**Swinburne on religious experience**

Modern philosopher Richard Swinburne (1934–) has used religious experience as part of a cumulative case for the existence of God. When religious experience is combined with teleological (Design) and cosmological (First Cause) arguments, it provides a strong case that suggests the probability of the existence of God.

Swinburne offers an unusual way of classifying religious experiences. Rather than labels such as numinous, mystical or conversion; he suggests that religious experiences can be categorised according to how they come about. The five categories are mutually exclusive and cover all experiences.

**Swinburne’s five categories**

1. Experience of God or ultimate reality mediated through a common public sensory object, e.g. icons, sunset. In other words, experiences of ordinary everyday objects that everyone around you can see, even if it doesn’t cause a religious experience in them.

2. Experience of God or ultimate reality mediated through an unusual public sensory object, e.g. The Burning Bush. These are also experiences of objects that others could see or hear if they were there, but they are unusual events or objects.

3. Experience of God or ultimate reality mediated through a private object that is describable in sensory language, e.g. Peter’s vision in Acts. These experiences are internal, the object is only seen by the experiencer. It is recognisable and can be described using language.

4. Experience of God or ultimate reality mediated through a private object that cannot be described in normal sensory language, i.e. feeling/seeing something that cannot be described. Similar to category 3 above but, in this case, the private vision or experience is not able to be described in normal language.

5. Experience of God or ultimate reality not mediated by any sensory object. In this experience nothing is seen or heard, but there is a definite experience. One example of this may be Buddhist meditation.

**Task**

Read the five descriptions of religious experiences that follow. Which categories do they correspond to?

**EXPERIENCE A**

I was at prayer on a festival of the glorious Saint Peter when I saw Christ at my side – or, to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for neither with the eyes of the body nor of the soul did I see anything. I thought He was quite close to me and I saw that it was He who, as I thought, was speaking to me…All the time Jesus Christ seemed to be beside me…I could not discern in what form. **St Teresa**

**EXPERIENCE B**

I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with the other two they were flying. And they were calling to one another: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ‘Woe to me’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.’ **Isaiah 6:1–5**

**EXPERIENCE C**

…It looked like a plaque of dull silver and it was possible to look at it without the least discomfort. It might have been an eclipse which was taking place. But at that moment a great shout went up and one could hear the spectators nearest at hand shouting: ‘A miracle! A miracle!’ Before the astonished eyes of the crowd…the sun trembled, made sudden incredible movements outside all cosmic laws – the sun ‘danced’… **Account of the events at Fatima**

**EXPERIENCE D**

Of one who has entered the first trance the voice has ceased: of one who has entered the second trance reasoning and reflection have ceased; of one who has entered the third trance joy has ceased; of one who has entered the fourth trance the inspirations and expirations have ceased; of one who has entered the realm of the infinity of space the perception of form has ceased; of one who has entered into the realm of the infinity of consciousness the perception of the realm of the infinity of space has ceased; of one who has entered the realm of nothingness the perception of the realm of the infinity of consciousness has ceased. **Samyutta Nikaya – Buddhist text**

**EXPERIENCE E**

I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house…it repeated the refrain ‘Take it and read, take it and read’. At this I looked up, thinking hard whether there was any kind of game in which children used to chant words like these. I stemmed my flood of tears and stood up telling myself that this could only be a divine command to open my book of scripture. **Augustine – confessions**