

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

Theme 4B: Religious Experience - Mystical experience

Key concepts:

- **William James** (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*) argued that although beyond the empirical realm, a mystical experience has a positive impact on the lives of the recipients. He identified 4 traits of mystical experiences:
- **Ineffable:** it cannot be put into ordinary words and expressed adequately for the benefit of others. James states, '... it defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words... its quality must be directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others.'
- **Noetic:** the experience imparts some form of authoritative spiritual knowledge or insight. James states, 'They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect... and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.'
- **Transient:** mystical experiences are short-lived, but their impact may not be. James states, 'Mystical states cannot be sustained for long. Except in rare instances, half an hour, or at most an hour or two, seems to be the limit beyond which they fade into the light of common day.'
- **Passive:** the mystic is not in control of the experience. James writes 'Although the oncoming of mystical states may be facilitated by preliminary voluntary operations... the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.'

- **Rudolph Otto** felt that there was too much focus on the rational and intellectual development of beliefs to the detriment of the spiritual aspects.
- Otto pointed both feelings and non-rational elements are central to religion since the founders all had powerful spiritual encounters with God.
- In his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, Otto analysed the sense of spiritual power (the '**holy**' or **numinous** - from the Latin *numen* meaning power) that accompanied a religious experience. He called this the numinous which had three elements to it, referring to it collectively with the phrase used the Latin phrase *numinous mysterium tremendum et fascinans*:

- **mysterium:** is the 'wholly-other' of divine power, totally separate and unique (*sui generis*) from anything else we know but this is not an intellectual experience.
- **tremendum:** is the 'daunting and repelling' power of something that is beyond our control and greater than ourselves - we stand in awe at the power of the divine.
- **fascinans:** at the same time as being unique and terrifying, the numinous also brings fascination, enquiry and invites exploration and a sense of wonder. It is the 'attracting and alluring element'.
- A numinous experience can be gentle or sudden and powerful. Otto felt that Christianity provided the perfect type of numinous experience since its understanding of God was a balance between **mystery, fear and awe** of God.

Issues for analysis and evaluation:

Key arguments/debates

The problem with James' definitions is that they are not grounded in objective, scientific research making them more interpretative than definitive.

It also is debated whether James' definitions are distinctive enough.

The debate about Otto's definition of the numinous is that it is far too vague and can also be used to depict what some would consider non-religious experiences.

Key questions

Can a religious experience really be defined accurately or are we really trying to do something that is inherently inappropriate?

If we cannot accurately define or explain religious experience, then what implications does this have for religious authority?

Key quotes:

"Transiency...Mystical states cannot be sustained for long" (William James)

"Ineffability...it defies expression" (James)

"Noetic quality...mystical states ... also states of knowledge" (James)

"...we come upon something inherently 'wholly other', whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own..." (Rudolph Otto)

"The mysterium is the wholly-other, an object eluding all understanding. It fills the mind with 'wonder and astonishment.'" (Otto)

"The tremendum, the daunting and repelling moment of the numinous..." (Otto)

"The fascinans, the attracting and alluring moment of the numinous..." (Otto)

Key words:

James	mystical	ineffable	noetic	transient
passive	Otto	holy	numen	numinous
mysterium	tremendum	fascinans		