

Religious Experience

Sub-topics The nature of religious experience - Context of religious experience across religious traditions, range of definitions related to belief in God and/or ultimate reality, theistic and monistic views, ineffability, noetic, transience, passivity. - Types of religious experience include: conversion, prayer, meditation, mysticism, numinous. - Students should show understanding of the relationship between religious experience and propositional and non-propositional revelation. - Understand the alternative explanations, physiological and naturalistic interpretations, objectivist and subjectivist views. With reference to the ideas of W James and R Otto. Influence of religious experience as an argument for the existence of God - Inductive reasoning based on evidence, the link between appearances, how things seem, how things really are and conclusions drawn from experience about reality and existence. Principles of testimony and credulity, the value and role of testimony to religious experience. With reference to the ideas of R Swinburne and J Hick. - Strengths and weaknesses of religious experience as an argument for the existence of God: experiences influenced by the religious context of the believer, religious experiences interpreted as any other sensory experiences, complexity of interpretations, issues of probability and proof as relating to the argument, nature of God, including transcendent and immanent, limitations of language, lack of uniformity of experiences, refinements of and challenges to the argument. With reference to the ideas of M Persinger and R Dawkins.	Key words Conversion: refers to a positive psychological change in conviction or orientation. Can be from atheism to belief or one religion to another. Numinous: the feeling of the holy and includes awe, fascination, religious awareness and the smallness of self Visions: Can be physical in nature (corporeal) or the can be in the mind. Visions can also be collective (e.g. experience of the Angel of Mons) or individual (e.g. St Bernadette) Ecstatic: an overwhelming feeling of bliss or peace Intellectual: in terms of vision, that which brings the recipient(s) knowledge Sensory: a vision where external objects/sounds convey knowledge and understanding to the individual Visions: the ability to ‘see’ something beyond normal experiences. E.g. a vision of an angel. Prayer: communication with the divine Ineffable: that being of which a person cannot speak as no words can describe the experience Noetic: knowledge gained through mystical experiences that would not otherwise be available to the recipient Transiency: mystical states that cannot be sustained for a long time Passivity: the experience tends to be ‘done to’ the recipient. The actual moment is governed by a being or force external to the mystic Mysticism: a religious experience where union with God or the absolute reality is sought	Key scholars Rudolph Otto William James St Teresa of Avila
Possible H/WK/Questions 8 mark Explore ideas about religious experience. Explore the key challenges to religious experience as argument for the existence of God. 12 mark Assess the strengths of the argument from religious experience for the existence of God. Assess Otto’s contribution to ideas about religious experience. Assess the claim that it is impossible to prove the existence of God by a religious experience alone. 30 mark Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the religious experience as proof for the existence of God. Evaluate whether the argument from religious experience is more convincing than using a priori arguments for the existence of God.	Starting point- Important key facts - Students need to understand the definition of a religious experience and the different types of religious experience - William James identified four key characteristics of a religious experience: - Ineffability – ‘The subject of its immediately says that it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words. It follows from this that its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.’ - Noetic quality – ‘They are states of insight into depts of truth implied by discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance.’ - Transiency – ‘Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day.’ - Passivity – ‘Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations...when the characteristics sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and help by a superior power.’ - Rudolph Otto states that ‘Holiness – ‘the holy’ – is a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion...while it is complex, it contains a quite specific element or ‘moment’, which sets it apart from ‘The Rational’...and which remains inexpressible.’ - St Teresa of Avila describes her mystical experiences – ‘...it penetrated into my entrails. When he drew out the spear he seemed to be drawing them out with it, leaving me all on fire with a wondrous love for God.’ - You also need to understand the significance of different religious experiences and how they are interpreted - Key question: can religious experience be used to prove the existence of God?	
Stretch and challenge/Suggested further reading John Hick, ‘Philosophy of Religion’ Peter Cole, ‘Religious experience’ Dr Persinger and the ‘God Helmet’: Susan Blackmore - Michael Persinger and the God Helmet (13/23) (youtube.com) Ruldoph Otto, ‘The Idea of the Holy’ William James, ‘The Varieties of Religious Experience’		

