Religious Experience

- Rare supernatural event – no scientific explanation.
- Can be a direct encounter with God – form of seeing a vision.
- Feelings of peace – feeling wonder at the beauty of nature.

Richard Swinburne

- Is there a God?
- If there is a God, then he would want us to have direct experience of him – a good creator will seek to interact with his creations.
- God might want to reveal himself in order to support or to answer prayer.

Religious experience raises the question of whether religious experience can be used as evidence for the existence of God.

- Religious believers – might say that that they know God exists because he has done things for them in their lives.
- Billy Graham – ‘I know that God exists because I spoke with him this morning’.
- Some people’s religious experiences have been so convincing to them – changed their lives and their outlook on life.
- Should religious experiences be expected given that God is a loving creator? – Or are they ‘mental events’ which take place in someone’s head?
- Do religious experiences show that there is a God?
- Religious experiences are unique to each individual.
  - 2 people can go to the same concert, have the same food – but their experiences will be different because they are different people with different tastes, expectations and interpretations of events.
- Each person who claims to have had a religious experience will give different accounts of what happened to them.
- Interpretations of these events may be clouded by cultural or religious backgrounds.
  - Hindus may say they experienced Krishna – Catholics may say they experienced the Virgin Mary.
C. Stephen Evans

- Relationship between ‘the religious dimension of experience’ and ‘religious experience’.
- Religious dimension of experience – people might view the world as an orderly and purposeful reality – drawn to the teleological argument and see the hand of God at work in the natural world around them.
- Religious experience – particular events which are interpreted as encounters with the divine.
- Believes that these religious experiences fall into one of two types:
  - Monist experience – the individual becomes intensely aware of the essential one-ness of all things – feeling that they are in union with the divine and that God can be found in the self and natural world.
  - A sense of separateness or otherness of God – individual becomes aware of the greatness and the mystery of God – aware of their own smallness in comparison – idea was explored by Rudolf Otto – numinous experience.
- Evan identifies three elements which he considers to be common to religious experience:
  - Sense of unity with God and the world.
  - Sense of dependence.
  - Sense of separateness.
Objectivist and Subjectivist Views of Religious Experience

Objectivist

- If a religious experience is true – it is evidence of a God who exists independently, outside the human mind.
- Some people argue that objective religious experiences are impossible – we have no way of knowing whether the object of someone’s religious experience is actually God or whether it seemed like God to that person.

Subjectivist

- The important thing about religious experience is the effect that it has on the believer – it is not necessary to think of an actual objective being which we call God.
- The meaning of a religious experience is the meaning given to it by the believer.
- If someone believes that they have had a direct encounter with God – then the experience of God is true to that person.
- Subjectivist views weaken religious experience – it does not matter whether they really are encounters between people and God.
- Subjectivist views might seem to reduce religious experience to the level of a particular personal mental state – like a dream or strong emotion.
  - This is not consistent with many reports of religious experience – such as those in the Bible, which are described with vividness as real encounters.
**Rudolf Otto**

- 1869-1937.
- Protestant theologian.
- Wanted to show that it was fundamental to religion that the individuals should have a sense of a personal encounter with natural forces – Myterium Tremendum et Fascinans – the encounter that would bring a sense of awe and mystery.
- Three main qualities of the divine:
  - Mysterious quality – realisation that God is incomprehensible and that God can be met and his work can be seen – yet God can never be captured, fully understood or described.
  - God is recognised as being of ultimate importance.
  - God has a quality that is both attractive and dangerous – feeling that God cannot be controlled but at the same time the individual feels a sense of privilege during the religious experience.
- **Numinous** – feeling of awe-inspiring holiness.
- Ordinary language could not do justice to religious experience because it is an experience unlike others.
- Religious language is a ‘schema’ – attempt to find clusters of words which approach the idea of being expressed although the idea itself is inexpressible.
- Otto’s book was important because for the first time someone had tried to express and understand the ‘otherness’ of religious experience.

**Peter Donovan**

- Awareness of holiness produces fear, terror and dread – it also fascinates and attracts, arousing a longing for redemption and salvation.
- It is in the presence of these emotions of numinous wonder – makes religious conversions more than mere lifestyle changes.
Friedrich Schleiermacher

- On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers.
- Essence of religion was based on personal experience – not enough just to agree a set of doctrines or commit oneself to a set of ethical principles.
- Every person has a consciousness of the divine – however it becomes obscured by other concerns.
- Religious people try to develop the sense of the divine.
- Religious experience is ‘self-authenticating’ – requires no other testing to see if it is genuine.
- Doctrines such as the creed were attempts by individuals to understand their religious experience.
- Roman Catholics – the experiences of mystics had to be tested against the Church’s teaching and against Scripture.
- Schleiermacher’s view was that the experiences should have priority – statements of belief should be formulated to fit them.
- Reacting against the contemporary view of the 18th century.
- Called religion ‘a sense and taste for the infinite’ and also ‘the feeling of absolute dependence’ – believed that feeling and experience were all-important.
- An individual’s religious experience was based on the sense of being wholly dependent.
- Religious experience could take a variety of different forms in different cultures.
- Christianity was the highest of the religions – not the only true one.

Criticisms

- Some argue that Schleiermacher put too much emphasis on the subjective – reducing religion to emotion and removing the possibility of showing that religious claims are based on fact.
- There has to be a possibility of testing experiences against the Bible and doctrines of the Church.
Different Forms of Religious Experience

Visions and Voices
- Seeing something supernatural.
- Visions and voices might be combines – Saint Bernadette Soubirous – saw and heard the Virgin Mary at Lourdes – described what Mary was wearing and followed her instructions.
- Bible – the vision of Isaiah in the Temple when he was called to be a prophet in a particularly powerful example:
  - Isaiah ‘saw God’ – was able to give a detailed description of different heavenly beings he encountered.
- Samuel and the Temple – Samuel is woken up from sleep because he by a voice because he believes it to be his master Eli – voice is so vivid.

Numinous Experience
- Numinous experiences are at the heart of all religious experiences.
- ‘The distinctive experience of God, at once ineffably transcendent, remote, yet stirring a recognition that here is the primary source of beauty and love’ – when individuals gain a new and deeper understanding of reality.
- They might feel as though they have touched on a new dimension – sense of awe and wonder.
- May be triggered by being out in the countryside – witnessing a scene of beauty or the birth of a baby.
- It can happen out of nowhere in the most ordinary of circumstances – have lasting effects.
**Conversion Experience**

- Can be dramatic or slower to show development – tends to follow a basic pattern:
  - The individual is dissatisfied with their current ‘system of ideas’ – people are not likely to be converted if they are content.
  - The person searches on an intellectual and emotional level for a basis on which to make a decision – may turn to the bible or be persuaded to go to an evangelical meeting.
  - There is a point of crisis/intense emotions – this is usually described as the presence of God, sense of sinfulness and repentance (bright light, voices, visions).
  - This is followed by the sense of peace and joy, even loss of worry – desire to share the new faith with other people and to talk about the experience.
  - In the long term, the convert will make changes of direction – new purpose in life, may include a change of career.

- Sociological and psychological studies have attempted to determine whether there are particular personality traits or circumstances which might make someone more susceptible to conversion experiences.

- John Lofland and Rodney Stark studied conversion experiences – suggested that conversion experience follow a pattern which can be seen to be common in all kinds of conversions.

- All human behaviour happens within a social context – difficult to separate internal spiritual influences from external social causes.
  - It can be impossible to tell what a person might have done or how he or she might have felt without the outside influences.
Corporate Religious Experience

• Several people have the same or similar religious experience at the same time – groups of people sharing the same feelings or receiving the same message.
• Toronto Blessing – people all worshipping together seemed to have the same experience – being overcome by the Holy Spirit.
• Medjugorije in Bosnia – 6 teenagers and children apparently had visions of the Virgin Mary and received messages from her.
• Some might say that they can hear and see something and others might agree because they want to be included.
• Toronto Blessing could be caused by whipped-up hysteria in a heightened emotional atmosphere, rather than by the Holy Spirit.

William James

• 1842-1910.
• The Varieties of Religious Experience.
• Career in medicine at Harvard University.
• His aim was to be objective and take personal accounts of religious experience seriously – make observations that would lead to some significant insight.
• Had an understanding when it came to analysing humans.
• Set out to study religious experience through scientific investigation – comparing reports of religious experience to see if they had any common features or characteristics that might add to human understanding.
• Was not trying to make a value-judgement about religious and was not trying to prove religious experience to be true or false – wanted to look at religious experience objectively.
• James included first-hand accounts of religious experience – in the words of people who had told him their stories.
• Considered what is understood by ‘conversion’ – process where someone who is divided and conscious of being unhappy or wrong, becomes more confident about what is right and happier – can be sudden or gradual.
• Case of Stephen Bradley – uneducated man.
  - Considered himself a Christian from the age of 14.
  - ‘I thought I saw the Saviour, by faith, in human shape, for about one second in the room’.
  - He was not as certain about his faith as other people were – he wanted this certainty.
  - When he went to hear a Methodist preacher, he felt nothing.
  - Later that evening he felt the presence of angels – seemed as if his reading of the Bible was directly the word of God speaking to him.
  - Felt a sense to speak to his neighbours about his experience.
  - Made a conversion from a ‘homeless, friendless, dying drunkard’ – he decided to stop drinking and took himself to the place where he was impressed by the preacher's conviction of faith.
Felt as though he never wanted another drink – new sense of commission.

- Other experiences include an Oxford graduate (son of a clergyman) – not interested in faith until he was converted his bedroom at 3pm after reading a book about religion.
- The experiences cannot be tested by others – this makes them unsuitable for scientific study.
- We have no way of recreating them for ourselves.
- James believed that experiences could be tested for validity.
- A religious experience does not have to be marked by dramatic supernatural events – the real test is the long-term change in that person.
- James is known as a pragmatist – holds that the truth of something can be determined by its practical effects and consequences.
- James recognised that psychological interpretations of conversions would look to the subconscious mind for the causes of religious experience – religious believer would look to God.
- Stressed that religious experience can have a power that takes over the individuals whole life – often changes it for the better.

**Main arguments of The Variety of Religious Experience:**
- Spiritual and religious value of experiences is not undone even if we can find psychological explanations for the experience – rejected the view of repressed sexuality (Freud).
- James did not agree that there was a single feature of religious experience that defines it – understood it to be ‘the feelings, acts and experiences of the individual’ – there is a sense of reality and perception in the human consciousness.
- The experiences of great religious figures can set patters for the conventional believer to study – example of ‘saintliness’ (St Teresa of Avila) – Christians can be strong people who have helped society to progress and adapt. People can learn from the experiences of the saints.
- Religious experience was more important as a focus of study than religious practice or religious institutions like the church – religious institutions were secondary because they came about as a result of religious experience.

**Four main qualities of a religious experience:**
- **Ineffability** – experience is impossible to express adequately in normal language.
- **Noetic quality** – gives the person an understanding of important truths, which could not have been reached by reason alone – people might speak of having the truth revealed to them.
- **Transience** – experience is usually over soon, lasts no more than a few hours, however the effects could last a lifetime.
- **Passivity** – feels as though you are being controlled by an external force.
• James believed that conversion experiences can change a person’s outlook on life.
• He thought that psychology could describe conversion, but is unable to account for the factors in any given case – conversion experience can be tested by its results.
• James notes how convincing these experiences are to the person having the experience – ‘they are as convincing to those who have them as any direct sensible experiences can be’.
• James concluded that although religious experiences do not give proof of anything, it is reasonable to believe that there is a personal God who is interested in the world and individuals.
• He called this a reasonable hypothesis – believed it was not reasonable for scholars or ordinary people to reject clear evidence of religious experience just because they are sceptical.

Criticisms
• Language analysis made James’ work out-dated – Antony Flew and the Falsification Principle – argues that statements which cannot be empirically tested are meaningless.
  - ‘I saw the vision of a risen Christ’ – cannot be tested.
• Seems as though James is basing his thinking on a subjective understanding of religious experience – concentrates on whether the experience is true for the individual, instead of focusing on whether it relates to God.
• Behaviour of an individual after a religious experience might be consistent with what we might expect if a God did exist, but this does not actually show that there must be a God.
• There could be other causes of religious experience – mind might have been in a vulnerable state during an illness or fasting etc.
• Religious experience could be created by a committee of Gods, or even demons, or perhaps by telepathic forces.
Alister Hardy

• Wanted to use scientific means to explore the nature of religious experience.
• Religious experiences tend to fall into one of a variety of types.
  1. A sense of the patterning of events – individuals feel overwhelmed by a sense that their lives have an unfolding pattern to them and they are being guided by God – things that happen are not a result of chance.
  2. Sense of the presence of God – in ordinary circumstances and the presence of God usually takes them by surprise because it is spontaneous.
  3. Answered prayers – actively looking for divine help in different circumstances (not all prayers were in times of distress).
  4. A presence not called God – some might be unhappy with the conventional ideas of God and they might sense a presence which they are unwilling to describe as God – pervading power.
  5. A sense of the presence of the dead – close relative – this is more common among the uneducated; religious interpretation that God has send the dead person to comfort the living.
  7. A sense of evil or occult forces – overwhelmed by a sense of absolute evil.
  8. An experience that all things are ‘one’ – unity with other aspects of the world, loss of identity and sense of being part of a whole.

• Conclusions
  - Religious experience can be triggered – e.g. listening to music, prayer, beauty of nature etc.
  - Between half and two-thirds of adults claim to have had some kind of religious experience.
  - These people are usually better educated than average and are happier people.
  - A large proportion have never spoken to anyone about their experiences.
  - Young and old people are both likely to report a religious experience.
  - Many have no connection with any formal or institutional religion.
  - Patterns are similar in the UK, Australia and the USA.
• Religious claims are sometimes connected with insanity, there are strong grounds to suggest that religious experiences should be taken seriously.
Swinburne’s Principles of Credulity and Testimony

- We should treat reports of religious experiences in the same way that we treat reports of other, non-religious experience.
- We should believe them and take them at face value.
- If a friend told you that she had received an email from an old friend yesterday, would you believe her or check her story before believing her?
  - If she told you she had received a message from God yesterday, would your reaction be the same?
- Analogy of a dog walker meeting another dog walker.
  - Would you believe that I had genuinely met this man one morning?
  - It is not an unlikely event – dog walkers meet each other on a regular basis.
  - You might accept this story as true or you might treat it with scepticism.
  - You might believe she has something to gain from telling the story – made it up.
  - Perhaps she thinks she went out for this walk, but in reality she is in a maximum-security hospital.
- Chances are you would believe this story – we usually accept what other people tell us about their experiences unless we are of a suspicious nature and we have good reason to think they are not telling us the truth.

Principle of Credulity

- Experience is normally reliable – balance of probability says that it can be trusted.
- If some experiences turn out to be misleading, we should take the more likely view – which is that we can trust experiences.
- Swinburne is not saying that experience is always reliable – it is more likely to be true than not true, therefore we should accept it unless we have convincing reason not to.
- We know that our senses can mislead us and our experiences can lead us to draw the wrong conclusions.
  - We think we see someone we know, but it is actually a stranger.
  - We need to accept our own instincts or we will get nowhere – if it looks like Grace, sounds like Grace, is wearing Grace’s coat, then we are better off accepting that it is really grace rather than continuing a state of suspicion.

Principle of Testimony

- People usually tell us the truth – we should go with the balance of probability.
- We should accept someone’s account of their religious experience.
Criticisms

- J.L. Mackie – when people tell us things, they could be telling the truth, they could be deceiving us, or they could be mistaken.
  - We might know that a person who speaks is usually trustworthy and unlikely to be lying, but they could be mistaken.
  - They might assume that the experience came from God, but it could have come from another source.
  - Mistaken is more likely than the supernatural explanation.
- Richard Gale – religious experience is not the same as other types of experience.
  - Usual rules about when to accept an experience at face value do not apply.
  - It is a general rule that we accept the accounts of experiences available to the five senses – not other kinds of experience.
- Caroline Franks Davis – we take reports of experience at face value unless there is some special importance attached to it.
  - We would want to check that an eyewitness had good eyesight before believing that they witnessed someone committing a crime.
  - The question of whether God exists needs to be thoroughly investigated.
- Michael Martin – Swinburne’s credulity and testimony leads to the conclusion that there is no God.
  - An atheist might say that they experience the world as Godless and that they have a strong sense of the absence of God.
- Swinburne responds by saying that the principle of credulity cannot be applied in the negative:
  - If someone says person X is present, then person X is probably present – does not work if someone says person X is not present.
  - There is no reason to suppose that the atheist would experience God if he were present – the atheist is not likely to interpret their sensory perceptions in a religious way.
- If we are to believe that things are usually as they appear to be, then this has serious implications.
  - We experience suffering – it appears that the creator and designer of the world is cruel and we should accept that would experiences are probably correct.
  - However – there is a big jump between seeing something and interpretation it, then concluding that God is evil.
  - Also a big jump between having a vision of God, then saying that he exists.
- Richard Gale – we should not assume that people believe things even though the balance of probability is against them.
  - We cannot choose what we believe or make ourselves believe something if we simply don’t.
Weaknesses of Religious Experience

- Religious experiences are only authoritative to those who have experienced them – only the people that experience them will be convinced.
  - They cannot be tested by others – totally unique to the individual.
- Members of different faiths encounter a God in a way that matches their beliefs – Roman Catholic might see the Virgin Mary etc.
  - Religious experiences might be no more than wish-fulfilment.
- Experiments with electrical impulses, drugs and fasting have suggested that the sensation associated with religious experience can be created artificially in the brain.
  - Some religious experiences might be able to be explained by science, but are wrongly interpreted to be God.
- Religious experience cannot be objectively tested or proven – it is subjective, just like other feelings such as love, grief, beauty etc.

Strengths of Religious Experience

- Some people would disagree with the view that religious experience only carries authority to those who experience it – people can be influenced by other people’s experiences – Islam and Muhammad’s experience.
- If God wants his followers to recognise him when he reveals himself, he will choose to do it in a form that they will understand.
- No reason why God should not appear to those who have been fasting or taking drugs – other religious experiences which are not artificially created may still be caused by God.