

IS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE EVIDENCE FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD?

Related exam questions:

- Is it appropriate to judge claims to have had religious experiences by the same criteria as claims to have had experiences of material objects? (2000/8)
- "Just as it is unreasonable, unless the circumstances are extremely unusual, to deny that I can see my desk across the room, so it is unreasonable to deny that my religious experience is an experience of God, unless the circumstances are equally unusual." Discuss. (2002/3)
- Could an atheist counter the argument from religious experience with an argument from non-religious experience? (2003/12)
- Is it appropriate to assess claims to religious experience by the same general standards as other experience claims? (2006/3)
- "The existence of mystical states absolutely overthrows the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe." (William James) Does it? (2007/7)
- How can we tell whether religious experience is reliable? (2008/13)
- Is the occurrence of religious experience any sort of evidence that God exists? (2009/10)
- What is a religious experience? Would it be appropriate to dismiss such experiences as fantasy? (2010/14)
- You know of no good argument for God's existence. You do something shameful. You feel guilt. All at once it seems to you that your guilt is no private affair: it seems to you that some judge who knows all you have done condemns your action. Would you be rationally justified henceforward to believe that God exists? (2011/5)
- Is there a sixth – spiritual – sense? (2012/6)
- You have a stunning, indescribable vision which leaves you with a powerful impression of having been in God's presence. Is this a reason to believe that there is a God? (2013/11)

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Few people believe in God on the basis of arguments that try to prove, without relying on revelation or any other premise that could in principle be contentious for an atheist, that God exists. Most people believe in God because that's how they were brought up or because they had some sort of religious experience. Consider the following examples of religious experience:

Upon reading the Bible, one may be impressed with a deep sense that God is speaking to him. Upon having done what I know is cheap, or wrong, or wicked, I may feel guilty in God's sight and form the belief *God disapproves of what I have done*. Upon confession and repentance I may feel forgiven, forming the belief *God forgives me for what I have done*. A person in grave

danger may turn to God, asking for his protection and help; and of course he or she then has the belief that God is indeed able to hear and help if he sees fit. When life is sweet and satisfying, a spontaneous sense of gratitude may well up within the soul; someone in this condition may thank and praise the Lord for his goodness, and will of course have the accompanying belief that indeed the Lord is to be thanked and praised. (Alvin Plantinga: "Reason and belief in God," in Plantinga/Wolterstorff: *Faith and Rationality*, p.80)

Or consider the following experience, reported by Tolstoy:

I remember, one day in early spring, I was alone in the forest, lending my ear to its mysterious noises. I listened, and my thought went back to what for these three years it was always busy with—the quest of God. But the idea of him, I said, how did I ever come by the idea?

And again there arose in me, with this thought, glad aspirations towards life. Everything in me awoke and received a meaning.... Why do I look farther? a voice within me asked. He is there: he, without whom one cannot live. To acknowledge God and to live are one and the same thing. God is what life is. Well, then! seek God, and there will be no life without him...

And, finally, consider this true story:

In 1990, Christopher Turgeon formed a Christian ministry in Washington state that he called "Ahabah Asah Prophetic Ministries," and which he later renamed "The Gatekeepers." [...] In 1996, God apparently told Turgeon that it was time to go to war against the US government. This message made sense to Turgeon, who had become convinced that the US government had come under the control of a Satanic secret society. Turgeon had also become convinced that God would allow him and The Gatekeepers to "plunder" unjust and wicked people, such as those working in the adult entertainment industry, in order to raise funds to pursue the divinely ordained war. The Gatekeepers proceeded to conduct a series of armed robberies targeting "evildoers". A member of The Gatekeepers, Dan Jess, had left the group before they moved to California in 1997, and was alleged to have called Turgeon a "false prophet". [...] Blaine Applin, a member of the Gatekeepers, volunteered to help Turgeon kill Jess, asserting that "God told me that I must be the one who does it." Turgeon and Applin drove to Jess's home in Washington state on March 28, 1998. As they were driving Turgeon asked God to cause them to make an unscheduled stop if it was not His will that they kill Jess. No unexpected stop was required, and instead Turgeon and Applin saw seven rainbows, which they took to be a sign that God had blessed their mission. In the early morning of March 29, Applin knocked on Jess's door and shot him several times when he answered, leading to Jess's death. Turgeon served as a lookout and driver. The two returned to California and continued to rob "evildoers" and raise money for the war against the US government and Satan, but were caught by the police two months later. Turgeon received a fifty-year sentence and Applin thirty-nine years.

(Stephen Clarke (2014): *The Justification of Religious Violence*, 154-5)

There's a wide spectrum of religious experiences, ranging from relatively mild premonitions and quiet realizations to overwhelming mystical visions and "voices in the head". The question is whether any of these count as evidence for God's existence, in the same sense in which the fact that I seem to see a table-shaped object in front of me is normally taken as evidence that there's a table in front of me.

The two main theistic defenses of religious experience come from William Alston and Richard Swinburne. Both of them build on alleged parallels between sense perception, which we unapologetically take to be reliable, and religious experience. Alston claims that just as it is impossible to prove the reliability of sense perception in a non-circular way, it is impossible to prove the reliability of religious experience in a non-circular way. Just as there is a certain practice (= normal daily life) within which our senses qualify as trustworthy, likewise, there are long traditions of religious practice within which religious experience qualifies as trustworthy.

Richard Swinburne, in contrast, defends the following basic "principle of credulity":

- (PC) It is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations), if it seems to a subject that x is present (and has some characteristic), then probably x is present (and has that characteristic); what one seems to perceive is probably so.

Swinburne claims that denying (PC) leads to scepticism and upholding (PC) justifies a wide variety of religious experiences.

You can read

Richard Swinburne: "The argument from religious experience" (Ch.13 of Swinburne's *The Existence of God*; argues for (PC).)

and/or

William Alston: "Perceiving God" (a paper which outlines Alston's basic idea; it was later expanded into a book with the same title)

Optional readings:

Caroline Davis: "Religious experience" (Ch.2 of her *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. Gives a detailed overview of the varieties of religious experience.)

Paul Draper: "God and perceptual evidence" (argues that "perceiving" God is so massively disanalogous to sense perception that we have no reason to think that the former is reliable because the latter is)

William Wainwright: "Chemical mysticism" (Ch.2 of his *Mysticism*, 1981. Describes empirical work on drug-induced mystical experiences and considers naturalistic explanations of religious experience.)