

My Revision Notes: AQA A2 Religious Studies: Religion and Ethics and Philosophy of Religion

Unit 4A Religion and Human Experience

Topic III Religious experience

(a) Explain what is meant by the term 'a religious experience'. (45 marks)

In 1969 Alister Hardy set up the Religious Experience Research Unit (RERU) with the aim of examining the extent and nature of the religious experiences of people in the UK. The experiences recorded were quite different from other types of experiences that people had. According to Alister Hardy the religious experience '... usually induces in the person concerned a conviction that the everyday world is not the whole of reality; there is another dimension to life ... awareness of its presence affects the person's view of the world, it alters behaviour and changes attitudes.'

Its features include:

- 1) an experience that has religious insight – usually, the unseen dimensions of existence and God, or Ultimate Reality, are the object of the experience.
- 2) some kind of perception of the invisible world, or a perception that some person or thing is a manifestation of the invisible world.
- 3) an awareness of some supernatural being/God or a being related to God, or some indescribable Ultimate Reality.

Hence religious experiences can be theistic (where God is the source and content of the experience) or monistic (where inner being/consciousness is experienced).

Given the wide variety of experiences, it is not surprising that people have attempted to find some way of grouping them or have tried to collate features that are common. For instance, a basic grouping is that of experiences where there is contact with a transcendent being. The features are awe and dependence. This is in contrast to those experiences that feature a more inward and immanent awareness.

Richard Swinburne identifies five types of religious experience classified according to how the experiences come about:

- 1) Experiencing a perfectly normal non-religious object or event, for example, a sunset. God is encountered through the event.
- 2) Experiencing a very unusual public event, for example, the resurrection appearances of Jesus.
- 3) Experiencing private sensations that can be described by normal vocabulary, for example, Joseph's dream of the angel.

- 4) Experiencing private sensations that can be described by normal vocabulary, for example, mystical experiences.
- 5) Non-sensory experiences. They would be unable to refer to anything in particular that made it seem they were experiencing God. 'It just did.'

Caroline Franks Davis has a different six-fold listing:

- 1) Interpretive experiences – for example, an answer to prayer.
- 2) Quasi-sensory experiences – for example, a vision.
- 3) Revelatory experiences – for example, an 'enlightenment' experience.
- 4) Regenerative experiences – for example, a conversion.
- 5) Numinous experiences – for example, an experience of God's holiness.
- 6) Mystical experiences – for example, apprehending ultimate reality or a oneness with God.

The above categories are not mutually exclusive, since an experience may exhibit characteristics of several categories.

A more general way of categorising religious experiences is to consider the four main types of religious experience: conversion, visions, revelation and mystical. The German theologian Rudolf Otto argued that there was one common factor to all religious experiences – the numinous. Religious experience is about a feeling – an experience of the holy. It is something 'wholly other' than the natural world and beyond apprehension and comprehension. It includes an inspiring awe; a sort of profound unease as well as a feeling of humility. A good example of the numinous is the experience of Moses at the burning bush.

More recently, philosophers have raised questions about the meaning of the word 'religious'. There is a recognition of the diversity and pluralism of 'religion'. Therefore, the word 'religious' can include the traditional understanding of God, paganism, animism and a post-modern approach to religion.

(b) 'Religious experiences are of little value since they cannot be verified.'

To what extent do you agree with this claim?

(30 marks)

A religious experience is usually an experience that is directly perceived. It is therefore subjective and private; an inner process that others cannot see. Thus it is argued that there is no way of verifying a religious experience. The statement in the question implies that religious experiences cannot be verified. However, not all would agree with this. It is argued that if there is a God, then it is reasonable to believe God would seek interaction with his created beings.

Some religious experiences are public and experienced by more than one individual. In these instances they are verifiable (for example, appearances of the Virgin Mary). Richard

Swinburne argued that we are justified in accepting that an event occurs unless there are strong reasons to the contrary, for example, reasons for supposing that the viewer was hallucinating. It is up to the disbeliever to show that it is unreasonable to believe the account, rather than for the believer to show that it is reasonable to believe. In other words, it is a case of religious experiences being viewed as true until proven otherwise. He also argued that it is reasonable to believe that the experiences of others probably are as they report them, unless we have good reason to believe otherwise.

However, the lack of uniformity in religious experiences is often given as a reason why reports of religious experiences are doubted. The messages, visions, information and beliefs apparently transmitted are so diverse and contradictory that it is impossible for the majority of religious experiences to be real and genuine. But does the fact that different experiences are recounted mean those experiences are in error? God may reveal himself in terms of cultural beliefs so that the person can understand them. Maybe only one religion is correct so other religious experiences are false, but those of that one religion are true.

Swinburne's approach has also been challenged since he puts it in the context of ordinary sense experiences, and experiencing God is not an ordinary sense experience. God is not material and does not have a location. Indeed, how would you recognise it was God you were experiencing? In response, it could be argued that God could make himself known. Recent research on temporal lobes and brain imaging suggests that it is just the working of a certain part of the brain that in some instances can be stimulated to produce such experiences. However, the neurological changes associated with religious experiences may mean the brain perceives a spiritual reality rather than causes those experiences. Indeed, it is difficult to isolate the cause from the effect.

Some people argue that certain criteria seem consistent with the experiences being genuine and so add weight to their credibility. For instance the experience must be in keeping with the character of God and the results of the experience should make a noticeable difference to the religious life of the person. Teresa of Avila said 'Though the devil can give some pleasures, only God-produced experiences leave the soul in peace and tranquillity and devotion to God.'

So it is not certain that religious experiences cannot be verified, and if they could be then they would be of great value since they are communications from God. Even if they cannot be verified, it does not mean that the religious experiences are of no value. For the individual who has the religious experience, its effects may be profound. Moreover, even if the source is an ordinary experience this does not mean that the experience cannot become a religious one by the interpretation of the subject.