

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

Theme 4C: Religious Experience - Challenges to religious experiences

Key concepts:

Challenges to religious experience tend to be centred around:

- (1) the **highly individualistic** nature that protects from rational enquiry; (2) the **inconsistency with everyday life** that means that questions about authenticity are raised; and, (3) the challenge that **scientific knowledge** (how the mind works), more self-awareness (there is no coincidence that cultural perceptions of the divine prevail) and/or linguistic precision (is the term divine an appropriate word to use?) could provide an alternative explanation.
- Caroline **Franks Davis** categorises all challenges into three categories:
 - **Description:** these challenges involve misremembering, exaggerating, misusing terms or telling lies.
 - **Subject:** these challenges look at questions around the unreliability, impairment or moral vulnerability of the subject of religious experiences and identify determining factors such as physiological states (e.g. intoxication) and psychological states such as dreams, hypnosis, feelings of loneliness and fear.
 - **Object:** these challenges centre on the implausibility of the object of the experience existing. The divine and God are not the only conclusions that could be drawn and such conclusions can be reduced to psychological factors (e.g. sexual repression), sociological influences (projection of society) or anthropological needs (to access social or political power).

Caroline Franks Davis offers a critique of the three types of challenge.

- **Description:** a religious experience cannot provide linguistic precision as it is describing something beyond normal experience; those with highly interpreted experiences are often willing to discuss them more objectively.
- **Subject:** it is an assumption, and a tenuous logical step, to argue that just because psychological and physiological factors of the individual may be impaired means that the experience is therefore unreliable.
- **Object:** many religious experiences do not claim to be the only authority, but rather serve as cumulative evidence as part of a wider argument.
- **Richard Swinburne** proposed this cumulative argument that taken together, the vast evidence for religious experience suggest it is more 'probable' than 'improbable'. Swinburne also presented the principles of credulity and testimony as integral parts of the argument from religious experience for the existence of God.

- The principle of **credulity** argues that it is reasonable to believe that the world is probably as we experience it to be, unless there are special reasons for thinking the experience is false. Only four factors might cast doubt on the validity of the event: (1) if the person was unreliable; (2) if similar perceptions are shown to be false; (3) if there is strong evidence that the object or person did not exist; (4) or, if the event can be accounted for in other ways.
- The principle of **testimony** suggests that in the absence of special considerations, it is reasonable to believe that the experiences of others are probably as they report them.
- Together, these principles point to the probability that God exists.

Key quotes:

"Religious experiences are not the sort of thing which can easily be produced for observation in a controlled setting." (Caroline Franks Davis)

"One must not assume some undetected (and probably undetectable) pathology in an otherwise healthy individual..." (Franks Davis)

"These principles of credulity and testimony are ultimate principles of rationality which ally to all types of perceptual experience..." (Franks Davis)

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates

Some philosophers would consider religious experience as belonging to an unknown and unverifiable 'sixth' sense; a religious experience through sensory perceptions is not something that is observable and testable.

Key questions

Are alternative, materialistic explanations for religious experiences are really 'explanations' or mere descriptions?

Although Franks Davis and Swinburne both accept cumulative arguments for religious experience, is not the reverse true that there are also cumulative arguments against religious experiences?

Key words:

Individualistic
description
cumulative

inconsistency
subject
credulity

authenticity
object
testimony

scientific knowledge
critique
probable

Franks Davis
Swinburne