7.7 Religious Experience: 30-minute Pack

AQA 8062 · about 30 minutes

Total Marks

Name: _____ Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Answer ALL questions.

1 Explain two contrasting views about whether religious experiences provide reliable evidence for the existence of God. Refer to a philosopher of religion in your answer.

(Total for Question 1 is 5 marks)

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2 This question is about religious experience as evidence for the existence of God. It is the AQA-style 24-mark, five-part question.

(a) State one type of religious experience, other than a miracle. **(1)**

(b) Give two features William James identified as common to mystical experiences. **(2)**

(c) Explain two ways religious experience can occur, using named examples. **(4)**

(d) Explain two contrasting philosophical views about whether religious experiences can be trusted as evidence of God's existence. Refer to a philosopher of religion in your answer. **(5)**

(e) Evaluate this statement: 'Religious experience is convincing evidence for the existence of God.' In your answer you should: refer to religious and philosophical teaching, refer to different points of view, reach a justified conclusion. **(12)**

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(Total for Question 2 is 24 marks)

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Mark scheme · 7.7 Religious Experience: 30-minute Pack

Question 1

view 1: some argue religious experiences are powerful, direct evidence for God, since the person having the experience often reports strong certainty and a transformed life afterwards, oe **B1**

development: William James argued that although mystical states cannot be proved to others, for the person who has them they carry a kind of authority, similar to direct perception, entitling them to believe what the experience seems to reveal, even though this does not bind anyone else, oe **B1**

view 2: others argue religious experiences can be explained without appeal to God, for example through psychological or neurological causes, such as stress, brain activity, or the mind's tendency to interpret ambiguous events as significant, oe **B1**

development: critics argue that because different religions produce experiences interpreted in line with each tradition's own beliefs, the content of these experiences may say more about the believer's prior beliefs than about objective reality, oe **B1**

reference to a philosopher of religion made accurately, oe **B1**

Answer: Contrast: religious experience as direct, authoritative evidence (James) vs psychological/neurological explanations undermining its evidential force.

Question 2

(a) e.g. conversion experience; mystical experience; experience of the numinous; near-death experience, oe **B1**

(a) Answer: E.g. a conversion experience.

(b) ineffability (cannot be fully expressed in words), oe **B1**

(b) noetic quality (feels like a state of insight/knowledge); accept also transiency (short-lived) or passivity (the person feels grasped by a greater power), oe **B1**

(b) Answer: Any two: ineffability; noetic quality; transiency; passivity.

(c) point 1: conversion experience - a sudden, life-changing turn to faith, oe **B1**

(c) development: e.g. the conversion of Paul (then Saul) on the road to Damascus, described in Acts 9, in which he reported seeing a blinding light and hearing the voice of Jesus, after which he became a committed follower and missionary, oe **B1**

(c) point 2: corporate or collective religious experience - a shared sense of God's presence experienced by a group, e.g. during worship, oe **B1**

(c) development: e.g. some Christians describe strong communal experiences of the Holy Spirit during worship, such as those associated with the Toronto Blessing in the 1990s, involving intense emotional and physical responses believed to reflect God's presence, oe **B1**

(c) Answer: E.g. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus (Acts 9); the Toronto Blessing as a corporate experience.

(d) view 1: some, following William James, argue religious experiences should be taken seriously as evidence, since the person who has one typically experiences it as more certain than ordinary sense experience, and it is not reasonable to dismiss such a widespread, cross-cultural phenomenon without good reason, oe **B1**

(d) development: James also argued that the fact an experience has a physiological or psychological cause, e.g. occurring during illness or fasting, does not by itself disprove its religious significance, since a belief's value should be judged partly by its effects, in this case the positive transformation it often produces in a person's life, oe **B1**

(d) view 2: other philosophers argue psychological or neurological explanations undermine the evidential force of religious experience, since if brain activity alone can reliably produce experiences indistinguishable from reported religious ones, this suggests the experience may originate entirely within the brain, without any external, divine source, oe **B1**

(d) development: they add that because reported experiences vary so much between religious traditions and are shaped by the believer's existing expectations and culture, this variability counts against treating them as direct, objective perceptions of a single, real, external God, oe **B1**

(d) reference to a philosopher of religion made accurately, oe **B1**

(d) Answer: Contrast: James's case for trusting widespread, transformative experience vs the psychological/neurological and cross-cultural-variation objections.

(e) **L4** A well-argued, balanced answer that considers more than one point of view in a developed way, using accurate and detailed references to religious and philosophical teaching to support each point, and reaches a clear, justified conclusion. **10-12**

(e) **L3** A clear and reasoned answer that considers more than one point of view, supported by relevant references to religious and philosophical teaching, though the justification of the conclusion may be less developed. **7-9**

(e) **L2** A reasoned answer that considers at least one point of view, with some relevant supporting evidence, but with limited or no consideration of an alternative view. **4-6**

(e) **L1** One or more relevant points are made, but with little or no supporting evidence and no reasoned conclusion. **1-3**

(e) **L0** No relevant content. **0**

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(e) Indicative content:

- Agree: many people across history and cultures report having religious experiences, and William James argued such widespread, cross-cultural testimony should not be dismissed lightly, especially given the significant, often positive, life changes that frequently follow them.
- Agree: James identified common features (ineffability, noetic quality, transiency and passivity) across many reported mystical experiences from different traditions, which some see as evidence they point to a genuine, shared underlying reality rather than being random or invented.
- Agree: for the individual who has a religious experience, it often carries the same conviction and immediacy as ordinary sense perception, so it is argued they are entitled to treat it as genuine evidence, even if it cannot be proved to a sceptic.
- Agree: believers may point to documented conversion experiences, such as Paul's on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), as historical examples where a religious experience produced a permanent, verifiable change in a person's beliefs and conduct.
- Disagree: psychological explanations suggest religious experiences may result from stress, grief, sleep deprivation or a strong desire to believe, rather than from any external divine cause, since these conditions are known to produce vivid, emotionally powerful experiences generally.
- Disagree: neuroscientific research has shown that stimulating particular areas of the brain can produce sensations similar to those described in religious experiences, suggesting a purely physical explanation is possible.
- Disagree: the content of religious experiences tends to reflect the believer's own existing religious tradition, which some take as evidence they are shaped by the mind's prior beliefs rather than being objective encounters with a real, external God.
- Disagree: even if a genuine, unexplained experience is granted, this does not on its own prove which religion, if any, is correct, since sincere religious experiences are reported across many mutually incompatible traditions.
- A balanced answer might conclude that whether religious experience is convincing depends on whether the possibility of a naturalistic explanation rules out a genuinely religious one, and how much evidential weight a first-person, unrepeatable and largely unverifiable testimony can reasonably carry for someone who has not shared it.

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