THE ARGUMENT FROM RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE
Dr. Peter Vardy

Through recorded history human beings have recorded experiences of the Divine. Great mystics and prophets of all the world religions as well as countless numbers of ordinary people have claimed to be aware of God or, at the least, of a transcendent Power. The question is whether these reports of religious experience can make the existence of God more probable or not. The problem is whether it is possible to move from saying:

1. It appeared to me that I experienced God last night, to
2. I experienced God last night.

The first statement records the way something appeared, the second the way something actually is and the problem is that these are not the same. The Sun appears to go round the Earth, a stick in water appears to be bent, there can appear to be an oasis in the desert, but all these appearances are deceptive. Skeptics will, therefore, maintain that the fact that someone thinks they have experienced God, does not mean that they have done so.

Argument for the existence of God are all (except for the ontological argument) *a posteriori* - they seek to move from experiences in the world to the existence of God. The Religious Experience argument is a classic *a posteriori* argument which seeks to establish, from looking at claimed experience of the Divine or the Other, that God or some transcendent reality does, indeed, exist.

William James was an American psychologist and his book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is possibly the best analysis of religious experience ever produced. James defined religious experience as:

"...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 the divine."

James focussed particularly on individual, mystical experiences and he analyzed four distinct features of these experiences:

1. **Ineffability.** (Religious experience, like love, needs to be directly experienced in order to be understood. No adequate report on its content can be given in words - it must be immediately experienced and no real sense of its content can be communicated. Mystical states are more akin to feelings than intellectual states.)

2. **Noetic quality.** (Mystics speak of revelations and illuminations which are held to provide knowledge and transcend rational categories. "They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive
intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance and, as a rule, they carry with them a curious sense of authority.

3. **Transiency.** (Mystical experiences last for a short time. "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." They cannot even be accurately remembered but they can be recognized again when they reoccur.)

4. **Passivity.** (The experience is beyond the individual’s control and cannot be obtained by effort; it is a gift. "The mystic feels as though his own will is in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power.")

James considers that religious experiences lie at the heart of all religion and that creeds and dogmas are overlaid on top of these experiences. James argues that:

- Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come. In other words for the person having the experience they are so real that they cannot be denied.
- No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of these experiences to accept their revelations uncritically.
- They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness and that there is something beyond everyday awareness of physical objects.

**Religious experiences**

The Acts of the Apostles provides three different accounts of possibly the most famous Christian account of a religious experience - namely the conversion of St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Even though the accounts differ, it is clear from the reports that something extraordinary happened to turn St. Paul from a passionate opponent of Christianity to perhaps its most powerful advocate.

**ACTS 9.3-8:**
As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus.

**ACTS 22.6-11:**
"About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, "Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?" 'Who are you, Lord?' I asked. 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. 'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked. 'Get up,' the Lord said, 'and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.' My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me."
In recent years, there has been an unprecedented increase in research on reports of religious experience and the work of the 'Oxford Religious Experience Research Unit' has been particularly important. The Unit has among its patrons some of the most influential religious figures in the world including the Dalai Lama, the Chief Rabbi, and the Archbishop of Canterbury and it has been involved in carefully listening to and analyzing reports of religious experience. There have been innumerable reports of these experiences. The Unit has also conducted opinion polls through Britain asking people from all walks of life the following question: "Have you ever had a spiritual or religious experience, or felt a presence or power, whether you called it God or not, which is different from your everyday life?" The results were extraordinary as 45% of those interviewed, irrespective of age, background, socio-economic group, or religious belief answered "Yes" to this question.

What is, perhaps, more remarkable is the number of people who had never before spoken of their experiences to even their closest friends as they felt that there was too much danger of being misunderstood. Almost always the individuals involved did not seek the experience - as William James said, the individuals were passive and the experience happened to them in a totally unexpected way. The following is one example of a report of such an experience:

"I decided to write after keeping my experience to myself for forty years. I was 16 and had always enjoyed solitary walks around my village home. One evening I set out, by myself, as usual, to walk up a lane towards the wood. I was not feeling particularly happy or particularly sad, just ordinary. I was certainly not 'looking' for anything, just going for a walk to be peaceful. It must have been August, because the corn was ripe and I only had a summer dress and sandals on. I was almost to the wood when I paused, turned to look at the cornfield, took two or three steps forward so I was able to touch the ears of corn and watched them swaying in the faint breeze. I looked to the end of the field - it had a hedge then - and beyond that to some tall trees towards the village. The Sun was over to my left; it was not in my eyes.

"Then ... there must be a blank. I will never know for how long, because I was only in my normal conscious mind with normal faculties and I came out of it. Everywhere surrounding me was this white, bright, sparkling light, like Sun on frosty snow, like a million diamonds, and there was no cornfield, no trees, no sky, this light was everywhere; my ordinary eyes were open, but I was not seeing with them. It can only have lasted a moment I think or I would have fallen over.

"The feeling was indescribable, but I have never experienced anything in the years that followed that can compare with that glorious moment; it was blissful, uplifting, I felt open-mouthed wonder.

"Then the tops of the trees became visible once again, then a piece of sky and gradually the light was no more, and the cornfield was spread before me. I stood there for a long time, trying in vain for it to come back and have tried many times since, but I only saw it once; but I know in my heart it is still there - and here -
and everywhere around us. I know Heaven is within us and around us. I have had this wonderful experience which brought happiness beyond compare.

"We see God in the miracle of life, in trees, flowers and birds - I smile when I hear talk of God as a man, wrathful or otherwise - I know I have seen and felt and am humbly grateful for the inner rock to which I cling.

"I wrote it down, but I never told anybody." [Record number 4405]

THE BAR OF IRON ANALOGY

William James likened a person's religious experience to a bar of iron feeling attraction and being unable to explain this:

"It is as if a bar of iron, without touch or sight, with no representative faculty whatever, might nevertheless be strongly endowed with an inner capacity for magnetic feeling; and as if, through the various arousals of its magnetism by magnets coming and going in its neighborhood, it might be consciously determined to different attitudes and tendencies. Such a bar of iron could never give you an outward description of the agencies that had the power of stirring it so strongly; yet of their presence, and of their significance for its life, it would be intensely aware through every fibre of its being." Varieties of Religious Experience p.4.

Human beings, claims James, experience the Divine and cannot doubt that this is the case once they have had such an experience even though they cannot explain it in rational terms.

This experience, like so many others, fits all the features analyzed by William James. It obviously had a very great impact on the person who had the experience but they did not want to share this or talk about it with others. There is a real sense in which these experience are so deep and so profound that analyzing them philosophically seems irrelevant given the overwhelming reality of the experience - this is why many people who have had these experiences prefer not to talk about them because they do not want friends providing a rational analysis of something that is so profound and so important to them. It is not only William James in the Western tradition who is aware of such religious experiences. D.T. Suzuki is a Buddhist writer on aspects of religious experience and his analysis is remarkably similar to that of William James. He considers the following to be common to all these experiences:

1. There is a sense of "something" beyond and much greater than oneself.
2. This "something" feeds and is the source of who you are.
3. The individuals feels exalted and at one with the Universe.
4. The experience is not simply a personal event.
5. The individual feels free and sees the essence of things; he or she sees things for what they truly are.
6. The individual accepts things for what they are.
7. The experience cannot be expressed in words.
8. The individual is absolutely certain of this experience: NO ONE can refute it.

Again, therefore, these experiences are seen to be individual and to point to a much wider realm of reality than the everyday world. Again the experience cannot be doubted by the person who has it.
Immanuel Kant

Kant rejected all claims to religious experiences. He did so because God is not an object in space and time and, since human beings have only got five senses which are used to record experiences of spatio-temporal objects, then it is impossible for God to be experienced at all. Kant drew a distinction between the world as it is experienced by human beings, the PHENOMENAL WORLD, and the world as it really is in itself, the NOUMENAL WORLD. Human beings all share five senses and they have no alternative but to experience the world through the senses. Kant certainly did not reject the existence of God, he simply rejected the possibility of human beings experiencing God.

A modern American philosopher of religion, William Alston, has replied to this suggesting that human beings have more than five senses. Just as dogs and cats have senses of which human beings are not aware, so Alston argues human beings may have faculties of which we are only dimly aware and which would enable us to experience God. Alston argues for a perceptual model for experiencing God: "...perceiving X simply consists in X's appearing to one, or being presented to one, as so-and-so. That's all there is to it..." God is experienced, only if God exists to be experienced.

Alston accepts that religious believers do make use of their prior beliefs when they have religious experiences, but he does not consider that this undermines the veracity of these experiences. Humans do this, he maintains, with normal experience. If he sees his house from 5000ft, he certainly sees his house and he may learn something new but it would basically be as he expected his house to look. Similarly when experiencing God, God is experienced as believers expect God to be experienced - there is no difference between ordinary experiences and religious ones. This does not, however, solve the challenge to religious experience which says that the likelihood of religious experience pointing to God is undermined by the fact that most people claim to see what their prior framework leads them to expect. Thus Catholics see the Virgin Mary, not the Hindu god Kali and this points, critics claim, to prior beliefs creating the experiences. However, it can be replied to this that if there is a transcendent 'Other' which some call God, it may be reasonable that different cultures will experience this through their own understandings but this does not mean that God does not exist. The famous poem about the blind men of Hindustan (on the next page) puts this well - the fact that so many religious people may have different views of the reality of God does not mean that God does not exist.

The psychological and physiological challenges

Perhaps the most powerful challenge against the idea that religious experience points beyond itself to God or a transcendent reality comes from some psychologists and physiologists who, whilst they may acknowledge that people do have the experiences they claim, nevertheless say that these can be explained entirely in psychological terms. As one example, in Ireland epilepsy was known as "Saint Paul's disease." The name points to the centuries-old assumption that the apostle suffered from epilepsy. Psychologists might, therefore, agree that St. Paul had the sort of experience he described but instead of attributing this to God they would explain it in physiological terms.

To support this view, people usually point to Saint Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, in which Paul, or Saul as he was known before his conversion to Christianity, is reported to have a fit similar to an epileptic seizure: "...suddenly a light from the sky flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him: 'Saul, Saul! Why do you persecute me?'... Saul got up from the ground and opened his eyes, but he could not see a thing... For three days he was not able to see, and during that time he did not eat or drink anything." Some argue that this account could well be of an epileptic seizure, not of a religious experience.
The Blind Men of Indostan
John Godfrey Saxe 1816-1887

It was six men of Indostan to learning much inclined
Who went to see the elephant though all of them were blind,
    That each by observation might satisfy his mind.
The First approached the elephant, and happening to fall
    Against his broad and sturdy side, at once began to bawl;
'God bless me! But the elephant is very like a wall!'
The Second, feeling of the tusk, cried, 'Ho! What have we here
    So very round and smooth and sharp? To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an elephant is very like a spear!'
The Third approached the animal, and happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands, thus boldly up and spake:
'I see', quoth he, 'the Elephant is very like a snake!'
The Fourth reached out an eager hand, and felt about the knee
'This wondrous beast is like is mighty plain' quoth he;
' 'Tis clear enough the Elephant is very like a tree!'
The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear, said: 'E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most; deny the fact who can
    This marvel of an elephant is very like a fan!'
The Sixth no sooner had begun about the beast to grope,
    Than, seizing on the swinging tail that fell within his scope,
'I see', quoth he, 'the Elephant is very like a rope!'
And so these men of Indostan disputed loud and long,
    Though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!
Moral: So oft in theologic wars, the disputants, I ween,
    Rail on in utter ignorance of what each other mean,
And prate about an elephant; not one of them has seen!

In his letters St. Paul occasionally gives discreet hints about his "physical ailment," by which he perhaps means a chronic illness. In the second letter to the Corinthians, for instance, he states: "But to keep me from being puffed up with pride... I was given a painful physical ailment, which acts as Satan's messenger to beat me and keep me from being proud." (2 Corinthians 12.7). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul again describes his physical weakness: "You remember why I preached the gospel to you the first time; it was because I was ill. But even though my physical condition was a great trial to you, you did not despise or reject me." (Galatians 4.13-14). In ancient times people used to spit at "epileptics," either out of disgust or in order to ward off what they thought to be the "contagious matter" (epilepsy as morbus insputatus: the illness at which one spits).

It is possible to argue that St. Paul suffered from epilepsy but it is not possible to reduce all religious experience to types of mental illness:
1. Although it may be possible that SOME religious experiences can be explained in psychological terms, this does not mean that ALL religious experiences can be so explained.
2. The degree to which those who claim religious experiences are often intelligent, well balanced and able to be self-critical counts against religious experience being simply explained as a psychological delusion.
3. One of the marks of a genuine religious experience is that it changes the person concerned and remains of enduring importance throughout their life. A psychological aberration is much less likely to have this effect than a profound experience of the divine which places the whole of life in a completely different context.
4. Even if many religious experiences were to be explained in psychological terms, this in no way rules out God being responsible for these experiences. After all, if God exists, how else would God communicate except through the human psyche?
5. God is not another object in space and time and, therefore, the fact that most religious experiences cannot be communicated in normal language which deals with spatio-temporal objects does not undermine their credibility but rather makes them more probably true.
6. The evidence of the Oxford Religious Experience Research Unit about the very wide scale of religious experiences and that these experiences often occur only once and come to many individuals who are not 'religious' or tied in to a particular faith community undermines the idea that such experiences are merely a psychological effect.

These arguments do not, of course, prove that religious experiences are true, but they do, perhaps, undermine the attempt to simply write off religious experience on psychological grounds. Carl Jung was one of the greatest psychologists who has ever lived and he considered that, in all his patients in later life, coming to a proper understanding of their position as spiritual beings was vital in coming to psychological wholeness. Jung maintained that all individuals have within their shared, collective unconscious the archetype of God the father and, for Jung, the central question psychology needed to answer was whether this archetype represented an 'imprint' of the God who existed beyond the psyche. He did not believe that he could ever prove this to be true, but he was in no doubt at all that the archetype of God WAS an imprint of the God who existed within. When asked on a BBC radio programme whether he believed in God, Jung paused and then said "I do not believe... I know." Many who have had religious experiences feel exactly the same way. They are in no doubt that they will survive death, that life has meaning and purpose and they feel surrounded by love but they also accept that this is not something which they can prove.

**CONCLUSION**

Whichever model of God one is working with, the "proofs" for the existence of God attempt to demonstrate that belief in God is not the same as belief in fairies at the bottom of the garden or Santa Claus. Religious people argue that there is good reason to believe in God and that it is not an irrational view of the world. Whilst Aquinas' Five Ways do not offer what would strictly speaking be called philosophical proof it can be argued that, cumulatively, they point to a way of making sense of the Universe and the continued existence of a world which exists as a perfectly balanced harmonious system. Whilst there are other explanations for the existence of this world, and these may be held to be equally plausible - the world may just be here by chance and there may be no creator and no ultimate purpose to life - the religious believer will argue that their beliefs about the world are just as probable as any other and perhaps more probable. They might argue that it is up to the atheist to demonstrate that belief in God is irrational or to demonstrate that there is no God. Richard Swinburne argues that the claims of those who have had religious experiences tip the balance of probability in favour of God. He appeals to two principles:

- **The Principle of Credulity** - which says that things are normally what they seem to be and if it appears to a person that they are experiencing God, then - in the absence of factors like the person being
unreliable, habitual liars, on drugs, etc - it is reasonable for them to believe that what they think they are experiencing they actually are experiencing, and

- **The Principle of Testimony** - which says that it is reasonable to believe reports of what people tell us.

Swinburne's aim is to shift the burden of proof onto the skeptic to show why religious experiences should not be taken as true unless evidence is presented to the contrary. The weakness of Swinburne's argument, however, is that it depends on first establishing that there is a reasonable probability that God may exist before relying on religious experience, and assessment of probability depends very much on the individual and is exceptionally hard to justify to someone else. In the final analysis, James' argument that these experiences are authoritative for those who have them is probably decisive - for such people they will not be able to deny the reality of this experience.

St. Thomas Aquinas was in this position. After devoting his life to philosophy and theology and producing a great volume of writings, he had a mystical experience late in life and he said that, after this experience, everything he had written seemed like straw - it seemed superficial and inadequate after the depth of the experience. This is just as true today and, for those who have had religious experiences, philosophic speculation about God may have little appeal.