

***Analyse the key concepts of religious experience as an argument for the existence of God and evaluate the view that this argument supports the probability of the existence of God.***  
**(40)**

The phenomenon of religious experience is described as contact between an individual and a transcendental reality. For many, such direct experience provides definite proof for the existence of God, so that the argument in this form is certainly *a posteriori*. Religious experiences are varied in both form and intensity, and are largely seen as positive and subjective; that is, such encounters are open to individual interpretation. Most are termed as 'mystical' in that there is an element of spiritual recognition of truths beyond normal understanding involved. Experiences including prayer to life-changing conversion are grouped under this category, and indeed there have been many famous examples throughout history.

Most forms of religious experience are referred to as 'mystical'. In this context, mysticism involves the spiritual recognition of truths beyond normal understanding. It also includes the gaining of knowledge of the 'Ultimate Reality', a sense of freedom from the limitations of time, space and human ego, and a sense of 'oneness' or unity with the Divine. Arguably one of the most famous examples of mysticism is stigmata- bodily marks or sensations of pain in locations corresponding to the crucifixion wounds of Jesus. Padre Pio was one such person to experience stigmata, and claimed to have felt a 'curious sense of authority' and closer to the Divine during these unexplained incidences. The sense of an awesome power, whilst remaining separate from it, as proclaimed by Pio is termed as 'numinous'. Rudolph Otto suggested that religion must derive from a being that is totally separate from this world and that is it in the presence of such a being that numinosity is experienced.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, William James attempted to categorize and hence certify these peculiar events. In his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James classifies experiences in accordance with four certain characteristics demonstrated. James asserts that a genuine religious encounter has the quality of being **ineffable**; that is, the recipient undergoes sensations beyond verbal portrayal. Similarly, he states that through perception knowledge is gained, so that all religious experiences are of a **noetic quality**, along with being **transient** and disproportionate to actual duration. Finally, James claims **passivity** as a vital characteristic of such incidents, pointing to a loss of control experienced by a recipient, as if some divine force is in fact responsible.

James recognised through his work the importance of separating genuine experiences to those perhaps induced by consumption of alcohol or drugs, since after taking such the mystic feels a greater depth of understanding, leaving a profound feeling even when the effects have faded. However, at a similar time to James, F.C. Happold claimed that rather than establishing set criteria to identify religious experiences, it would be more sensible to provide a context in which to think about them. In his book 'Mysticism – A Study and an Anthology', he divides experiences in to two groups: those of love and union, and those of knowledge and understanding.

By setting out a context in which we might consider different religious experiences, we are aiming therefore to prove the validity of such incidences. The main problem for using them as an argument for the existence of God is the problem of validation. In most cases it is individual rather than groups who undergo these experiences. As a result, we only have one person's testimony as to what has happened. For example, St Bernadette testified that the Virgin Mary had spoke to her; other who witness the 'experience' only saw her talking to an unseen 'someone'. Obviously, no form of empirical testing can be used on these experiences and so definite proof of the Divine, for those other than the individual, cannot be provided.

Religious experiences imply that the God responsible wants to have an involvement in human affairs, and this is what would be expected of the God of classical theism. Despite the criticism of individual experiences outlined about, there have been mass experiences that can provide evidence of a similar existent divine being revealing himself. For example, in 1994 at a church in Toronto, a crowd of worshippers experienced uncontrollable shaking, weeping, laughter and an overwhelming joy whilst listening to a church sermon. What is more, the descriptions of the effects by witnesses are strikingly similar. With such a strong bank of first-hand statements, it may be hard to dismiss them all on the grounds that the experience cannot be empirically tested.

The pragmatic theory can be used to evaluate the truth of statements by focusing upon the consequences of accepting the experience. It states that the 'truth' of a statement is seen purple in practical terms, and therefore acceptance of a religious experience would have to produce beneficial results. The theory depends on the notion that truth is always life-enhancing, whereas delusion will always ultimately be life-diminishing. Consequently, religious experience would have to be found to be life-enhancing to be worth of our credence.

In other words, a genuine religious experience would need to affect the individual in a positive, life-enhancing way.

Another key weakness in using religious experience to prove God is the fact that such incidences will always be subjective; that is, they are open to interpretation and this interpretation will vary from person to person. No objective criteria can be applied to them in order to judge their merit or authenticity. While one person may interpret the need to convert and indeed do so, another person may not do so. It would seem then that religious experience as an argument for the existence of God is only applicable for the individual concerned, and may well do much to strengthen the existing faith of the believer, as highlighted by C.S. Evans. However, 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.