature, the words of the Bible, or the interaction with other persons; it could be a background sense of the presence of God, sustaining one in one's ongoing activities.

Some think that Alston's claims may amount to those of the anti-realist: that religious experiences are acceptable within the form of life of religious believers. Alston in his own writings makes clear that he is a realist: *I believe that in sensory experience and in theistic experience we encounter and learn about realities that could be just as they are had we not been around to record the fact.*

- 7 Some religious experiences were *shared* experiences. Some experiences claim miraculous happenings and the evidence that these leave (for example, healings, miraculous images and so on).

Negative Criticisms

- 1 a) John Hick, the Cambridge Philosopher of Religion, sums up the main objection to all religious experience arguments:

'In short, any special event or experience which can be construed as manifesting the divine can also be construed in other ways, and accordingly cannot carry the weight of a proof of God's existence.'

- b) The problem of interpretation is vexing (see box beside). Richard Swinburne tried to deal with the problem of reported mystical experience using the example of St Teresa of Avila's ecstasy. In this she wrote, 'I was convinced that God's dart pierced by heart with exquisite rapture and agony'. Is this interior certainty the same as an external independent reality: 'God's dart pierced her heart'. This led him to develop his two Principles of Credulity and Testimony (see above).

Two people look at a neglected garden; one is convinced that there is a gardener because of the signs of beauty and order that are there. The other denies this and points to the weeds and the signs of disorder. They devise various tests but no sign of a gardener is found. The first person, however, sticks to his belief and maintains that there is a gardener, but it is an invisible gardener. The two people do not disagree about the facts, but about how to interpret them.
(from Vardy's notes)

- 2 **Anti-realists** accept a *coherence* theory of truth: that truths stand as coherent links within a particular context and form of life (rather than as corresponding to reality). 'God exists' is true, not because the word 'God' refers to an objective being, but rather because the phrase 'God exists' has a use and a purpose within the form of life of a believing community. All religious language and experience, by extension, serves this same purpose.

The (Reading-based) Philosopher Anthony Flew has noted that religious experiences *'seem to depend on the interests, background and expectations of those who have them rather than on anything separate or autonomous'*. Visions tend to be culturally contained. Mary appears to Bernadette, a young Catholic from Lourdes, rather than to Lakshmi, a young Hindu from Benares.

I was chatting with a Zimbabwean Jesuit novice. He was telling me about various tribal practices within particular villages and townships. We got onto the widely held view of 'shape-shifting', where certain people metamorphosed into animals. I laughed at the notion. He said that you wouldn't laugh if you had seen a baboon coming to your township hut to summon you to a meeting back at your ancestral village. The Jesuit novice wore a look of absolute conviction.

- 3 Reviving Hume's remarks about miracles, some critics wonder which religion gains through the supposed wealth of religious experiences in them?
- 4 Some reject outright the notion that religious experience should be used as evidence for the existence of God. Nicholas Lash (Easter in Ordinary, 1988) criticises William James' emphasis on mystical experience. In his view, this is unhealthy as it depicts religion as depending on a minority of privileged 'pattern setters' who then must be followed by others. Lash's own position tends towards anti-realism.
- 5 Religious experience lacks key tests for relying on ordinary experience, for example: *intersubjective corroboration* (i.e. different people will independently corroborate, back up, the reality of what is experienced).