

# Arguing the existence of god from religious experience

[Religion](#), [God](#)



Analyse the argument for the existence of God from religious experience “ A religious experience offers a sense of the ultimate and an awareness of wholeness, a consciousness of the infinite and an absolute dependence. ” Edward Schleiermacher. Religious experience has been a contentious subject for philosophers of religion in trying to actually define what a religious experience is, along with psychologists and religious believers. Otto, James, Hardy and Schleiermacher are among many people who have tried to define a religious experience and their basic understanding is it is an encounter with the divine. It is non-empirical, a personal occurrence that brings with it an awareness of something beyond ourselves. Those who have had such an experience count it as the ultimate proof of the existence of God. It is difficult to find a common theme with religious experiences due to the variety but you can divide them into two basic groups; a direct experience and an indirect experience. Testimonies of the occurrence of religious experiences can be found throughout human history, but do they prove that humanity has a link with God if they are true and if they are false, why are we so ready to believe them? Every testimony of a religious experience is unique and most occur to individuals in private but others are ‘ corporate’ experiences, when large numbers of people share in the same experience.

Despite the testimony of believers there is a vast range of alternative explanations for such events which means it is impossible to arrive at a definite understanding of religious experience and to verify or falsify whether such events occur. The argument from religious experience is an inductive

argument. Those who believe that religious experiences are proof of God's existence usually argue inductively and look at the subjective testimonies of individuals to draw similar conclusions from their experiences that can only be explained in terms of the existence of God. Thus Richard Swinburne in 'Is there a God?' argues inductively that it is reasonable to believe that God is loving and personal and would seek to reveal himself to humanity as an act of love to enable people to bring about good; "An omnipotent and perfectly good creator will seek to interact with his creatures and, in particular, with human persons capable of knowing him. Swinburne suggests that religious experiences can be felt empirically and interpreted non-empirically through our 'religious sense.' Thus, if someone has a religious experience, we should believe the experience has taken place, even if their experience differs from others. In an analysis of the inductive argument, it is strong as there is evidence that after the experience the experiencer is changed forever.

Moreover some of the greatest events in history have resulted from people having religious experiences, such as Paul's conversion after seeing a vision of Christ and was instrumental in spreading Christianity around the world. Nevertheless, the continued problem remains that the conclusion is only the best answer that appears probable on the basis of the evidence offered. The conclusion depends on an accurate interpretation of the evidence which may be influenced by the beliefs of the experiencer or the person interpreting the experience. The cumulative argument for religious experience is based on the view that if you take all the arguments about religious experience together, then they are more convincing than one argument alone. If all the

testimonies to religious experiences are taken into account, then this would certainly add weight to religious experience as proof of the existence of God. Swinburne concludes his work with the cumulative argument and believes that when the arguments are considered in isolation of the others they don't prove God, but put together, they make an overwhelming argument which cannot be denied in the grand scales of Atheism Vs Theism. But it has been argued the theory is logically and mathematically flawed as taking many low probabilities and adding does not make on more probable argument - in fact the opposite.

You should be multiplying the weak arguments to get a very weak argument. Richard Swinburne believed that unless we have good reason to think that someone is not telling the truth we should work on the principle that what they say is the case, these are his 'principles of testimony and credulity'. Under his principle of testimony, he argues unless we have evidence to the contrary we should believe what people say when they claim to have had a religious experience: "In the absence of special considerations, the experiences of others are as they report. Furthermore Swinburne created the principle of credulity that holds the belief that unless we have overwhelming evidence to the contrary, we should believe that things are as they seem to be. In 'The Existence of God' he wrote; "How things seem to be is a good guide to how things are.. " Therefore in his view, religious experiences provide a convincing proof for the existence of God.

In support of Swinburne's position, empirical research undertaken in recent years has indicated that as many as 40% of people have at some time in

their lives had an experience that could be classified as religious.

Furthermore in 1969, the Religious Experience Research Unit in Oxford surveyed people by asking them the question: ' Have you at any time in your life had an experience of something completely different from your normal life, whether or not you would describe it as God? ' Many responded positively, saying it was the first time they had told anyone about their experience but it had been one of the most important moments of their lives. However one difficulty Steven Law highlights in his book ' The Puzzle of Ethics' is taking such ' revelatory' experiences at face value is not restricted to one faith. He wrote, " Catholics see the Virgin Mary. Hindus witness Vishnu.. the fact that people have so many bizarre and often contradictory experiences.

. ought to lead someone who claims to have had a ' revelation' to treat their experience with caution. " Law calls for experients to question their experience and for atheists to remain sceptic, as the experient could easily have mistaken their experience. The argument from religious experience is a posterior which means that it is based on experience, and if the experience is reliable it may lead to reliable conclusions. Many theists believe in order for a belief in God to be rational, they don't need to back up their experience with proof as God's existence was directly revealed to them through a personal experience of God. Those who have experienced may have done so but the evidence doesn't strongly support that conclusion for non-religious believers.