

# RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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## QUICK OVERVIEW

Religious experiences come in many forms, including mysticism, visions, conversions and prayer.

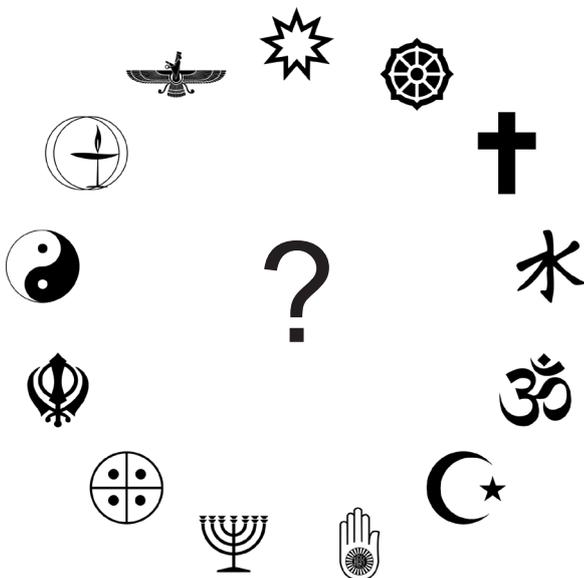
Some argue that the amount of evidence and testimony suggest that such experiences are real and come from God.

Others say all such experiences can be explained on non-religious grounds.

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## WHAT IS A RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE ?

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Where God is experienced beyond ordinary empirical explanation.

Most likely to take place within a context of religious expectancy and hope.

May be individual and subjective - where an individual is made aware of a transcendent reality.

May be corporate – where a gathering of people appear to be affected.

They often give prophetic insight or revelation.

# TYPES AND EXAMPLES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

## VISIONS

**A vision is a view or message of God.** Biblical example - Moses sees a burning bush and hears a voice calling him to a particular mission (Exodus 3).

Experiences, visual and verbal symbols are given a special interpretation and demand a response from the person who has the experience.

Paul Tillich identified a feeling of 'ultimate concern' as being characteristic of religious experience.

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## CONVERSION

**The word 'conversion' comes from the Greek term metanoia, which means to 'turn again' or to 'return'.**

Conversion may be from one major religion to another — Christianity to Buddhism, or from within one religious tradition — for example, Anglicanism to Catholicism, or from no religious tradition to a religious tradition, or from faith (believing) to faith (trusting).

Paul's conversion, when he saw blinding light and heard the voice of Jesus calling him to ministry. His life was changed forever.

John Wesley's vivid experience that enlivened his faith. He wrote: 'I felt my heart strangely warmed, I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins...'

C.S.Lewis' conversion is an example of an intellectual conversion. He recounts how in 1931 he walked and talked for hours with the author J.R.R.Tolkien about myth and Christianity and became convinced that Jesus was the Son of God.

Augustine is an example of a moral conversion, in that his wayward life was challenged when he read the words from Romans, which exhorts the reader to abandon the works of the flesh and be clothed with Christ.

# THE KEY FEATURES OF A CONVERSION EXPERIENCE ARE:

## **INDIVIDUAL**

The conversion is of a single person rather than a group

## **COMMUNAL**

The conversion is of a group of people at the same occasion

## **GRADUAL**

The conversion takes place over a length of time possibly even years

## **SUDDEN**

The conversion takes place suddenly, when a clear decision is made and a particular date can be given for the event. However, there may have been prior sub-conscious development.

## **PASSIVE**

The conversion is not deliberately sought but comes upon them unexpectedly.

## **ACTIVE**

The conversion is deliberately sought, perhaps by going to an evangelistic meeting with the intention of responding to the preacher



# TYPES AND EXAMPLES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

## MYSTICISM

A mystical experience is one in which the subject becomes overwhelmingly aware of the presence of God.

### **Mystical experiences have several common features:**

- A sense of union with the divine.
- A sense of dependence on God.
- A sense of separateness from God.
- Time is transcended.
- 'Noetic' experiences (William James) or a 'showing' (Mother Julian of Norwich) – something is clearly revealed to the person receiving the experience.
- A sense of joy and well-being.

### **Paul Tillich described two stages in a mystical experience:**

- The first is an event or encounter
- The second is a special understanding of that event as the result of ecstasy, a special way of looking at the event which reveals its religious significance.

## TYPES OF MYSTICISM

<b>NATURE</b>	The experience of oneness with nature. God is everywhere so he can be experienced through the natural world
<b>MONISTIC</b>	The experience of one's own spirit as the Absolute, the identity of Atman and Brahman.
<b>THEISTIC</b>	Union or communion with a personal Lord.
<b>INTROVERTIVE</b>	In which the mystic looks inwards on her own experience and understands her own oneness with the divine
<b>EXTROVERTIVE</b>	Where the experience of the mystic is like that of the poet, contemplating outward circumstances.

**Williams James** in 'Varieties of Religious Experience' observed that religious experiences draw on the common range of emotions, notably happiness, fear and wonder - but which are directed at the divine. This gives the person an overwhelming feeling desire to belong to God:

*'God was present, though invisible; he fell under not one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him.'*

He identified four characteristics of mystic experiences;

#### **INEFFABILITY**

A state of feeling that 'defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words.'

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#### **TRANSIENT**

The experience is brief but profoundly important 'mystical states cannot be sustained for long.'

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#### **NOETIC QUALITY**

Revelations of universal and eternal truths; 'states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect.'

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#### **PASSIVITY**

The person feels that they are taken over by a superior authority; 'the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance...as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.'

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For James, religious experiences are too personal and subjective to be convincing proof of the existence of God for those who have not had such an experience. However, for those who have, religious experiences are the most convincing proof of all.



The Christian mystic St Teresa of Avila, who had received many visions, found it impossible to define her religious experience.

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**'I wish I could give a description of at least the smallest part of what I learned, but, when I try to discover a way of doing so, I find it impossible...'**

St John of the Cross observed:

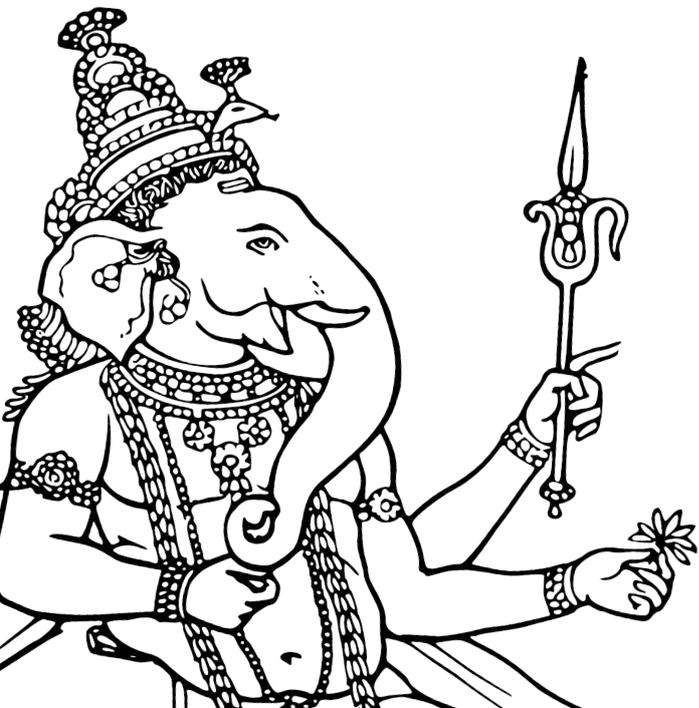
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**'Human language is unable to express the sense of mystical union with God.'**

Mother Julian of Norwich was said to have received 16 'showings' on 8 May 1373 during a time of dire sickness:

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**'Our Lord showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon with the eye of my understanding, and thought: 'What may this be?' And it was answered generally thus: 'It is all that is made'..In this Little Thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it, the second that God loveth it, the third that God keepeth it.'**



## **Hans Kung in DOES GOD EXIST?**

Suggested that mysticism is characterized by a closing of the senses to the outside world and a dissolving of the self. It is an individual experience, whereby the person seeks a loving union with God by purifying their own soul.

## **EXAMPLES OF MYSTICISM FROM DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS**

### **JEWISH MYSTICISM**

The Torah contains many stories of mystic experiences. The Kabbalah is the mystical branch of Judaism. Originally the two primary subjects of mystical thought were the work of creation and the work of the chariot (of Ezekiel's vision). In the middle ages, many of these mystical teachings were committed to writing in books like the Zohar.

*Research the mystic experience of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, founder of the Hasidic Movement.*

### **MUSLIM MYSTICISM**

Sufism is the inner, mystical dimension of Islam. Al-Ghazah (1059-1111CE) emphasized the personal, inner religious faith that should accompany the external practices of Islam.

*Research the life and teaching of Al-Ghazah.*

### **HINDU MYSTICISM**

Hinduism has perhaps the oldest tradition of mysticism. The apparent separateness and individuality of beings and events are held to be an illusion (maya). This illusion can be dispelled through the realization of the essential oneness of atman and Brahman. Then a mystical state of liberation (moksha) is attained. The Hindu philosophy of Yoga is a discipline to experience union with the divine self.

*Research the practice of Yoga.*

### **BUDDHIST MYSTICISM**

Meditation is a key aspect of practice in most schools of Buddhism. Zen Buddhism has a particular understanding of the idea of the dissolution of individuality.

*Research the Zen practice of "zazen".*

### **CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM**

Look again at the examples in the notes of Christian mystics

*Research the Christian mystic St Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510CE)*

## THE NUMINOUS

Rudolph Otto in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, coined the term 'numinous' to describe the event; the individual was both attracted and repelled by a sense of awe and wonder. Simon Peter's words to Jesus after the miraculous catch of fish express this paradox well:

*'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord' (Luke 5:8);*

He analysed this type of experience in terms of the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

**The tremendum component of the numinous experience comprises of three elements:**

<b>AWE-FULNESS</b>	inspiring awe
<b>OVERPOWERINGNESS</b>	inspires feeling of humility
<b>ENERGY</b>	impression of vigour and compelling.

**The mysterium component has two elements:**

<b>WHOLLY OTHER</b>	totally outside our normal experience
<b>FASCINATION</b>	the person is caught up in the experience

# TYPES OF PRAYER

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- Blessing - Ephesians 1:3
  - Adoration - Psalm 95:6
  - Petition - Colossians 4:12
  - Asking forgiveness - Luke 18:13
  - Intercession - 1 Timothy 2:1
  - Thanksgiving - 1 Thessalonians 5:18
  - Praise - Ephesians 3:20
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In a sense all religious experience is about prayer i.e. communion with God.

*Research William James' example of George Muller in Lecture 19 of "The Varieties of Religious Experience".*

*Research attempts to verify prayer in Russell Stannard's book "The God Experiment".*

# THREE CATEGORIES OF CHALLENGE TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

## DESCRIPTION-RELATED

### THIS FOCUSES ON WHY THE RELIABILITY OF THE DESCRIPTION OF THE CLAIMED RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE MAY BE DOUBTED

- Logical inconsistencies or incoherence within the subjects' descriptions
  - But the Judaeo-Christian concept of God is incoherent.  
For instance God is both transcendent and immanent.
- Inconsistencies between the subjects' actual behaviour and the behaviour one would expect if they had had the claimed experience
  - The behaviour change may not be immediate but more a gradual change.
- Unreliability of the person (e.g. known liar)
  - No evidence that those claiming religious experiences are liars  
Even if they were liars it does not mean they are lying about the religious experience.
- Unreliability of memory
  - Memory is reliable especially if the experience is vivid, unusual and highly significant
- The person misunderstands the experience (e.g. how can they recognise infinite wisdom)
  - God can make himself known.  
Full understanding is not required.

# THREE CATEGORIES OF CHALLENGE TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

## SUBJECT-RELATED

### THIS FOCUSES ON WHY THE RELIABILITY OF THE PERSON CLAIMING THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE MAY BE DOUBTED

- Such things as dreams, visions and hallucinations are generally regarded as unreliable
- Conflicting claims between different religious experiences
  - There is a common core. God may reveal himself in terms of the cultural background and understanding of the person having the experience. Maybe some of the experiences that conflict are false, but that does not mean that they all are.
- Doubtful state of the person at the time they had the religious experience (e.g. lack of sleep, drugs)
  - Even if it does apply to some religious experiences it cannot be said to apply to the majority.

# THREE CATEGORIES OF CHALLENGE TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

## OBJECT-RELATED

### THIS FOCUSES ON WHY THE RELIABILITY OF THE CLAIMED RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE MAY BE DOUBTED

- The entities in the experience are improbable (e.g. a God commanding an individual to murder someone or a rejection that God does not exist so cannot be experienced)
  - Although some religious experiences may involve psychotic individuals the majority do not. To claim that God does not exist is invalid as an argument. Religious experiences point to the evidence that God may exist.
- Other people present did not perceive anything
  - The behaviour change may not be immediate but more a gradual change.



**FOR  
DISCUSSION:**

Which of the challenges to religious experience are the most convincing?

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“Surely if there was a God He would want everyone to know about Him and therefore all should have religious experiences. However, it could be argued that some precondition, like faith, is required.”

# **RICHARD SWINBURNE'S SUPPORTING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

God has reason to make himself known to enable humanity to bring about the good, and to intervene personally in the lives of individuals out of his love for them

## **PRINCIPLE OF CREDULITY**

unless we have overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we should believe that things are as they seem to be.

## **PRINCIPLE OF TESTIMONY**

We should, unless we have real cause to doubt otherwise, believe what people say:

## **SWINBURNE IDENTIFIES THREE TYPES OF EVIDENCE WHICH GIVE GROUNDS FOR SAYING THAT A PERSON'S EXPERIENCE IS NOT AS THEY REPORT IT:**

The circumstances surrounding the experience render their perceptions unreliable – e.g. hallucinatory drugs

We have particular evidence that things are not as they are reported - e.g. that the person was not in the place they say they were in when they had the experience.

There is evidence that the experience was not caused by God – e.g. someone apparently experienced God because they had a fever.

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SWINBURNE'S APPROACH IS THAT HE PUTS THE ONUS ON THE SCEPTIC TO SHOW THAT RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE SHOULD BE REJECTED, RATHER THAN FOR THE BELIEVER TO SHOW THAT IT IS TRUE.**

# RICHARD DAWKINS

**Richard Dawkins** in 'The God Delusion' claimed that there is no such thing as a religious experience – they were just expressions of a person's psychological needs:

*'The argument from personal experience is the one that is the most convincing to those who claim to have had one. But it is the least convincing to anyone else, especially anyone knowledgeable about psychology.... If we are gullible, we don't recognize hallucinations or lucid dreaming for what it is and we claim to have seen or heard a ghost; or an angel; or God...such visions and manifestations are certainly not good grounds for believing that ghosts or angels, gods or virgins are actually there.'*

**Richard Dawkins** claimed that testimonies of religious experiences are simply the manifestation of mental or psychological needs. Religious experiences are an illusion created by the mind to enable people to cope with their fear of the unknown:

*'If you've had such an experience, you may find yourself firmly believing that it was real. But don't expect the rest of us to take your word for it, especially if we have the slightest familiarity with the brain and its powerful workings.'*

## EXAMPLES OF MYSTICISM FROM DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

- affirmation of belief
- strengthens and binds community
- promotes faith value system
- restores faith to individuals
- strengthens faith in times of trouble
- source of religious practice (e.g. some festivals)
- source of the foundation for religious movements
- renewal of commitment to faith/ belief system

# TEST YOURSELF

1. Name four different religious experiences.
2. Explain the meaning of the following words:
  - (i) Subjective,
  - (ii) monism,
  - (iii) numinous
3. Name the author of the following books:
  - (i) The Idea of the Holy,
  - (ii) The Interior Castle
  - (iii) The evidential force of Religious Experience
  - (iv) The Varieties of Religious Experience
4. List the five elements of the mysterium tremendum et fascinans.
5. List the three types of conversion.
6. Identify and explain the main features of St Paul's conversion.
7. What might you reply to each of the following challenges to religious experience
  - (i) Unreliability of the person
  - (ii) The person misunderstands the experience
  - (iii) Conflicting claims between different religious experiences
  - (iv) Other people present did not perceive anything.

# ANSWERS

1. Visions, conversions, mysticism, prayer
2. Having its source within the mind. The view that there is only one basic and fundamental reality. An experience of the Holy; something wholly other than the natural world and beyond comprehension.
3. Rudolf Otto | St Teresa of Avila | Caroline Franks Davis | William James
4. Awefulness | Overpoweringness | Energy | Wholly other | Fascination
5. From no faith to a faith | From one faith to another faith |  
From faith (believing) to faith (trusting)
6. **Individual** (only Paul was converted. Those accompanying him were not)  
**Sudden** (Paul was on his way to Damascus when he suddenly had the conversion experience. However, he had been at the stoning of Stephen so we do not know how much prior events had affected him)  
**Passive** (Paul was on his way to arrest Christians, not to join them)  
**Emotional** (it was an encounter with Jesus and a recognition of him as the one he persecuted)  
It was conversion from being a strict Pharisee to becoming a Christian. Some would regard this as a change from one faith to another. Others might argue that he saw Jesus as the promised Messiah and so became what is now termed "a Messianic Jew".
7. (i) No evidence that those claiming religious experiences are liars. Even if they were liars it does not mean they are lying about the religious experience  
(ii) God can make himself known. Full understanding is not required.  
(iii) There is a common core. God may reveal himself in terms of the cultural background and understanding of the person having the experience. Maybe some of the experiences that conflict are false, but that does not mean that they all are.  
(iv) God may choose to whom he reveals himself. There may be hidden factors (e.g. lack of faith) that may preclude others from the religious experience  
Name four different religious experiences.

