

An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion Eduqas AS Knowledge Organiser:

Theme 4A: Religious Experience - The nature of religious experience

Key concepts:

- **Visions** are perceptions beyond normal experience that typically include dream-like qualities; and/or intellectual content (a message or insight).
- Visions can be **corporeal** (physical) in nature (Saul – ‘bright light’), or **spiritual**.
- Visions can be **collective** (Angel of Mons) or individual (St. Bernadette).
- Teresa of Avila (16th century nun) suggested that the highest form of a vision was a sense of God’s presence without sensory aspects.
- A vision can be part of another type of religious experience.

- **Conversion** usually refers to a positive psychological change in conviction and orientation (James). For example, a conversion from atheism/agnosticism to belief (Alister McGrath) or, from one religion to another (Muhammed Ali). It may be **intellectual** (C.S. Lewis) or **moral**, forgiveness of sin (Augustine).
- Like visions, conversions can be a **collective** (disciples in the upper room Acts 2) or individual experience (Saul on the road to Damascus).
- A conversion can be **sudden** (Saul) or gradual (C.S. Lewis).
- Conversions can be **free** (volitional) or **coercive** (instigated by some ‘other’).
- A conversion can be **active** (the participant is engaged with the experience), or, **passive** in which the participant is taken over by the experience.

- **Mysticism** is a unique experience of direct access to the divine realm.
- William James outlined 4 characteristics of mystical experience (see next KO).
- Mysticism is also **transcendent**; this is an experience that is **‘otherworldly’** or of a different spiritual dimension that may apprehend a greater reality or insight e.g. Sufi Muslims or Hindu ascetics during meditations.
- The **ecstatic** element involves ‘standing outside of oneself’ and complete absorption with one’s spiritual focus; it may take the form of a trance.
- The **unitive** element is the sense of oneness with the divine or a sense of wholeness within reality, removed from the barriers of the physical realm.

- **Prayer** is communication with God. This ‘communication’ can be an independent request from the devotee, a form of praise or, alternatively take on a more mystical and collaborative encounter with the divine object.
- Teresa of Avila saw the ultimate goal of prayer as union with God.
- She wrote of **types and stages** of prayer through the use of two analogies.

- A **garden** being watered: (a) drawing water from the well is the hard work to help the individual focus; (b) using a winch is becoming more withdrawn from the world and focused; (c) irrigation is being open to the flow of God; and, (d) heavy rain is the moment when all sense of self-effort in prayer is completely diminished and the flow of God is directly united with the soul.
- The Interior **Castle**: (a) mansions 1-3 are the stages just before one achieves unity with God; (b) mansions 4-5 are when one first achieves unity with God and God is implanted in the soul; (c) mansions 6-7 depict spiritual marriage in which there is a sense of spiritual ecstasy and painful longing, and a mystical marriage entailing intuitive and constant awareness of God.

Key quotes:

“Mysticism... ever will be one of the great powers of the world.” (William B. Yeats)

“God is in all things. The more he is within, the more he remains without. The more he is inside, the more outside.” (Meister Eckhart)

“Prayer and comfortable living are incompatible.” (Teresa of Avila)

“Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices.” (Teresa o Avila)

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates

The debates about the types of religious experiences appear to hinge upon their impact on both the individual and the community and how best to measure their value.

Others debate their authority in relation to established scripture.

Key questions

If mystical experience is ineffable, then of what value is it beyond the individual?

Religion is grounded in religious experience but how do people differentiate between what is authoritative and what is not?

Key words:

| | | | | |
|----------|-----------|------------|--------------|------------|
| Vision | sensory | dream | corporeal | collective |
| physical | spiritual | conversion | direction | conviction |
| sudden | gradual | free | coercive | active |
| passive | positive | mysticism | transcendent | unique |
| ecstatic | unitive | prayer | garden | castle |