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Religious Experience at a Glance

A-level Religious Studies
OCR H573/01 · Religious experience

Sample factfile

IN A NUTSHELL **Can an apparent encounter with God give good grounds for believing God exists? Religious experience claims direct acquaintance with God, not an inference.**

1 Key terms

Mystical
union with ultimate reality

Conversion
change of faith or life

Corporate
shared by a group

Noetic
giving knowledge

2 William James (Varieties, 1902)

- Four marks of mysticism: ineffable, noetic, transient, passive.
- Conversion unifies a "divided self"; judge experiences by their fruits.
- Experiences are authoritative for those who have them, not for others.

3 Examples

- Mystical: Teresa of Ávila, The Interior Castle (1577).
- Conversion: Paul (Acts 9); John Wesley, "strangely warmed" (1738).
- Corporate: Pentecost (Acts 2); the Toronto Blessing (1994).

4 Swinburne (The Existence of God, 1979)

- Credulity: if it seems that x is present, x probably is, unless there is reason to doubt.
- Testimony: others' experiences are probably as they report them.
- Martin (1990): "negative credulity" cuts the other way.

5 Challenges

- Freud (1927): wish-fulfilment. Persinger (1980s): the "God helmet", though Granqvist (2005) could not repeat it.
- Conflicting experiences across religions; Russell (1935): heaven and snakes.

6 Exam tip

Distinguish "basis for belief" from "proof". A natural cause shows how an experience happens, not whether God is behind it.

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