**How successful are the challenges to religious experiences?**

In this essay I will be discussing the challenges to religious experiences and how successful they are in proving whether they are genuine or not. A religious experience is an encounter with God and is unique to each individual, these experiences may be a result of intensive training and self discipline which leads people to having these encounters. Challengers of religious experiences such as Feuerbach and Freud try to give more naturalistic and alternative explanations to why someone may claim they have had a religious experience. Personally, I believe that the challenges to religious experiences are not successful as there are still so many reports of religious experiences that take place where recipients are convinced that their encounter was genuinely with God, this has not been proved otherwise and the challengers of religious experiences are those who are not open to God.

Firstly, William James’ objective study was a pragmatic approach to religious experience as he wanted to find out the usefulness of religious experiences. He saw the value in religious experiences even if there was a psychological explanation that we all accepted, James’ he suggested that religious experiences do not need to be spectacular as it can just be a sudden recognition that there is a God. James’ does agree that Psychology and science may be able to explain religious experiences not to be true through naturalistic explanations such as emotional reasons or drugs the individual may be taking, but he also accepts that religious experiences are true and valid for the individual who experiences it as some souls may have the ability to connect to the spiritual world. Although there are some flaws of James’ study as it is true for the person who has had an encounter of God there is still no explanation or evidence to explain whether claims of this are true or not. Overall, I support that his study is successful as James’ takes into account the personal experience and contact that an individual has encountered, as he believes religious experiences are meaningful for the person who has experienced it thus does not need to be proven or confirmed by anyone else.

A challenge of religious experiences that is not successful is from Feuerbach who supposed *‘God is a psychological projection’* as human beings have observed themselves and have unravelled all these admirable qualities such as being loving and kind. Feuerbach suggested that we all fall short in terms of perfection as it is impossible for anyone to be hundred percent all loving and kind. Feuerbach demonstrates how we project these qualities into our imaginary God and this is our own construct from our minds for us to worship and aspire to. The consequence of this is that there is no validity in the experiences and can lead to people in creating their own constructs which will never be true. Although this may seem plausible at first glance, there are some issues with this challenge as Feuerbach indicated that people project God and in time religion will become extinct however it hasn’t. ‘With social development, religion will disappear’, yet religion is still present throughout the world, this definitely cannot be the result of people continuing to create their own constructs of God. Feuerbach’s challenge is unsuccessful and does not destroy my belief in the authenticity of religious experiences as Feuerbach is a Psychologist who has a physical perspective on religious experiences, however religious experiences are not physical therefore he does not have the tools to validate the experiences of others. As Theists we are happy to accept that the spiritual world is something real and that God, in his omnipotence and benevolence would want to reach out to us - a view supported by James and Schleiermacher.

Another scholar who is successful in proving religious experiences is F. Schleiermacher who held the view that religious experience comes from within not without; therefore it is accessible to all. Schleiermacher responded to Psychologists who said religion is something we have made up because we arescared of dying. The most important point given by Schleiermacher was that when you are religious, the belief is not about preserving ourself, it is able sacrifice and the preservation of others. Schleiermacher's point convincingly counter attacks the psychologists challenge to the validity of religious experiences. Furthermore, he believed once you have an encounter with God it is self-authenticating and the experience is already real enough; hence does not need to be confirmed with anyone else. A strong point point given by Schleiermacher is that everyone is able to have a religious experience but some refuse it but to find proof of God you need to have an open mind to seek him: *‘a sense of the infinite is obscured in some’.*

Richard Swinburne is at the top of the ladder when supporting religious experiences he has the opinion that we should trust such experiences, otherwise we are left with a philosophy that doubts everything, but unlike Descartes who doubts everything he sees or hears. Swinburne presents two principles: The Principle of Credulity *‘if it seems to a recipient that X is present that probably X is present, what one seems to perceive is probably so’,* this means we have our own sense of whether something is genuine and regarding a religious experience there is nothing that invalidates what a person sees or hears. However, the weakness within this principle is that it casts doubt on the word ‘probably’ as it does not seem certain that x is present, also if X is ‘present’ we are not completely sure where as it could either be present in front of us or in our own vision. The Principle of Testimony is when we are told something we believe what we are told unless we have a reason to think otherwise, so why do we not believe someone if they tell us they have had an encounter with God? It is unreasonable to believe that millions of people who have had an religious experience are deluded, if anything the amount of people who have experienced one makes it more veridical. There are some flaws in the Principle of Testimony as although there are millions of people to confirm these experiences there are much more people to say that these claims are false. Another flaw is from Dawkins: ‘*Extraordinary claims need extraordinary evidence, which recipients don’t have’,* we believe we people tell us however we believe them as they have evidence to prove this to us however individuals who have had encounters with God only have their word, nothing else.

I think Richard Swinburne offers a credible defence of the authenticity of religious experience. Compared to the doubt of Descartes, his Principles of Credulity and Testimony are refreshingly non sceptical in their approach. There are weaknesses in his theory, such as M. Martin's observation that his Principle of Testimony could be applied in the negative, but I agree with P. Vardy that the types of people who have experienced God are the sorts of people we would trust when they speaking of everyday occurrences. As for Dawkins point that ‘extraordinary claims need extraordinary evidence’ this seems implausible to me. If every recipient had a great quantity of physical evidence for religious experiences then they would no longer be ‘extra-ordinary’ experiences. God in his transcendence selects those with faith to receive his message - of course there will never be quantities of the type of evidence that Dawkins demands.

In conclusion to this, I believe points from both sides are logical and valid however not all the challenges to religious experiences are successful although they may be a reliable explanation. It can be argued that the people who attempt to challenge religious experiences (psychologists) do not have the tools to validate experiences, as they have a physical perspective and religious experiences are not physical therefore they can not study it if they are shut off from it themselves. The challengers to religious experiences are not successful as they do not understand the nature of religious experiences nor are they religious themselves to then claim that there are alternative explanations for religious experiences, such as Feuerbach who suggests that we project admirable qualities into our own imaginary God. This is not successful as it does not explain why people can feel such amazing things and why people may encounter something that is not explainable, although we are able to create our own God it still does not give a reliable explanation to these experiences.