

William James was a nineteenth-century theologian who was specifically interested in the religious experience and mystical experiences. He developed the following terms:

Ineffability: the nature of religious experience which is beyond human words.

Noetic quality: being beyond the knowledge of normality.

Transiency: the short-lived nature of a religious experience (but it may nonetheless effect great change in the person having it).

Passivity: a religious experience as being sourced from outside the individual and having an impact on them.

Religious experience
A religious experience is an experience of some Ultimate Reality – an all-powerful, ineffable being.

Mystical experiences are a subsection of religious experiences. These are specifically defined as experiences of the numinous – the beyond.

Walter Stace believes that a mystical experience should be understood as a non-sensuous and non-intellectual union with the divine. During this experience the self will cease to be. The self is usurped by 'pure consciousness'. On this basis, he would not consider a vision to be a mystical experience, as visions are sensory (i.e. vision).

Rudolph Otto was a Christian Protestant theologian who examined the nature of religious experience. He believed that a religious experience was defined by being numinous, which means the presence of the divine – an experience of what is considered wholly 'other' to the ordinary experience of human beings.

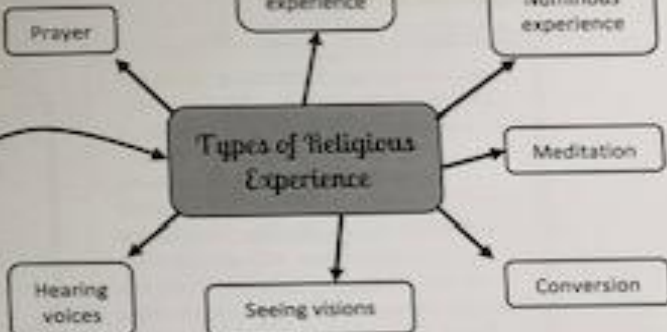
He developed the following terms:
Mysterium: the mystery of religious experience
Tremendum: sense of awe at religious experiences
Fascians: fascination with the divine

Religious experiences can be divided into two different categories:

- **Direct religious experience** (contact with God / an ultimate reality); for example, the conversion of Paul to Christianity and the giving of the Qur'an to Muhammad.
- **Indirect religious experience** (an internal sense of something other than this world); for example, the many mystical experiences of St Teresa of Avila in which she felt God's presence.

Religious Experience

Types of Religious Experience



There are different kinds of visions within religious experience – such as corporeal, imaginative and intellectual. These are defined as follows:

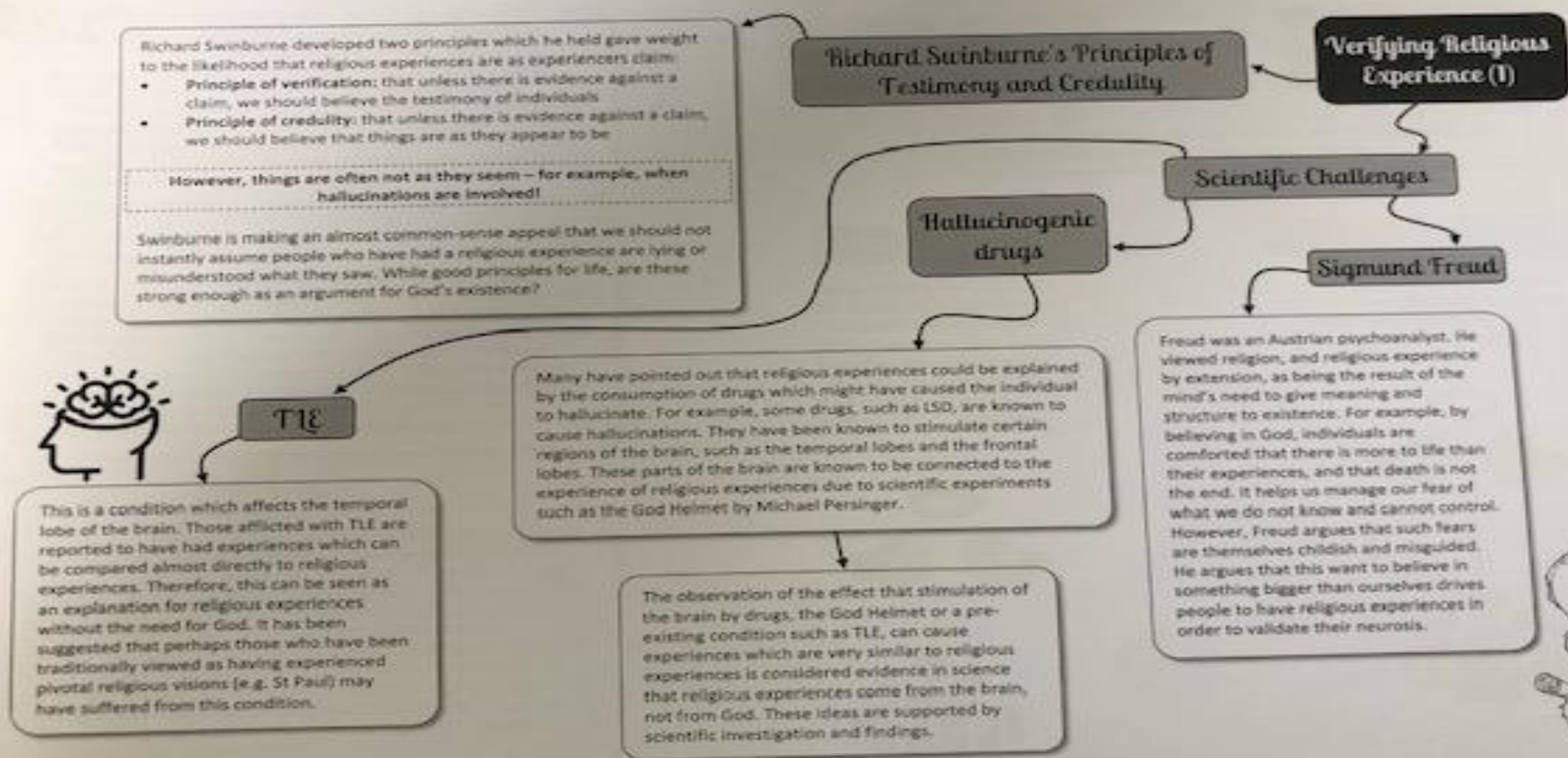
Corporeal – a vision which is external to the body

Imaginative – a vision which takes place within the mind

Intellectual – a vision which gives only knowledge/ understanding/revelation

Verifying Religious Experience (I)

3b



Firstly, a religious individual might critique Freud's ideas about religious experiences by pointing out that Freud's argument is not based on any scientific evidence whatsoever. It appears to only express an opinion, albeit an opinion based on his theory of psychoanalysis. The issue they might point to is that Freud's theory, while well known, is known to be one which is critiqued for lack of scientific development and effort to back up his claim. They would argue that this viewpoint regarding religious experience is little different from his theories on conscience.

Another religious response to this is that the scientific theories regarding TLE and the use of hallucinogenic drugs do not disprove the existence of God in religious experiences; they merely show us how our brains process them. Theoretically, all these scientific endeavours show is which areas of the brain are stimulated when a religious experience occurs – and, of course, if you stimulate them artificially, then you will experience a similar feeling. To find the part of the brain which processes light is not to state that light does not exist. Therefore, the same cannot be said for religious experience.

William James himself does not specify a specific way to achieve a mystical experience – theoretically, according to his definition it could be sought, such as through the use of hallucinogenic drugs. The argument follows that the God of religions such as Christianity is both personal and creative – indeed, he is believed to have created human beings. Therefore, if such a God could be considered to be relational, then it makes a lot of sense for human brains to contain a part which enables them to experience a mystical experience. It is a way for God to interact with human beings. God in such religions is seen as personal, and, therefore, followers of those religions would not consider such scientific challenges to be challenges at all!

Religious Responses to Scientific challenges

Verifying Religious Experience (2)

The two main religious responses to the issue of the temporal lobes of the brain are represented in the diagrams below:

The Interactive Model

Represents the idea that God or the divine can be approached by the believer and the believer can interact with this higher power through religious experiences. These can be interpreted through the brain and potentially achieved through stimulation.



The Top-down Model

Represents the idea that God or the divine gives religious experiences, which are interpreted through the brain.

