



psychology."

No two religious experiences are the same although it is possible to establish common themes among them. In *Sociology of Religion*, Andrew Greeley surveyed a number of testimonies of religious experience and discovered that the most common themes are; a feeling of deep, inner peace, a certainty that everything will turn out for the good, a sense of the need to help others, a belief that love is at the centre of everything, a sense of joy and lastly, great emotional intensity.

There are also a number of types of religious experience. The dramatic, or conversion event is a direct experience, where the experient feels that he or she is in contact with God. Rudolf Otto described this type of experience as the numinous; a mysterious but nevertheless real object of experience, which evokes feelings of awe, wonder and fascination. The experience may sometimes convert the experient from one faith to another, for example Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus.

There are indirect experiences which are said to enhance a person's understanding of their life and the world around them, known as responses to life and the world. They often occur as a result of prayer, and believers claim that God guides them and helps them to make sense of their lives and the world.

Revelatory experiences are experiences such as visions or dreams, where God makes himself directly known. In this type of experience God reveals new knowledge to the experient such as truth about god, the future or a prophecy.

▲ near-death experience occurs when a person dies and is brought back to life, usually during a medical operation. The experient is able to recall what happened to them when they "died" after they have been resuscitated.

▲ corporate experience is where a large group of people witness events that they perceive to be religious. Examples of these include the Toronto Blessing and the Florida Outpouring.

▲ strength of the argument from religious experience lies in the type of argument that it is, a posteriori. There have been many thousands of people

who claim to have had a religious experience. Psychologist Carl Jung said that "religious experience is absolute, it cannot be disputed. Those who have had it possess a great treasure, a source of life, meaning and beauty which gives splendour to the world." The argument is based on the premise that experience is somehow the product of facts about the real world. For example, experience of God indicates the reality of God and since it is possible to experience God, He exists.

Although, there are considerable, convincing problems with this type of argument. First of all, an experience of God does not always indicate the reality of God. Our regular experiences can easily be mistaken, for example you are walking down the street when you see your friend on the other side of the road, you call out their name but when they don't turn around you realise that it is just a person who looks like them. And since regular experiences are easily mistaken, is it not fair to say that an experience of the divine must be even more ambiguous. Because the argument itself is inductive, meaning that is dealing only in probabilities. The conclusion cannot be sustained simply on the basis of the claims made in the premises.

Richard Swinburne argues inductively in favor of the argument from religious experience. He states that it is reasonable to believe that God is loving and personal and would seek to reveal himself: "An omnipotent and perfectly good creator will seek to interact with his creatures and in particular, human persons capable of knowing him".

Swinburne attempts to solve the problem of moving from the conviction that a person has experienced God to the claim that he or she actually did experience God, or "bridge the internal/external gap", with The Cumulative Argument for the existence of God. This argument is based on the view that if one takes all the different arguments for the existence of God, then they are more convincing than one argument alone. As part of his argument, Swinburne puts forward two principles; The Principle of Credulity and The Principle of Testimony. The Principle of Credulity draws on the work of David Hay, maintaining that since millions of people have experienced what they perceive to be God, it is the basic principle of rationality to believe them. Unless we have overwhelming evidence to the contrary, what perceives to be so probably is. The Principle of Testimony states that in the absence of special considerations, we should believe that the experiences of others are probably as they report

them. This relies on the trustworthiness of other people. If we know that a person is of sound mind, reasonably intelligent and reliable, then in theory there is no reason why we shouldn't believe them. Swinburne believes that if we refuse to accept these principles, we land in a skeptical bog. And so, Swinburne puts the onus on the skeptics to disprove religious experience, rather than the other way around.

Swinburne continues by saying that since people normally tell the truth, there are only three circumstances in which testimonies of religious experience can be rendered unreliable. Firstly if the circumstances surrounding the experience are unreliable, for example through the use of drugs. Secondly, if there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the person is lying and lastly if the experience can be explained in terms other than God, such as the person is suffering from a mental illness.

However, Peter Vardy in *The Way of Zen*, builds on the notable flaw of this argument; misinterpretation. He uses the example of a person who claims to have seen a UFO or the Loch Ness monster. Unless there was a great deal of evidence to support what the person had seen, having seen such a phenomenon could easily be mistaken and so it is correct to remain sceptical. "The probability of all such experiences must be low, and therefore the quality of the claimed experiences must be proportionally high."

Another problem with religious experiences is that they are non-empirical, and so they cannot be verified in a testable way. Ludwig Wittgenstein used the notion of "seeing-as", correctly arguing the point that each person sees their experience differently; some may think that they have experienced God while others believe that they have experienced something else. From this, it is reasonable to conclude that all testimonies concerning religious experiences are unreliable. Ultimately, a person of a religious background is more likely to link their experience to God. This view is supported by John Wisdom's gardener example where two people are looking at a neglected garden. One of them is convinced that a gardener has been coming and tending to the plants whilst the other is convinced of the contrary. "They examine the garden ever so carefully, but sometimes they come on new things suggesting the gardener comes and sometimes they come on new things suggesting the contrary. The events which to some persons seem to work."

R.M Hare describes religious experiences as a "blik". ▲ religious believer sees or feels something and claims that it is God; however this is their personal interpretation which they believe to be true. It cannot be proved to others as true and so their testimony is unreliable.

Those who are in favor of the argument from religious experience draw on examples of corporate experiences, such as the Toronto Blessing where large numbers of people were experiencing God at the same time. ▲Although, some people have questioned the reliability of the blessing, expressing that people are manipulated by crowds and mass hysteria.

In particular, the issue with the consistency of religious experiences is a strong deciding factor when considering the existence of God. There are thousands of testimonies of religious experience, with God as the source of them all. It is undeniable that there are common themes to religious experience, but surely there would be a greater similarity between them all? ▲Anthony Flew puts forward a strong argument, claiming that the character of religious experience "seems to depend on the interests, background and expectations of those who have them rather than anything separate or autonomous". He implies that it is strangely convenient that a vision of the Virgin Mary would occur not to a "Hindu at Bewares" but to a "Roman Catholic of Lourdes".

Flew clearly puts forward an argument more credible than that used by Caroline Franks Davies in an attempt to justify it. She rejects his challenge on the basis that it applies largely to visions and also claims that people will tend to use the language and ideas of their beliefs in order to describe their experiences.

Ultimately, the argument from religious experience fails to provide a definite proof of God's existence. The argument relies on the authenticity of such experiences, and while they may be convincing for those who have had them, we cannot be sure unless we experience it ourselves. Caroline Franks Davies suggests that we take all the arguments in favor of God's existence and when we add in religious experience, the scales have tipped in its favor. However, a collection of bad arguments do not equal a good one.