

Religion, Ethics and Philosophy

Summer Independent Learning
2026

Philosophy of Religion 3 A and B

Religious Experience

Read the booklet and then
complete all the tasks.

Bring in on the first day back after the
holidays. (Assume you have REP on that day)

Task – Tick when you’ve completed each task and again when you have revised the content.

You will be tested on your knowledge of these topics when we return to college.

Task	Completed	Revised
Task 1 Create a revision resource (eg. Flashcards) Learn the key terms on pages 3 and 4. You will be tested on these terms in September		
Task 2 Summary questions on visions		
Task 3 Example of a vision – notes on Bernadette’s vision		
Task 4 Questions on conversion experiences and examples (first Pentecost and St Paul)		
Task 5 Explanations and examples of mysticism – Miller (UNITE), Rumi and St Teresa of Avila		
Task 6 Activities on St Teresa of Avila’s types and stages of prayer		
Task 7 Explanation and examples of William James’ definition of mystical experiences – PINT		
Task 8 Explanation and summary task on Rudolf Otto’s definition of numinous mystical experiences		

Philosophy

Theme 3 A and B: Religious experience Booklet 1

A.	The nature of religious experience with particular reference to: Visions – sensory; intellectual; dreams. Conversion – individual/communal; sudden/gradual. Mysticism – transcendent; ecstatic and unitive. Prayer – types and stages of prayer according to Teresa of Avila.
B.	Mystical experience: William James’ four characteristics of mystical experience: ineffable, noetic, transient and passive. Rudolf Otto – the concept of the numinous; <i>mysterium tremendum</i>; the human predisposition for religious experience.
Issues for analysis and evaluation will be drawn from any aspect of the content above, such as: • The impact of religious experiences upon religious belief and practice. • Whether different types of religious experience can be accepted as equally valid in communicating religious teachings and beliefs. • The adequacy of James’ four characteristics in defining mystical experience. • The adequacy of Otto’s definition of ‘numinous’.	

THEME 3 : RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE	
TERM	DEFINITION
asceticism	Deliberate self-denial of bodily pleasures for the attainment of spiritual fulfilment.
charismatic	Christians of various groups who seek an ecstatic religious experience, often including speaking in tongues.
conversion	To change direction or to turn around.
description-related	Relating to descriptions of mystical experiences as a basis for challenging their authenticity.
foundational belief	A belief that needs no further proof to support it.
Franks Davis, Caroline	Caroline Franks Davis - scholar who demonstrated how the authenticity of religious experiences could be challenged.
Holland, R.F.	R.F. Holland (1923-2013), an English philosopher who advocated that miracles could be explained as a set of coincidences. They do not break natural laws, but are seen as having religious significance.
Hume, David	David Hume, (1711-1776) 18th Century philosopher, whose work relating to empiricism was hugely influential on the twentieth century logical positivists. His <i>Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion</i> (published after his death) are particularly influential on the development of the philosophy of religion.
Immanent	Existing or remaining; in theology it refers to God's involvement in creation.
ineffable	Defies expression, unutterable, indescribable, indefinable.
James, William	William James (1842-1910) 19th/20th Century American psychologist renowned for investigations into religious experience and mysticism.
miracle	Act of wonder; variously defined including a violation of the laws of nature (Hume) and an unusual and striking event that evokes and mediates a vivid awareness of God (Hick).
monism	The view that there is only one basic and fundamental reality.
mystical	Experiences or systematic meditation, which causes a heightened awareness of the divine or an ultimate reality.
noetic	Gaining special knowledge or insights that are unobtainable by the intellect alone; usually as a result of a mystical experience.
numinous	An experience of the holy; something wholly other than the natural world and beyond comprehension.
object-related	Relating to the object (that that was experienced) of mystical experiences as a basis for challenging their authenticity.
Otto, Rudolf	Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) in his book <i>The Idea of the Holy</i> defined the concept of the holy as that which is numinous.
passive	Where the recipient(s) of the mystical experience do not bring it about themselves – the actual moment is governed by a being or force external to

	the will of the recipient.
subject-related	Relating to the subject (recipient) of mystical experiences as a basis for challenging their authenticity.
subjective	Having its source within the mind.
Sufism	The mystical tradition within Islam.
Swinburne, Richard	Richard Swinburne (1934-) British philosopher and Christian apologist writing on numerous issues in philosophy of religion. On the topic of miracles, he argued that miracles not only broke the laws of nature but also had religious significance.
transcendent	Having existence outside the material universe.
transient	The experience may be short-lived, but the effects tend to last much longer than the experience itself.
veridical	When the object of the experience actually exists as a reality and not just in the imagination.
vision	Something seen other than by ordinary sight.

Task 1

Learn these key terms e.g. you could create flash cards and/ or ask someone to test you.

These can be either online or on card.

You will be tested these terms in September.

Religious Experience

A religious experience is an encounter with the divine.

It is a non-empirical occurrence that brings with it an awareness of something beyond us.

However, there is a wide variety of religious experiences and so it is difficult to find a common theme.

Nevertheless, there are some key features of religious experiences that can be set out as follows:

- God is experienced as opposed to everyday physical objects. There is a spiritual change that clearly has a religious dimension.
- Religious experiences are often subjective as opposed to objective.
- Religious experience is not verifiable.
- Religious experiences are not universal i.e. not everybody experiences them as opposed to ordinary experiences e.g. a tree, the weather etc.
- Human beings often use the same conceptual scheme when they describe an ordinary experience. Thus, regardless of culture we all describe a tree in the same way. However, with religious experiences, though the feelings may be similar (e.g. awe and wonder, joy, peace etc.) the object is different e.g. Jesus, Allah, Krishna etc.
- Religious experiences can be understood as pragmatic in that they bring about life changing behaviour.
- Religious experiences are difficult to describe using everyday language, they are ineffable.

David Hay's book *Religious Experience Today* presents some of the findings of The Religious Experience Research Unit. These findings, which are based on a random sampling of the public include:

- 31% of British people and 35% of Americans have had an experience that they might consider religious.
- These experiences often last for a few seconds but can last much longer.
- They generally give awareness that there is more to reality than this physical world.
- They can produce a change in both behaviour and attitudes – including a sense of altruism, increased self-esteem and a feeling of purpose.

For many people throughout history the strongest demonstration of the existence of God comes from personal experience. Figures like St Paul and Mohammed (pbuh) are famous examples of religious experience. However, it is not just famous people or figures from history who have religious experiences; ordinary people have experiences which have a dramatic and lasting effect on them.

There is a wide variety of religious experiences, including:

- **Visions** – used to describe experience of God or another religious figure appearing with a message.
- **Conversion Experiences** – used to describe an experience that leads to an adoption of a new religious belief that differs from a previously held belief.
- **Mystical Experiences** – used to describe experience of direct contact or oneness with God or ultimate reality.
- **Prayer** – used to describe the experience of communicating with God or a higher power through the medium of prayer.

3 A The nature of religious experience with particular reference to: Vision Experiences

A vision involves 'seeing something' beyond normal experience.

Religious experiences of visions and voices are unusual in that they are usually described in terms of ordinary perceptions. People who experience visions and voices describe them using phrases like 'I saw' or 'I heard'. However, these sights and sounds aren't usually heard or seen by other people. Both visions and voices occur in a variety of forms and in various faiths.

Visions have been described by Caroline Franks Davis as quasi-sensory – this means they resemble a sensory experience, but don't have all the usual features of one

Vision experiences can happen when a person is awake or in a dream. In the vision, information may be revealed to the recipient.

Visions are usually divided into three types that are not mutually exclusive:

1. Sensory/Corporeal: A vision has a sensory characteristic if it is to do with sense experience. In other words, it is where external objects, sounds or figures appear before the recipient. Sensory visions can be summarised in three ways.

Groups or communal – Angel of Mons, during the First World War a vision of St George and a phantom bowman halted the Kaiser's troops.

Individual – seen by only one person, for example St Bernadette of Lourdes had several visions of the Virgin Mary. In one of these visions, she was told to dig in the ground at the feet of Mary. When she did, she discovered a mountain spring. People still visit the spring at Lourdes to pray and bathe, and many report being healed in some way.

Corporeal – an object that is external and appear to be physical in nature, but only visible to certain people, for example, St Bernadette saw Mary as a form or image like a physical person.

2. Intellectual: A vision can have an intellectual quality if the vision brings the recipient a message of inspiration, insight or instruction that cannot be gained in any other way. The experience is seen with the mind rather than the eye. It can also contain warnings!

Peter's Vision - For example, Peter being told that all foods are 'clean' – Acts 10.

⁹ About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." ¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean." ¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

3. Dreams/ Imaginative: Some dreams can involve visions wherein the unconscious state experiences a series of images or dream narrative, which would not normally be available to the individual in conscious state e.g. the **wise men** received a warning in a dream.

Matthew 2. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Also, in the Bible (Matthew 1) **Joseph**, while engaged to Mary, has a dream telling him not to be afraid of marrying Mary – even though she is pregnant and he is not the father. This is imaginative as it refers to a vision that occurs in a dream, in which a message is received from God.

Content of visions

- An image or event in which there is a message – St Peter – vision of heaven
- Religious figures – St Teresa of Avila saw Jesus, Joan of Arc saw St Michael
- Places (heaven or hell) – Guru Nanak had a vision of God's court
- Fantastic creatures/figures – Ezekial – living creatures with form of a man and four wings
- Future – children of Fatima

Task 2 Summary questions on visions

- ## 1. What are 'visions'?

2. Write a summary that includes a definition and an example of each type of vision sensory/corporeal, intellectual and dreams/imaginative. Use the Eduqas Knowledge Organiser to help you. [Eduqas Knowledge Organiser](#)

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Sensory example - St Bernadette (1844–79)

On a February day in 1858, Bernadette went to the river and saw a golden cloud float out from the grotto. In the cloud stood a beautiful young woman, who seemed to float to a space in the rock.

Bernadette drew closer, fell to her knees and began to say the **rosary**. The woman in the vision also had a rosary. When they had finished praying, the Lady vanished. This experience affected Bernadette so powerfully that she told others what had happened, and the news began to spread through the village.

When Bernadette told her priest of the vision, he made light of it, thinking the girl had suffered from a **hallucination**. On the following Sunday, Bernadette returned to the **grotto** accompanied by friends. She knelt before the grotto and the vision reappeared. Although the others saw nothing they began to tell what Bernadette had 'seen', and more and more local people began hearing reports of what had happened.

The next day her mother and aunt went with her, and on each subsequent visit crowds of people gathered nearby, hoping to see or hear something miraculous. Others were sceptical, and the police questioned Bernadette, trying to make her admit that it was all a **hoax**, but she remained firm in her insistence that her visions were genuine.

On 21 February, Bernadette was accompanied by many doubters, and on this occasion, Bernadette reported later, the apparition said to her: '*You will pray to God for sinners.*' On 26 February, while still in the **trance-like state** brought on by her vision, Bernadette crawled into the grotto and, at the Lady's direction, uncovered with her bare hands a trickle of **water** from which she drank and with which she washed her face. The water continued to well up and by the next day was flowing steadily down to the river. It continues to do so to this day; its discovery is regarded as a **miracle**. On 2 March, the apparition told Bernadette to tell the priests that 'a chapel should be built and a procession formed'. The priests, still doubtful, told Bernadette to ask the Lady her name. On 25 March, when the vision next appeared to her, Bernadette asked, 'Would you kindly tell me who you are?' The Lady replied: 'I am the **Immaculate Conception**.' This answer identified the Lady as the **Virgin Mary**; only four years before, the **doctrine** of the Immaculate Conception had been introduced into the Catholic Church. The term Immaculate Conception was a term for the Virgin Mary that Bernadette would not have known.

Task 3 Example of a vision

Write a mindmap/summary of Bernadette's experiences from the first vision to the final vision on the 25th of March. Include the words in bold and ensure that you explain what they are.

Bernadette's
vision

AO2 What evidence supports Bernadette's visions as a genuine religious experience?

AO2 If they were not genuine religious experiences, what other explanations could be given for Bernadette's visions?

Conversion Experiences

Conversion – 'change direction' or 'to turn around'. It usually refers to a change in beliefs or orientation.

Conversion experiences raise interesting issues; although the inner experience cannot be empirically observed, the resulting changes in behaviour are something that can be empirically seen. Often these changes occur dramatically over days and weeks, which for many believers is a powerful piece of evidence for the existence of God.

4. a. Write a definition of conversion religious experiences

Conversion is also not limited to individual experience.

Communal conversion experiences can occur, in which a group of people simultaneously experience the divine and this leads to a change in behaviour or beliefs at the same time.

For example, the communal conversion in **Acts of the Apostles** chapter 2 or the Toronto Blessing in 1994.

The disciples were gathered in a room and received the Holy Spirit.

*'When the day of **Pentecost** came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from Heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.'* Acts 2

[Acts 2 video](#) Click on the link, find the video and watch it.

4. b. Write a definition of communal conversion experiences and an explanation of religious experience that led to communal conversions in Acts 2.

Individual conversions

Conversion may be from one major religion to another — Christianity to Buddhism, or from within one religious tradition — for example, Anglicanism to Catholicism. One example is Paul's conversion from Judaism to Christianity, when he saw blinding light and heard the voice of Jesus calling him to ministry. His life was changed forever

From no religious tradition to a religious tradition e.g. Alister McGrath, Anthony Flew or Nicky Cruz.

Augustine is an example of a **moral conversion**, in that his wayward non-religious life was challenged when he read the words from St Paul's letter to the Romans, which encourages the reader to abandon the works of the flesh and be clothed with Christ.

From faith (believing) to faith (trusting) e.g. John **Wesley** had a vivid experience that enlivened his faith. He wrote: 'I felt my heart strangely warmed, I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that he had taken away my sins...'

Furthermore, **C.S.Lewis'** conversion is an example of an **intellectual conversion**. He recounts how in 1931 he walked and talked for hours with the author J.R.R. Tolkien about myth and Christianity and became convinced that Jesus was the Son of God.

Two types of mental occurrence lead to a difference in conversion processes:

Active The conversion is deliberately sought, perhaps by going to an evangelistic meeting with the intention of responding to the preacher. This is a conscious and voluntary experience, called 'volitional type'

Passive The conversion is not deliberately sought but comes upon them unexpectedly. This is an involuntary and unconscious experience also called 'self-surrender type' (sudden conversion)

The experience can also be gradual or sudden.

Gradual means the conversion takes place over a length of time, possibly even years, it is usually voluntary and takes conscious effort.

Sudden means the conversion takes place suddenly, when a clear decision is made and a particular date can be given for the event. It is a moment of self surrender, it is often involuntary and unconscious.

William James identified three stages of the conversion experience

1. The individual loses any sense of pleasure – there is a difference between what they want to be and what they are.
2. The individual searches for relief – they know something must change
3. There is a moment of breakthrough or clarity, they feel contentment – they are what they want to be.

James' stages of conversion	From Tolstoy's <i>My Confession</i>
Loss of pleasure, a divided self – a difference between the way the subject is and the way they want to be. No entreaties to stop worrying will help them feel positive.	'My life had come to a stop... I had not one single desire, the fulfilment of which I could feel to be reasonable.'
A desperate desire for relief – something must change, searching for answers.	'Will anything real and positive come out of my life and what?'
Self-surrender/reunification between life as it is and how the subject wishes it to be – a breakthrough; clarity and contentment are found.	'What am I? – A part of the infinite. In those few words lay the whole problem.'

One religion to another:

No faith to faith (add moral):

And believing to trusting (add intellectual):

Gradual:

Sudden:

Passive:

Active:

Describe James' stages of conversion with reference to Tolstoy's My Confessions:

Individual Conversion – Paul's Road to Damascus Conversion Story Summary by Jack Zavada

The story of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus is told in **Acts 9:1-19** and retold by Paul in **Acts 22:6-21** and **Acts 26:12-18**.

Saul, a Pharisee in Jerusalem after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, swore to wipe out the new Christian church, called The Way. Acts 9:1 says that Paul was "breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples." Saul obtained letters from the high priest, authorizing him to arrest any followers of Jesus in the city of Damascus. On the Road to Damascus, Saul and his companions were struck down by a blinding light. Saul heard a voice say, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4, NIV) When Saul asked who was speaking, the voice replied: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." (Acts 9:5-6, NIV). Saul was blinded. His companions led him into Damascus to a man named Judas, on Straight Street. For three days Saul was blind and didn't eat or drink.

Meanwhile, Jesus appeared in a vision to a disciple in Damascus named Ananias and told him to go to Saul. Ananias was afraid because he knew Saul's reputation as a merciless persecutor of the church. Jesus repeated his command, explaining that Saul was his chosen instrument to deliver the gospel to the Gentiles, their kings, and the people of Israel. So, Ananias found Saul praying for help. Ananias laid his hands on Saul, telling him Jesus had sent him to restore his sight and that Saul might be filled with the Holy Spirit. Something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He arose and was baptized into the Christian faith. Saul ate, regained his strength, and stayed with the Damascus disciples three days. After his conversion, Saul changed his name to Paul.

Historical Context

Saul of Tarsus possessed perfect qualifications to be an evangelist: He knew Jewish culture and language, Greek language and culture and Jewish theology which helped him connect the Old Testament.

Paul's life-changing experience on the Damascus Road led to his baptism and instruction in the Christian faith. He became the most determined of the apostles, suffering brutal physical pain, persecution, and finally, martyrdom. He revealed his secret of enduring a lifetime of hardship for the gospel:

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13, NKJV)

Points of Interest for Christians

- Paul's conversion showed that Jesus himself wanted the gospel message to go to the Gentiles.
- The men with Saul did not see the risen Jesus, but Saul did. This miraculous message was meant for Saul.
- The scales falling from Paul's eyes symbolized a spiritual transformation that allowed him to see the truth. Once he knew the truth about Jesus, there was no going back.
- Saul witnessed the risen Christ, which fulfilled the qualification of an apostle (Acts 1:21-22). Only those who had seen the risen Christ could testify to his resurrection.

[illegible]

Mysticism: a religious experience where union with God or the absolute reality is sought or experienced.

William James identified four features of mystical experiences which we will study in more detail in theme 3 B, they are passivity, ineffability, a noetic quality and transiency (PINT).

Miller regards mystical experiences as 'the pursuit of a transcendent, unitive experience with the absolute reality' and created the following summary:

- 13

There are mystic traditions in all major world religions; Sufism in Islam, Kabbalah in Judaism and the writing of Ramakrishna in Hinduism. Often, people will invoke mystical experiences through various methods; meditation, pilgrimage, fasting, hypnotic movement and sensory restriction or over-stimulation.

Such experiences can be:

- **kataphatic** – making positive claims about the divine
- **apophatic** – making negative claims about what the divine is not
- **introvertive** – inward, looking to the self to find union
- **extravertive** – outward, looking into the world or universe to find union

Task 5

- a. Write an explanation of mystical experiences with reference to Ed Miller (UNITE) – can be notes or a mind map

[illegible]

Example: Rumi, Sufism and transcendent mystical experiences

The word **transcendent** comes from the Latin prefix *trans-*, meaning "beyond," and the word *scandare*, meaning "to climb." When mystics achieve *transcendence*, they have gone beyond ordinary limitations, moving beyond physical needs and realities. This includes experiencing other worldly, different dimensions, the realm of the other, feelings of ecstasy and disengaging from the temporal world.

Sufism is a Muslim movement whose followers seek to find divine truth and love through direct encounters with God. Sufism arose from within Islam in the 8th-9th centuries C.E. as an ascetic movement. Sufis could be described as devout Muslims but, they are distinctive in nurturing theirs and others' spiritual dimension. The practice of Sufism is the intention to go towards the Truth, by means of love and devotion. This is called the *tarikat*, the spiritual path or way towards God.

Sufis engage in a variety of ritual practices intended to help them realize union with God. This includes distinct forms of ritual prayer, including the recitation of God's names, bodily rituals such as those practiced by the so-called "**Whirling Dervishes**," a Turkish Sufi order that practices meditation and contemplation of God through spinning.

Rumi was born in 1207. He believed a personal and direct experience of God could be achieved through meditation and turning round and round (Whirling Dervish) while reciting poetry. This dance is believed to be a mystical portal between the earthly and cosmic worlds.



b. What does transcendent mean?

c. What is Sufism?

d. Who was Rumi? Outline his beliefs.

e. Who are the Whirling Dervishes?

Example of mystical experience - St Teresa of Avila (1515–82)

Teresa was a nun in the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in Avila. After a year in the convent, Teresa's health began to fail; she suffered fevers and fainting spells and was believed to have tuberculosis. She left the convent and stayed briefly with an uncle who introduced her to mental prayer through Francisco de Osuna's *Third Spiritual Alphabet*. The prayer of quiet was just what Teresa needed as she suffered what she described as 'noise in the head'. As she grew worse, her father brought her home to die. She fell into a deep coma and soon it was thought that she was dead. Her grave was dug, and she would have been buried if her father had not insisted she was not yet dead. Several days later she awoke from her coma, although she was unable to open her eyes because they had been sealed shut with wax in preparation for her burial.

She went back to the convent and when she was almost 40 she began to have a series of remarkable visions, which she said were 'seen not with the eyes of the body, but the eyes of the soul':

*One day, when I was at prayer, the Lord was pleased to reveal to me nothing but His hands, the beauty of which was so great as to be **indescribable** ... A few days later I also saw that Divine face, which seemed to **leave me completely absorbed**. And finally, there stood before me the most sacred humanity in the full beauty and majesty of His resurrected body ... The visions were lit by an unearthly light: It is a light so different from what we know here below that the sun's brightness seems dim by comparison ... It is like looking upon very clear water running over a bed of crystal and reflecting the sun, compared with a very muddy stream running over the earth beneath a cloudy sky. It seems rather to be natural light, whereas the other is artificial.*

In the passage below, Teresa describes her most famous vision:

*I would see beside me, on my left hand, an angel in bodily form ... He was not tall, but short, and very beautiful, his face so aflame that he appeared to be one of the highest types of angel who seemed to be all afire ... In his hands I saw a long golden spear and at the end of the iron tip (I seemed to see) a point of fire. With this he seemed to pierce my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. When he drew it out, I thought he was drawing them out with it and **he left me completely afire with a great love for God**. The pain was so sharp, that it made me utter several moans; and so excessive was the sweetness caused by the intense pain that one can never wish to lose it, **nor will one's soul be content with anything less than God**.*

Although her visions are the most famous part of her religious experiences, she considered them inferior to the **quiet sense of union with God** that she achieved later in life. She tried to hide her visions from the other sisters as she found them disorienting and embarrassing. Also, at this time visions were dangerous, and it was not unusual for visionaries to be burnt at the stake as heretics. Teresa felt drawn to a more strict life of poverty and self-denial, including fasting.

In 1562, she began a reform of the Carmelite order at a small convent in Avila. Here, she wrote a treatise, *The Way of Perfection*, as a guide to convent life. In spite of her desire for poverty, silence and solitude, Teresa spent the last years of her life travelling all over Spain, becoming a celebrity and wielding power over her fledgling reform. She began a reformed Carmelite order for men, beginning with a small foundation for two hermits, one of them the famous mystical poet John of the Cross.

Teresa died in 1582 and was canonised by Gregory XV in 1622. In 1969 she was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church for her writings.

f. Write a brief summary of St Teresa's experience, this can also be useful for visions.

g. Why can they be seen as **transcendent**, **ineffable** and **ecstatic** mystical experiences? Do you think it shows any other aspects on Miller's list?

Prayer Experiences

Prayer is the experience of communicating with God; in some ways, all religious experiences can be seen as a form of prayer. This 'communication' can be an independent request from the devotee, a form of praise or, alternatively take on a more mystical and collaborative encounter with the divine object.

Teresa's types and stages of prayer

St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was a Spanish mystic and Roman Catholic saint. Teresa believed that the purpose of life is union with God through prayer. St Teresa created two analogies to show the types and stages of contemplative prayer, inspired by the visions and mystical experiences she had of Christ. Both analogies show that deep reflection or contemplation on God is a very hard process but it can end with a union with God when He takes control.

The Four Stages of Prayer - The Garden Analogy The analogy is presented in the Autobiography of Teresa of Avila, and gives the metaphor of a garden; with the earth representing the soul and water being the understanding of grace. Teresa stated that *"a beginner must look on himself as one setting out to make a garden for His Lord's pleasure, on most unfruitful soil which abounds in weeds. His Majesty roots up the weeds and will put in good plants instead."*

Task 6 a - Read through the following explanation of the **four stages of prayer**. Make notes on the stages under the following headings:

1. The Bucket - First Water (mental prayer)

2. The Windlass - Drawing Water (prayer of quiet)

3. The River - Irrigated Garden (imperfect union)

4. Rain (perfect union)

The **first stage** consists of **drawing, or attempting to draw, water** from a well by one's own effort. She calls this "the First Water" or "mental prayer". In it, we withdraw our minds from the outside world, and focus our minds upon seeking penitence and meditating upon Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. This is a slow and painful stage, in which we are filled 'drop by drop'. But through these efforts we can draw up some of our inward understanding of Grace. She says, "We shall do alright if we walk in righteousness and cling to virtue, but we shall advance at a snail's pace. Freedom of spirit is not to be had in that way." God has placed the water in the well of our garden. At other times, the well is dry and we must await more water. It is not helpful or healthy to grasp at the water that isn't there. We must wait for the well to again fill up before we can again draw water. God sometimes suspends our understanding. We must accept this. We must wait and prepare our garden for the life sustaining water. This stage, or beginning method is useful at first, and all men will have to fall back on it in their prayer life, but it is the lowest stage and least effective.

Still maintaining the metaphor of a garden, she describes the **second stage** as drawing water by means of a "**windlass**" (which evidently is a kind of pulley). In this way we are aided, by God, in our drawing of understanding. This is the "prayer of quiet". Much less labour is now required, "the soul becomes recollected", and one begins "to come in contact with the supernatural. One still strains but the burden is much less. We are starting to be won over by the divine and we have a greater and more frequent understanding of things. "On arriving at this state, the soul begins to lose desire for earthly things." We begin to become detached. There are fewer and fewer distractions. We are given over to a state of quietude. After our justification, we begin our process of sanctification. We are given over to Christ and are transformed, through Him, into more perfect people. In this stage, we are interiorly made aware of our transformation.

The **third stage** is described as a garden which has been **irrigated, like a river**. We no longer must continually strain but leave our soul open to understanding. The Lord takes over our work and becomes a gardener Himself. We are essentially enraptured and in a state of perfect joy. The garden is beginning to flower. "The soul's humility is now greater and more profound than it was before. It clearly sees that it has done nothing except consent to the Lord's granting it graces, and embraces it with its will." St. Teresa admits that a perfect union with God is possible in this lifetime, at least temporarily. This stage is almost a complete union, except that one is conscious of this rapture.

The **fourth stage** is this union.

She likens it to **rain** falling upon the garden. We make no effort, no strain. We are completely enraptured. This rapture is a result of a perfect, though, temporary union with God. It is a special grace. She compares the union with God to a blazing fire and the state of one's soul to slug of iron. In this fire the iron slug will change its nature and glow. This is the soul enraptured. In this state we can no longer consciously analyse our experience. In this way it differs from the third stage, though it is contingent on that earlier stage. Such a stage is brief. St. Teresa herself says he has only experienced it for periods of less than half an hour. In this stage, time, memory and imagination melt away, leaving one only in the presence of God. It is as if one has been lifted into heaven.

The seven types of prayer - The Interior Castle

This work describes the 'seven mansions' or 'seven dwelling places' that each represent a step towards unity with God. It is a guide for spiritual development through service and prayer. Initially, we are introduced to those outside the castle who are described as paralyzed and crippled by sin. This level represents those who are spiritually and morally bound by evil.

Mansion 1	A long way from the centre of the castle. The souls are surrounded by sin and are only just starting to seek God's grace through humility, in order to achieve perfection. The souls are still distracted by their earthly life. Learn humility
Mansion 2	The mansion of the practice of prayer. The souls seek to advance through the mansion by daily thoughts of God, humble recognition of God's work in the soul and ultimately, daily prayer.
Mansion 3	The mansion of exemplary (good) life. In this mansion the souls have a love for God that is so great that they reject sin, and they have a desire to do works of charity for the ultimate glory of God. Can still fall back and give up.
Mansion 4	The prayer of quiet. During this time Jesus comes to the person in their imagination where a relationship of personal love grows towards great depths of intimacy. The person becomes inwardly quiet and peaceful, absorbed in love, love within and without. Nothing else is important. It is an early stage of mysticism.
Mansion 5	In this mansion, the soul begins to prepare itself to receive gifts from God, and becomes aware of the unity with God, like the river in the Garden Analogy. It is a period of darkness, but yet the soul is certain beyond doubt that it is with and in the Lord. God is in the interior of the soul
Mansion 6	The mansion of spiritual betrothal. The person also receives special teachings and revelations. The results of these events create within the person intimate knowledge of each person of the Trinity, a deep self-awareness that is rooted in humility, a rejection of all earthly things that are not necessary to the continuance of this great love relationship, and finally a sense of joy so overwhelming they must shout it from the rooftops.
Mansion 7	The mansion of mystical marriage. When the person is ready for mystical marriage, the Lord removes the scales from their eyes and they see and understand how beautiful they have been made by the Lord. Thus, fortified, they are united in marital love deep within the Self. Complete union with God.

6 b Write a summary of the types of prayer

Mansions one to three are the stages before union with God

This is where people begin to pray, persevere with prayer and do good works.

In Mansion four and five the soul is captivated by God ...

In Mansion six and seven

3 B Mystical experience:

[Eduqas Knowledge Organiser Mysticism](#)

William James' four characteristics of mystical experience

William James was a philosopher and psychologist, and the author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a study in the human nature*. In his book, James aims to survey the types of religious experience as a psychologist and to present the findings of this survey and its implications for philosophy.

James felt that religious experience was at the very heart of religion. He said that religion was *'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...'* (*Varieties: Lecture 2*).

James noted that religious experiences have great authority for the person who has them and can often have a marked effect in a person's life. He observed that conversion experiences are characterized by religious beliefs becoming central to a person's life (see Saul's Conversion). As religious experiences can so noticeably change people's behaviour, James suggested that religious experiences were the inspiration and source of religious institutions.

Much of his book concentrates on descriptions and first-hand accounts of experiences. Sceptics viewed some of these as examples of psychological disorder, but James disagreed and placed such accounts as central to any understanding of religion.

Four characteristics were found to be particularly prominent in mystical religious experiences of God:

Passive: The experience is not initiated by the mystic but rather they feel that something is acting upon them. Even if the mystic attempts to induce the experience the recipient has a feeling of relinquishing power to the divine/ God. (*James saw this as evidence against arguments claiming that a religious experience can be explained by saying a person willed it*)

Ineffable: The experience is beyond proper description. The direct experience of God goes beyond human powers of description. 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.' It can be compared to trying to describe love.

Noetic: Mystics receive knowledge of God that is not otherwise available. In this sense religious experiences are direct revelations from God. 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: The experience is a temporary one that cannot be sustained, although it may have long-lasting effects. 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.'

James suggested that religious experiences were 'psychological phenomena'; a part of a person's psychological make-up. However, he did not see this as a criticism of his argument, but explained that religious experience is natural to a person, just like other psychological experience like thinking and self-awareness. James' conclusions rest on three key principles: **empiricism**, **pluralism** and **pragmatism**.

Empiricism: The many case studies produced are empirical evidence of the effects of religious experience. This evidence provides us with clues as to the reality beyond what we see and hear. In response to those who might object that he is interpreting the data, James argues that we interpret all our experiences.

Pluralism: James' research into experiences in different faiths led him to conclude that they were similar. Those having experiences may be experiencing the same ultimate reality, but interpreting it as their religious belief structure. Therefore, a Christian might interpret an experience as the Holy Spirit, whereas a Sikh may interpret it differently.

Pragmatism: James believed that truth was not fixed and that what is true is whatever has great value to us. As a religious experience has great value to those it effects, we have to conclude that there is truth to be found in religion.

William James believed that all religious experiences indicated the probability of God (although as a pluralist he referred to 'the spiritual' and 'higher aspects' of the world and the self). He was more interested in the effects of religious experiences. To James, the validity of a religious experience rests upon the effects it produces – are lives changed? James' argument for God is very general; the phenomena of religious experiences point to a higher order of reality.

Task 7

- a. Explain James' four characteristics of mystical experiences and add examples e.g. Rumi or St Teresa of Avila's religious experiences (in this booklet)

Passive	Ineffable
Noetic	Transient

- b. Explain James' principles of empiricism, pluralism and pragmatism.

Rudolf Otto and the numinous – the human predisposition for religious experience

Numinous: Religious experiences of awe and wonder in the presence of an almighty and transcendent God. It is the awareness of human nothingness when faced with a holy and powerful being.

Rudolph Otto was a German philosopher and theologian who pointed out that a central element of direct experiences of God was an **'apprehension of the wholly other'**. He described this wholly other as **'numinous'** (from the Latin word *numen*, which refers to a supernatural divine power) meaning the world that is beyond the physical observable universe in which we live. Therefore, Otto refers to direct experiences of God as being completely outside of our possible knowledge and experience, it was *sui generis* or unique.

Otto also noticed that people who have had religious experiences describe them using words like 'awe' and 'wonder', but the actual nature of the experience was **ineffable** (*experiences which humans can't describe*).

In his book **The Idea of the Holy**, Otto created the term 'numinous' to describe the event; the individual was both attracted and repelled by a sense of awe and wonder.

Simon Peter's words to Jesus after the miraculous catch of fish show this contradiction well: *'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord'* (Luke 5:8).

He analysed this type of experience using the Latin phrase *'mysterium tremendum et fascinans'*.

The tremendum component of the numinous experience comprises of three elements:

1. *Awe-fulness – inspiring awe, fear or dread.*
2. *Overpoweringness – inspires feelings of humility.*
3. *Energy – impression of vigour and compelling.*

The mysterium component has two elements:

1. *Wholly other – totally outside our normal experience.*
2. *Fascination – the person is caught up in the experience and they are pulled towards it or attracted to it, they are unable to drag themselves away.*

Otto was trying to describe the intensity or strength of feeling associated with a mystical experience and the mix of emotions and sensations that affect the individual.

He believed the experience led to a sense of insignificance or 'creature consciousness' while they were in the overwhelming presence of God. Otto claims the numinous grips the mind powerfully and produces the **Numinous dread**.

C.S. Lewis's example can be used to understand the nature of numinous dread and its difference from ordinary fear:

*'Suppose you were told that there was a **tiger** in the next room: you would know that you were in danger and would probably feel fear. But if you were told "There is a **ghost** in the next room," and believed it, you would feel, indeed, what is often called fear, but of a different kind. It would not be based on the knowledge of danger, for no one is primarily afraid of what a ghost may do to him, but of the mere fact that it is a ghost. It is "uncanny" rather than dangerous, and the special kind of fear it excites may be called Dread. With the Uncanny one has reached the fringes of the Numinous. Now suppose that you were told simply "There is a **mighty spirit** in the room" and believed it. Your feelings would then be even less like the mere fear of danger: but the disturbance would be profound. You would feel wonder and a certain shrinking—described as awe, and the object which excites it is the Numinous.'*

C.S. Lewis, 'The Problem of Pain' 1940.

An example of a numinous experience from the Bible – the book of Exodus

Task 8a. Moses and the Burning Bush – what features of the numinous experience can you find in this quote?

3 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. **2** There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. **Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.** **3** So Moses thought, **“I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up.”**

4 When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!”

And Moses said, “Here I am.”

5 “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” **6** Then he said, “I am the God of your father,^[a] the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” At this, **Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.**

7 The LORD said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. **8** So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. **9** And now the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them. **10** So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.”

11 But Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

12 And God said, “I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you^[a] will worship God on this mountain.”

13 Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

14 God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.^[a] This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”

The human predisposition for religious experience

Religious growth has occurred because of a **human predisposition towards religious experience that was always present but only gradually awakened**. Otto emphasises that this predisposition is a characteristic not just of some individuals, but also of the whole human species, it is universal.

Otto goes on to identify and discuss a series of phenomena he associates with the earliest expressions of the human predisposition for religion. His eight phenomena are not part of religion as he understands it, but of pre-religion.

He begins with:

Magic, Worship of the dead, Ideas regarding souls and spirits, Belief that natural objects have powers that can be manipulated by spells etc., Belief that natural objects like mountains and the sun and the moon are actually alive, Fairy stories (and myths). A little more advanced are belief in daemons (pre-deities, so to speak), notions of pure and impure.

The beginnings of religions

Otto claimed religion proper starts only when feelings prompted by the predisposition for religious experience are no longer projected on to things out there in the natural world, but are accounted for in terms of gods. From then on, the progress of religion is a matter of the gradual refinement of people's understanding of their experience of the divine, till the culmination in Christianity.

Otto's view of Christianity as the end product of religious development: for example, Christianity... "stands out in complete superiority over all sister religions". The Idea of the Holy)

8b. According to Otto, what is a numinous experience? Include the three components, the example of Moses, numinous dread and the human predisposition for religion and the beginnings of religion.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

REP – Something to watch, to listen to and to read.

The following tasks are not compulsory; however, we strongly recommend that you complete them as they will help you develop your knowledge and understanding of the many topics covered during the Religion, Ethics and Philosophy A Level course.

Choose a minimum of one listen task, one watch task and one read task, write a one paragraph summary and/or review of it that we can discuss in September.

	The Panpsycast Panpsycast episodes Aimed at A Level RS and Philosophy students. Thought-provoking and witty. Useful episodes include, 1, 2, 32 or 42 or any that you find interesting!	Philosophy Bites, Ethics Bites and Philosophy the Classics podcasts philosophy bites episodes Brilliant introductions to key texts and ideas in philosophy and ethics	BBC In Our Time A very wide ranging series of programmes In our time episodes Some interesting discussions on the history of religion. The fairy tales episodes is very good You're dead to me	History of Philosophy without any gaps This is a podcast that tells the story of philosophy but without the focus on the Western tradition. Introduction to the ideas of Aquinas
	The Good Place The Good Place clips Comedy on Netflix exploring the afterlife and ethics (it is very funny!) Some clips are available on YouTube.	Religion for Breakfast ReligionForBreakfast YouTube series of short, 6 minute videos on a huge range of religious topics and movements.	Crash course philosophy Christianity from Judaism to Constantine What is God like? What is philosophy? There are lots of other interesting introductions to key issues	The Root of all Evil? 2-part documentary series from Richard Dawkins that outlines the main arguments of the New Atheists regarding the apparent dangers of religion
	Article on Jurgen Moltmann An influential theologian looks back on his life and ideas.	Challenging Learning Journal - articles Journals aimed at A levels students e.g. Autumn 2020 has articles on Jesus, faith in a pandemic and religion and science.	Challenging learning - atonement and feminist theology articles Specific articles on relevant topics	Current and archived news articles on religion BBC ethics Keep up to date with religion in the news.