

## Candidate 7

### RMPS Dissertation - [REDACTED]

Religious experiences are such that they are beyond academic study. To what extent is this a valid assertion?

Throughout the course of humanity, experiences deemed mystical, spiritual and beyond the ordinary have been recorded. Shaping society through emergent institutions and behaviors, these religious experiences have permeated human nature, structured cultures and defined personhood. The world in which we live in has been based upon the religious experiences of James' 'pattern-setters'. Whether these events be that of God's work upon "sick souls" or otherwise, such events, epiphanies and visions demand study in order to elucidate a truer understanding of the nature of the divine and therein tell us more about humanity. Biological survival mechanism or ineffable phenomena, religious experiences merit the scrutiny in order to afford understanding. Former director of the Alistair Hardy Research Centre for Religious experience, David Hay highlighted that religious experiences aren't "*the preserve of an aristocracy of spiritual adepts*" but are "*part of human nature...universally present as a potential in every member of the human species*"<sup>1</sup> ingeminating the value of studying these phenomena.

However, this task comes with struggle. Whilst trying to define the meaning of time, Augustine of Hippo summed up perfectly the difficulty by saying "we know what it is until we are asked to say what it is"<sup>2</sup>. This problem can equally be applied to the term religious experience. One 'type' of religious experience identified, or dismissed, by numerous scholars, for example Richard Swinburne or David Hume, is miracles. The miracle of Lourdes for example is a potent religious experience for thousands of Roman Catholics – pilgrimage is made in the hope of a spiritual or even physical change or cure. What happens at Lourdes is beyond the scientific, it is not empirical, it is based on personal and intuitive experience – this is totally subjective. However, David Hume, 18th century atheistic philosopher, rejected such testimony as a form of evidence to support the miraculous religious experience.<sup>3</sup> Hume believed that testimony was too vulnerable a source of evidence and therefore rejected its uses. Hume argued that testimony of miraculous events were false due to a number of factors; that a person who claims a miracle is

<sup>1</sup> Hay, D. (1990). *Religious Experience Today: Studying the Facts*. London: Mowbray, viii,

<sup>2</sup> Hippo, A : *The Confessions of St. Augustine Bishop of Hippo – Book XI: Chap. IV*

<sup>3</sup> Hume, D. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. Reprinted in *David Hume Enquiries*. L.A. Selby-Bigge, Third Edition, Clarendon Press, Oxford, U.K. 2002. (EPM)

likely to have exaggerated the story to unbelievable lengths due to natural human curiosity, that the claimant will be ignorant and barbarous, that there are never enough reliable sources and that if every religion claims miraculous experiences to promote the veracity of their religion then all the events cancel each other out. I believe Hume's rejections of this type of religious experience showed the context of the time that he lived in, for example, by saying ignorant and barbarous Hume refers to uneducated, women and people of a lower-class however - this argument is outdated as in the modern day there are more and more people having an education but there has been no decline in claims to miraculous events. The only case where Hume would argue that a miracle, or a religious experience, could have occurred is that if the possibility of it not happening is more unrealistic than the religious experience itself. However, Hume never goes on his studies to mention what circumstances these would be. Surely in circumstances where a miracle would be the most probable set of events, then the circumstances would be miraculous. What are these circumstances and why, then, would we then believe the circumstances are miraculous without there being further circumstances that would mean that the miraculous circumstances were most probable without being miraculous themselves? With this Hume's definition of miracles goes around in circles without any hint of answers. By defining it in his studies Hume has prevented a more accessible definition, meaning that his academic studies have prevented further evidence of his studies by defining themselves out of understanding.

So instead of trying to define a religious experience through a singular example of one type, can religious experiences be defined by a common core? A commonality, a trademark characteristic would bring with it a greater and unrivalled understanding to humanity about the origin of religiosity and its divine nature. William James, American psychologist, was key in laying the foundations for the study of religious experience. His book 'The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study of Human Nature'<sup>4</sup>, aimed to present the findings of his survey on various types of religious experience. James used a variety of first-hand sourced case studies. His body of work not only takes us closer to comprehending the nature of religious experience, by methodically and rationally studying a wide variety of cases, but also illuminates common characteristics by shedding light on recurring features of these reputedly divine experiences that James sees to be of direct impact. In his academic study of religious experience, he employed a

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<sup>4</sup> James, W. (2012). *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

descriptive approach, instead of outlining a generic theory, drawing from many examples; James cited the example of a homeless drunken man who “seemed to feel some great and mighty presence. I did not know then what it was. I did learn afterwards that it was Jesus, the sinner’s friend.” and went onto become a preacher. It was with case studies like this that James concluded that the importance of religious experience, rather than its origin, were the “fruits” of which the religious experience bore. He concluded that there was no singular, omnipotent origin responsible for every single religious experience. Instead he understood a religious experience to be “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider to be divine.” By systematically going through each of his case studies James identifies core traits, proving to an extent that religious experience is not beyond academic study, nonetheless James can only then define religious experiences by their impacts and not by the religious experience themselves. Therefore, James implicates religious experiences’ effects can be studied and not the events themselves.

Acknowledging the hardships in defining religious experience, James proposed four criteria he considered to be common of all mystical experience, that they would all share a passive, ineffable, transient and noetic quality. Passive meaning that the experience was controlled outside the beholder’s capacity, not initiated by beholder but the experience was acted upon them and ineffable inferring that the experience was beyond words, that language is limited to adequate descriptions and therefore descriptions will never be truly valid, just like nibbana- it is like trying to describe the colour blue to a person born blind with no sense of colours at all. By using the description of transient, James acknowledges that the experience cannot be sustained or constant in any way but that the religious experience is temporary. And although the effects of the event can last a lifetime, the finite nature of the experience leads to the subject having a more developed and deeper understanding of the experience’s importance, which can be reaffirmed for the subject through subsequent events and experiences. The noetic quality, that James introduces to the descriptions of religious experiences, is the sense of the ‘truth’ being revealed to the subject of the religious experience, without having a feeling but the subject now having a profound knowledge of God that through reason alone wouldn’t have been achieved. James’ moves onto ultimately conclude, from his studies, that whilst religious experience gave reason to believe in an intervening and personal God, interested in each singular as well as the world,

religious experience did not give concrete proof of anything. It is unreasonable however to reject proof of the religious experience, itself, though due to a former or current position of scepticism. Bertrand Russell asserted “the fact that a belief has a good moral effect upon a man is no evidence whatsoever in favor of its truth”<sup>5</sup>– he argued that it might be possible for someone to be profoundly affected for the good by a story about a great hero, but this could happen even if the story were a myth and the hero was entirely fictional. Antony Flew in ‘Theology and Falsification’ concluded that statements which cannot be tested empirically are meaningless. He would therefore reject James’ test of religious experience through its results in the life of individuals. It is at this point I would agree with Russell’s rejections. James’ study, whilst offering first-hand testimonies as evidence, has a narrow pool as he only really focuses on case studies of a Christian faith as well as being subjective as James focuses more on the truth of the experience for the individual rather than if this relates to the idea of a God who exists in the ‘real world’. On one hand, James doesn’t show that there must really be a God, on the other hand. James’ study shows the effects that of these experiences are powerful and positive. They change the lives of communities and individuals in a way that it difficult to explain without reference to an outside agency such as God. James’ study displays the understanding in the impacts of religious experiences, these bringing us closer to a holistic definition of religious experiences. Admitting himself that he thought of religious practices and teachings as ‘second-hand’ religion, James believed that religious experiences, ‘first-hand’ religion, were at the heart of religion, that religious experiences were a form of true religion. James indulged this notion of ‘second-hand’ religious experiences through prayer, for example, believing that these people primed themselves for their religious experience. Calling these “institutionalized” mimics of true religious experiences had by “geniuses” and “pattern-setters”, James found a passion for those of whom which religions were founded. Conversion, prayer and saintliness were at the forefront of the religious experiences that he studied, viewing conversion as a transformation of a “sick souls, who must be twice-born in order to be happy” to a sky-blue...healthy minded” being. James, in his study, refutes medical materialism as being an origination of religious experiences, yet by describing the “sick soul” he falls into the trap of origination in medical materialism contradicting himself, as he even goes onto describe this condition of the sick soul as being anhedonia, initially inferring that the location of the origin of religious experience was in the

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<sup>5</sup> Russell, B. Religion and Science

unconscious. Sharing similarities with Sigmund Freud, James went onto hinting that religious experience could be the subconscious continuation of our conscious lives. However, in this view, again, James contradicts his rejections of medical materialism, instead of drawing descriptions from his examples, giving nearly a definitive theory on religious experience. The fact, though, that James never clearly outlined this and only hinted, again indicating the ineffability, that James outlines in his study, to hinder the process of defining religious experience, the goal of academic studies on religious experience. By studying religious experience, James has only proved the extent to which religious experience cannot be studied.

Akin to James, Rudolf Otto felt that the feeling and non-rational element of religious experience was overlooked compared to physical evidence. Otto, a 17th century theologian, philosopher and comparative religionist, published his study of religious experience, 'The Idea of the Holy', taking as its object 'the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine'<sup>6</sup>. This experiential element by both James and Otto, is considered to be the living, common and essential characteristic to understanding the core of religious experiences and religion. At the expense of feelings and the feelings, doctrines, sacred texts and sermons all use language, limiting the whole understanding of the experience for a person who wasn't there at the time. Whilst language is important to religion, it necessarily diminishes the experience of 'the holy', if not excluding the experience completely. Otto believed that the idea, certainly the experience of 'the holy' must be recovered. Focusing on the numinous consciousness, Otto's study particularly looks at numinous religious experiences. A numinous religious experience is where the subject is completely overwhelmed by the feeling in the presence of something greater than themselves. This divine presence makes the subject realize their own significance not as an individual but as a single part of something much bigger. Otto's study includes his theory that these numinous experiences render a divinity as a "wholly other" God rather than being a personal God. His famously quoted "mysterium tremendous et fascinans" qualities, that Otto coined, were to describe impression of omniscience, omnipotence and superiority that these numinous religious experiences served of God above all creation. The subject of the experience being left acutely aware of their own insignificance and transience in relation to the divine, rather than a sense of oneness. This awareness Otto termed as "creature feeling", the feeling of the subject's mercy of and dependence on a higher, big-brother-

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<sup>6</sup> Otto, R. (1958). *The Idea of the Holy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

like being, and that as a creation the subject is not only numerous, but also finite compared to God as being a singular and eternal creator. Whilst Otto's theory gives us the connection to the divine, deserved to the divine figure being the conscious cause of our origination, on the other hand, our evident inferiority highlighted by numinous experiences shows the distance between ourselves and the divine. His theory is not fool-proofed, as Otto's common trait that he inexplicitly points to, "creature feeling", is hard to prove or disprove as to where a person could be lying about having that 'feeling', however, this does not mean to say that emotions and feeling is not a legitimate form of evidence. To base an academic study's results on emotions, however, when studying events such as religious experiences only goes to show how incomprehensible religious experiences are. Again, like James, what Otto has studied and drawn conclusions on are the effects and shared characteristics within these effects of religious experience, only able to be provided evidence from the subject of these experience who will be biased towards the actuality of their religious experience. The unknowable definition of a religious experience means that James, Otto and other scholars who study religious experience will only ever be able to be provided evidence of those who believe in the experience and those who do or do not believe the subject of that experience, however, if the subject of that experience does not believe it to be that of a religious experience then they will not be considered as a case study for academic studies, those which specialize in religious experience. As a result of this, scholars such as James and Otto, are left only to study the experiencer's behavior and beliefs before the religious experience and after the religious experience but cannot study the experience itself, and they especially cannot study the event from a completely unbiased and objective point of view.

British philosopher, Richard Swinburne also sees feeling as a legitimate form of evidence of experiences, arguing that these feelings are a common characteristic in how you would define a religious experience.<sup>7</sup> Offering the principles of credulity and testimony as support, Swinburne sees no reason as to why claims of religious experience should be differently treated to regular, perceptual claims made. The principle of testimony, which Swinburne refers to, is that we should trust the testimony of the experience given to us, unless we have clear evidence that the person giving the testimony is untrustworthy or misremembering. Swinburne goes on to say of the

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<sup>7</sup> Swinburne, R. (2004). *The Existence of God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

principle, "other things being equal, we usually think that what others tell us that they perceive, probably happened". The principle of credulity is where, again unless we have positive evidence of the opposite, we simply must accept what has appeared to happen. Positive evidence of this, in terms of religious experience, could mean that you could prove God doesn't exist or prove that the experience was not caused by the divine, or if you had good reason behind doubting the person claiming the religious experience. Swinburne, however, does not go on to say what good reasoning is, hindering continuations of his study and the belief in his own study's reliability. By not having the reliability as a study, Swinburne only goes to prove, implicitly, the incomprehension of religious experience as a subject of academic study. As well as this the principle of credulity, instead of increasing the believability of religious experience, contradicts his intentions by inexplicitly implying that known liars cannot have religious experiences, where according to James' analysis of those most likely to have, those with sick souls, would possibly be habitual liars due to their nature caused by their anhedonia. Swinburne kiboshes the evidence that could be given to disprove a religious experience in the principle of credulity, possibly due to his Christian background and bias, as he doesn't detail what could disprove God or God's hand in religious experience.

Establishing religious experience as the divine union between an individual's innate links to God, Paul Tillich argued that this link, within all living beings, is latent until it is awoken by the religious experience. <sup>8</sup>Tillich believes that a subject aware of this connection with God gains an enlightened understanding of religion and reality. At this point in his studies Tillich was also preoccupied with the idea of epistemic distance, and by establishing this link Tillich could bridge the gap that epistemic distance leaves between God so this meant that God could be a knowable and personal God as well as a higher almighty power. Tillich suggests two phases to religious experience; the first being the act itself with an encounter with divinity, and the second being the understanding of religiosity gained through ecstasy, involving Tillich's concept of the ultimate concern. The characteristic of ecstasy, Tillich describes, as meaning to invalidate the normal subject-object structure by standing outside one's self and body, that epiphany is the interrelationship of ecstasy and miracle. Tillich takes the grasp of a divinity one step farther by introducing the ultimate concern. Ultimate concern meaning to unify with the divine and to

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<sup>8</sup> Tillich, P. (2001). *Dynamics of Faith*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc



achieve this, the subject must separate the normal subject-object structure. Tillich holds the inside religiosity that we hold dormant within us being the common trait in all living beings meaning that we experience these unions. Tillich does not, however, have proof of this shared dormant religiosity, consequently implying the instability of his study into religious experience. The proof of there being a dormant religiosity inside every living creature would prove the strength and veracity in his academic study into religious experience, however if there were to be proof that this dormant religiosity did not exist then Tillich's whole study would fall through. Because of this Tillich's theories prove themselves to be based more so on assumption rather than unbiased analysis of objective research, meaning that his theories do not stand strong as an academic study into religious experience. Tillich's innate nature of, his assumptions, of a connection between humanity and God necessitate an integrity of the subject object structure, which will always involve subject object structure, or what Tillich calls "cleavage". The complexity of this, again, implicitly proves the complexity and, most likely, improbability of studying religious experiences as Tillich, some would argue instinctively, doesn't see the divine with the external in the way that other finite beings are and bases his whole understanding of religious experience on this.

Being clearer in his findings in, what he considers, his academic studies, Tillich explains that mysticism saturates all religious experience, and shares William James's variety of topics that range from things like mysticism to thing like religious faith and the object of faith and the meaning, or conclusively the meaningless, of life. And whilst they might come to different conclusions, especially on subjects like epistemological basis, these conclusions of the two can be complementary as both of their finding have an a priori (deduced, or presumed by experience instead of observation) nature, that some would argue eliminates their findings as being results of academic study. Basing his views on religion on mystical a priori, Tillich postulates that identity of every individual and immediate connection with an omnipotent divinity as a common finding in religious experience. His ultimate concern involves the subject appreciating the object of thus concern, and Tillich's ultimate concern is easily his most distinguishable characteristics that he poses for the understanding of religious experience.

To evaluate, influenced by romantic idealism, Tillich's end objective was to find a meta-narrative of human life in order to limit the epistemic distance between God and ourselves as



well as the gap within an experience feeling truthful to the subject and being truthful, the logical gap objection. Finding the narrative for this would be the defining characteristic in religious experience and would be the ultimate gateway into the understanding of religious experience. Bias to there being a divinity and to his Christian faith, Tillich's study into religious experience was most likely part of his ultimate objective of answering questions of the divine and producing a narrative for humanity's history. By analyzing the objects and subjects of apparent religious experience Tillich came up with his definition, of which helped his case to proving God by his definitive characteristic of the dormant religiosity and link to the divine.

Simone Weil as a case study offers support to James's and Tillich's theories on religious experience, as over her short life (dying aged 34) she experienced several events. Born Jewish, but a converted Catholic, Weil had one particular experience whilst observing at the Benedictine Abbey of Solesmes, France, 1938, reflecting that she "was suffering from splitting headaches; each sound hurt me like a blow" until she left her body. She recalled that she was able to rise above herself and the pain that she was in to fully engross herself in the monks' chants and prayers. Tillich's understanding of an innatelink with the divinity is clearly established when Weil goes on to claim that she had "this sudden possession of me by Christ, neither my senses nor my imagination had any part". Going on to write later that "one day or another God will come to him" in her book *Waiting for God*, Weil again makes the point of the omniscient God who is a personal God interacting to his subjects, thus lending itself extremely well to Tillich's core characteristic of religious experience. Weil could also be used to affirm James's belief that what he called the 'fruits' of religious experience hold higher importance than the experience's origination. The 'fruits' of Weil's short lifetime consisting of many mystical experiences and beliefs meant that, whilst she remained out of any particular church, she held a dedication to share in others' suffering and went onto fight on the side of the anarchists of the Spanish Civil War as an inexperienced laborer and field hand, dying in England at 34 years old. Writers from A. Camus to T.S. Eliot proclaimed her to be one of the foremost thinkers of the twentieth century and her recalls of her religious experiences exceedingly lend themselves to descriptions from James and Tillich. Even as James' and Tillich's priorities clash over origination over impacts and vice versa, Weil's life and experiences recount both divine origins and her actions after these events, however there is no external recounts of the mysticism of which these events proved to Weil. This means that, just like any other case study on religious experience, by studying Weil

we can only actually look to prove or disprove her testimony and not the religious experiences themselves.

Founded in 1969, the Alistair Hardy Research Centre <sup>9</sup>(AHRC) was created with the purpose of the analytical study into the recurrence of transcendent experiences, their nature and their ultimate purpose. Studying William James, Hardy researched whether there is a 'core' to religious experience, noting that all James' identified events' impacts within his *Varieties* book were beneficial in some form, as a cure to what James called anhedonia, James's concluded common trait for religious experience found through his studies on the subjects of religious experiences based on their recounts and their lives afterward. Hardy came from a scientific background being a former Zoology professor at Oxford, so unlike Tillich did not have an agenda biased to a divinity, however as a dedicated Darwinist he did lend himself and the AHRC to lean towards a more scientific approach and ultimately a more science-based conclusion. Hardy's younger colleague, David Hay, at the Centre, therefore, went onto conclude that "religious awareness is probably natural to the species and has evolved by natural selection" basing this on correspondence between the experiences themselves and people's recollections, by this Hay believed that science could study religious experience. Just like James, Hardy and Hay emanate from science, meaning that unlike Tillich and Swinburne their interests lie in the common characteristics of the event and then impacts rather than the origins, with what physically comes during after the experience being analyzed to find shared traits rather than looking into unattainable research into the realms in which the experience came from. One of the AHRC's main goal was to investigate the academic studies of religious experience and research religious experiences, but up to this point in time the centre's most progressive finding is that religious experiences can be studied through science. This finding, however, in itself is not progressive in actually studying religious experiences but only in that they can be studied, which the AHRC is yet to prove.

This all still begs the question as to whether religious experiences are beyond academic study. Historical psychologists and philosophers, such as James or Tillich, who set out the foundations for the academic exploration of religious experiences and whole centers dedicated to the subject so far have yet to study mysticism itself. The problem with the study into religious experience is

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<sup>9</sup> Hay, D. (1990). *Religious Experience Today: Studying the Facts*. London: Mowbray

that evidence has not yet been discovered that is objective, not only to the subject of the experience but to whom it is being analyzed by. Whether it is Hume, whom is of an atheistic predisposition, who's aim is to disprove testimonies of religious experiences or Tillich, whom is of a Christian faith, who's aim is to provide a divine meta-narrative for the history of humanity, the background of a scholar in some way has always shaped their aims in their research into religious experiences. Religious experiences, proven with case studies like Weil, are completely subjective and this means that professionalism and an objective nature, so far has proved religious experiences too idiosyncratic to be within the realms of academic study.

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