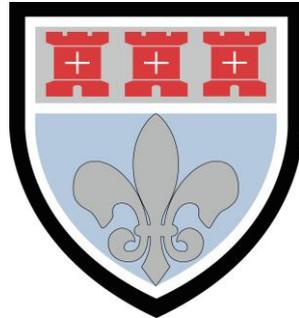


# St Mary's - Religious Education Department



## A2 Level : G581 – Philosophy of Religion Revision booklet

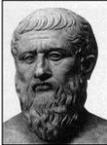
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# PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION 2

## The Body and Soul

### Introduction

- **Materialism** is the view that the mind cannot be separated from the body
- **Idealism** is the view that the mind is the only reality and the body is unreal.
- **Dualism** is the view that the mind and body both exist and are linked in some way.



### Plato

Review Plato's distinction between body and soul in the foundation unit so that you can make comparisons with the thinking of Hick and of Dawkins.



### John Hick

*Philosophy of Religion (1973); Death and Eternal Life (1976)*

- The soul is a name for the moral, spiritual self formed by the interaction of genes and environment. The human is a psychophysical person with a divine purpose.
- The person shall be resurrected through a divine act of recreation or reconstitution in resurrection, rather than reincarnation as Plato would have it, through God's creative love.
- The new body is not the old one brought back to life but a spiritual body inhabiting a spiritual world just as the physical body inhabited a physical world.
- Hick conducts a thought experiment with a hypothetical person called John Smith. Smith disappears from the USA and reappears in Calcutta, India. He is physically identical with the same memories, emotions, fingerprints, and so on. People would agree he was Smith. If he died and reappeared in this world, again identical, people would agree he was Smith. If he died and reappeared in another world with other resurrected people, he would be Smith. This is called the replica theory.
- God is not restricted by death and holds man beyond natural mortality.
- Martin Luther wrote: 'Anyone with whom God speaks, whether in wrath or mercy, the same is certainly immortal.'



### Richard Dawkins

*The Selfish Gene (1976); River out of Eden (1986); The Blind Watchmaker (1995)*

- Dawkins the evolutionist argues that humans are merely carriers of DNA, 'just bytes and bytes of digital information.' Information flows through time, the bones and tissues do not.
- The belief in an immortal soul is anachronistic and damaging to human endeavor. There is 'no spirit-driven life force, no throbbing, heaving, pullulating, protoplasmic, mystic jelly'
- Dawkins argues that myths (such as Plato's Forms) and faiths are not

### Critical comments

Dawkins rejects any idea of a soul that lives beyond death: 'When we die, there are two things we can leave behind us: genes and memes. We were built as gene machines, created to pass on our genes, but that aspect of us will be forgotten in three generations. Your child, even your grandchild, may bear a passing resemblance to you, perhaps in a talent for music, in the colour of her hair. But as each generation passes, the contribution of your genes is halved. It does not take long to reach negligible proportions. Our genes may be immortal but the collection of genes which is any one of us is bound to crumble away. Elizabeth II is a direct descendent of William the Conqueror, yet it is quite probable that she bears not a single one of the old king's genes. We should seek immortality in reproduction, but if you contribute to the world's culture, if you have a good idea, or compose a tune, invent a sparking plug, write a poem, it may live on intact, long after your genes have dissolved in the common pool.'

(Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, 1976)

supported by evidence; scientific beliefs are. Life lacks purpose and is indifferent to suffering. There is no creator God.

- Evolution is the only rational theory. It is not our soul that guides us but our genetic make-up. Over time, the good genes survive and the bad genes die out.
- We are as we are because of our genetic make-up, not the efforts of our soul to guide us towards the realm of Ideas. No soul continues, only DNA, the function of life.
- Our sense of self and individuality is based on digital information, not the soul. Our genes are a colony of information that wants to be replicated. It is easier for this to happen in a multi-cell organism. 'We are survival machines - robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.' (*The Selfish Gene*, 1976)
- The genes are found in behaviour, so the bodies acquire individuality. We feel like a single organism, not a colony, as selection has favoured genes that co-operate.
- Genes working together give us a sense of individuality not the soul. The colony needs a central control. The genetic model becomes more complex and thinks about itself as an individual and considers the consequences of its actions.
- 'Consciousness arises when the brain's simulation of the world becomes so complete that it must include a model of itself.' (*The Selfish Gene*, 1976)
- This leads to human culture, a 'replicator' or 'meme' (tunes, catchphrases, quotes, teachings), which are heard and lodged in the brain and then imitated by it.
- At death, we leave behind genes and memes, though the genes will quickly be dispersed. DNA survival brings about the body and individual consciousness creates culture. This is the soul.

## Debates about the body/soul distinction

- Aquinas believed the soul animated the body and gave it life. The soul is the anima, the source of all activity. It survives death taking the identity of its body
- Descartes rejected the naturalistic idea that the soul gave life to the body and when it left the body died. He thought the relation of the soul with the body came from the connection that we could move our bodies and also that we could experience changes on or in our bodies.
- The body is corporeal, the mind non-corporeal. The mind is where thoughts and feelings are known and the body performs physical actions.
- We do not move the body as a mind steering a ship. The soul/mind is united with the body. The soul is joined to all parts of the body and informs it. We know that the mind is affected by things we do to the body, especially chemical abuse. When we die, the soul moves on to God.
- Descartes also maintained that the body and soul were complete substances leading to a tension between that and the idea the body is not steered by the soul.
- Hick argues that there is evidence of the existence of a spiritual aspect of the person that may be found in parapsychology. such as ESP, telepathy, clairvoyance, apparitions, séances, reincarnation memories, out of body experiences (OOBE), near-death experiences (NDE), and so on.
- The evidence is not conclusive, though it is wrong to take absence of knowledge to mean knowledge of absence. It is not irrational to believe the self survives death in the soul. A

### Glossary

**Anima:** Aquinas' view of the soul; the source of all activity

**Memes:** A replicator of human culture, which is passed on.

**Replica theory:** Hick's theory that if a person vanished and a replica appeared in another world, people would presume that

personal survival is a necessary condition for immortality.

- Some religious texts talk about the soul, which would be an argument for a religious believer that they exist on the basis of the authority of these sacred texts.
- If a person believes in God, then it naturally extends, according to Hick, that souls exist. It is contradictory for God to create people to live in fellowship with God if they are limited.

- Perry (*A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*, 1978) argues that souls cannot establish a personal identity since souls are immaterial. 'Whether or not any souls exist, or have ever existed, they are unobservable and could never be testable. There is no evidence that it is the same personal identity Even if the soul had passed from one temporal form to another in the afterlife, only divine inspiration could tell for sure.
- Perry also argues against those who use memory as evidence. A being in the next world may have a memory of being in the first, but memory can be misleading or even false and cannot be relied upon.
- Gilbert Ryle (1900–76) (*The Concept of Mind*, 1949) argues that we make a categorical mistake b thinking that the noun 'soul' refers to a concrete object in the way that the noun 'body' does.
- The soul does not exist as a separate thing, in the same way the spirit in 'team spirit' does not exist in a separate way. \*
- Ryle opposed the dualist separation between a tangible body and an intangible mind or soul. All references to the mental must be understood in terms of witnessable activities. The body/soul distinction is a myth and scientifically literate people have no use of it. The soul is a name for the set of properties or dispositions of the person.
- Hegel (1770–1831) argued that the mind imposes order on the senses and so we cannot be certain of any physical objects. Our souls come from the underlying universal soul. History is the development of the spirit through time.

## Tips for A2 exam questions

'The body/soul distinction is a myth invented by philosophers such as Plato.' Discuss.

- ▣ Explain the distinction formulated by Plato and his belief in an immortal soul and reincarnation. The soul contemplates the Forms between incarnations. The distinction expresses a belief in life beyond the physical demise of the body.
- ▣ One approach could be to explain that Christian beliefs in the soul, as expressed by people such as Hick, do not encompass reincarnation but do hold that the soul moves on to live beyond this world. Reference could be made to Descartes' view of the soul.
- ▣ Hick's evidence of supernatural events could be considered as evidence.
- ▣ Hick's reasoning that in principle the soul could exist beyond this world should be explored as well as the religious reasons for belief in the soul once belief in God was accepted.

- ▣ Dawkins' alternative explanation of the sense of personal identity could be considered.

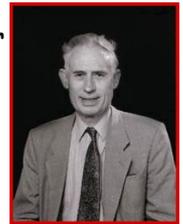
# Life after death

## Introduction

Life may be disembodied (separate from the body) as Plato argued, leaving the body to corrupt on earth, or life continues in some bodily form. Peter Geach, a contemporary British philosopher, writes, 'Apart from the possibility of resurrection, it seems to me a mere illusion to have any hope for life after death. I am of the mind of Judas Maccabeus: if there is no resurrection, it is superfluous and vain to pray for the dead.'

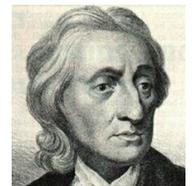
## Disembodied survival after death

- Descartes, Lewis and Swinburne are dualists arguing that we exist beyond our bodies. If people are distinct from their bodies, then after death they exist in a disembodied state. Descartes thought this was possible.
- H.D. Lewis argues that we detect mental processes quite distinct from physical ones, suggesting a non-physical self. Richard Swinburne argues that people could conceivably not be limited to using a chunk of matter for perception, knowledge and control.
- Descartes argues that the body is divisible, parts can be severed, but the mind is not. We conceive ourselves as separate from the body. Yet while Descartes may feel he cannot divide his mind, it is not proof that it cannot be done.
- Descartes argues that he can doubt his body but not that he exists. Norman Malcolm argues against Descartes, suggesting that if Descartes were right, we could doubt that a thinking being exists, but that would not imply we were not thinking beings.
- Swinburne argues that it is coherent to describe someone as disembodied, although Brian Davies questions whether we conceive ourselves as disembodied. To live means to participate in activities, which requires a body



## Bodily survival after death

- While it may be possible for me to conceive of life in a new bodily form, it does not mean I actually will have life with a new bodily form.
- Hick argues for the possibility of replica bodies (see previous section). Brian Davies argues that he would not be content to receive a lethal injection on the basis that a replica with identical memories, feelings, thoughts and physique would exist.
- John Locke (1632–1704) argued that the body is distinct from the person. A person is a thinking, intelligent being with reason and reflection. A person can exist in a spiritual world and can move from body to body.
- Brian Davies argues that it might be the case that after death we continue as a being that is physically continuous with what has died.



## Resurrection and rebirth

Resurrection is a belief held by Christians that the body, a spiritual body, will rise again after its death. The 'I' that lives now will rise again and be identifiable in the afterlife.

- The Christian Gospels state that Jesus rose from the dead. St Paul considers this fundamental to Christianity — proof both of Jesus' identity and that God's plan will come to fruition.



- Jesus said those who believed in him would have eternal life. St Paul described the new life as being with spiritual bodies. The Nicene and Apostle's Creeds both confirm the resurrection of the body.
- Rebirth is a common idea in Eastern religions. There is continuity from one life to another. The body dies but the person lives a different life in a new body. The nature of the new life is determined by the law of karma, by what was done by the person

in the previous life.

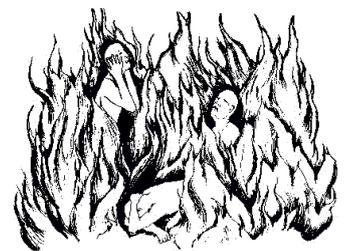
- In Hindu belief, the atman (soul) moves from body to body until it becomes the one spirit or undifferentiated consciousness.
- Buddhists hold that the life of the person is connected through the law of karma to another life, although the soul as such does not exist. The process is linked and the individuality that a person feels is related to the process and context. This life is determined by our acts in the last life.

## The concept of Heaven and Hell

- In the New Testament, Heaven is a place with God where good people go when they die after the Day of Judgement.
- Roman Catholic theology sees eternal life as a timeless Beatific Vision of God. On death, the person goes to Heaven, Hell or Purgatory.
- The New Testament speaks of God's wrath and punishment. In Matthew 25, the unrighteous are sent to the 'eternal fire' on the Day of Judgement. Parables say that no-one can return from this place.
- Hick argues that the idea of Hell is something that humanity could achieve on earth without the need for a reality in the next world. However, if Hell is not to be interpreted literally, why not treat Heaven similarly?
- Hick also argues that one could conceive of another place that is no distance or direction from me. There could be many of these other worlds.



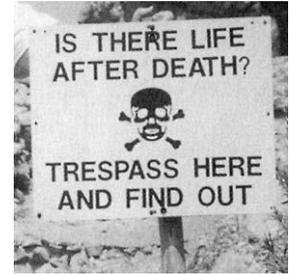
- Hell may be viewed less literally and taken as the suffering of this life. A contemporary way for viewing Hell is a person determined to freely turn away from God after death. God will not force someone to God.
- Purgatory is a place of cleansing of the soul; a temporal punishment for lesser sins before Heaven. A contemporary view of



Purgatory is the journey from selfishness to selflessness. Heaven is the timeless and completely satisfying vision of God.

Is it reasonable to believe in life after death?

- Some evidence put forward is parapsychological (or psychical), such as near-death experiences, mediums, and so on, though the data generated from such evidence is contested.
- Plato argues that life is opposite to death. Death comes from life, so logically life must come from death otherwise all would end up dead and there would be no life. However, life and death are not attributes to be acquired.
- Descartes argues that the human person/self is not divisible, not identified with the body, and continues after the body. However, there is no reason to suppose only things that have parts will die.
- Kant's moral argument for the existence of God is also an

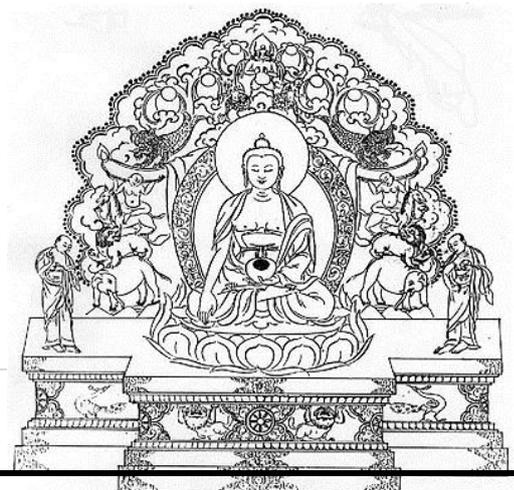


argument for life after death. However, some dispute the existence of a moral imperative.

- Arguably, morality could make sense without the need for life after death as it would bring about a better world.
- Some people argue that their faith is a reason for believing in life after death.
- Most people do not remember anything of previous lives, undermining the argument for the soul from memory. On the other hand, some claim to recover memories from a previous life through hypnosis, though this cannot be

tested empirically

- Hick says that memory is important evidence for the continuity of the same person. If memory is wiped at rebirth, then how can we be sure it is the same person?
- The body is different, and possibly also the memory. The only comparable aspect is character or dispositions, but there are many broad similarities between hundreds of thousands of people living now and many hundreds of thousands of people living previously. This, too, does not provide solid evidence.
- Modern physics denies the possibility of resurrection. It seems scientifically implausible that God could resurrect the disintegrated body. However, this objection ignores the idea that the body is a spiritual body, a new body.
- Is belief in life after death an answer to the problem of evil? It seems unjust that people are moral, have a hard life and die with no reward. The possibility of judgement and Hell vindicates the good and punishes the bad. However, the matter of natural evil is not addressed by this possibility and it could be argued that the suffering is not worth the prize of Heaven. Also, it does not explain why suffering seems to be so arbitrary — are people who happen to have good fortune and comfortable lives going to receive less after death through no fault of their own?
- The concept of karma, from Eastern religions, seems to justify the evil and suffering in the world. It is down to the actions of that person in a previous life. However, when the person suffering cannot remember that past life, or is too young to understand the philosophy of karma, questions might be asked as to whether the system is fair. In Hinduism, though, the question of fairness does not



arise as the results of karma are not 'reward' or 'punishment', they are just the results of your own actions according to the eternal laws of the universe.

## Tips for A2 exam questions

'It is impossible to justify innocent suffering unless there is life after death' Discuss.

- Explain how the existence of the suffering of the innocent, be it through natural or human evil, seems unjust.
- The doctrine of original sin could be explored as a form of justification, or the argument of karma, though the limitations of these ideas should also be explored.
- The traditional theodicies could be explored, in which the suffering is argued to have a purpose, enabling the individual to mature and to exercise free will, with consideration both to Augustine and Irenaeus.
- The extent of suffering, citing extreme cases such as genocide and child starvation, and the fact that it seems arbitrary, could be contrasted with the view of Hick that everything will be revealed and put right after death in the next world.
- Animals suffer, but Christianity does not see animals going to Heaven — what is the purpose, then, of this suffering?

### Critical comments

'Life after death is possible, but we have seen no decisive philosophical reason for believing in it. Many religious believers would say that there are other reasons for belief in life after death. According to them, we can be sure that people survive death because survival after death is an item of faith.' (Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 1993)

'Many people today find the very idea of resurrection absurd, and it must be admitted that the physics of resurrection raises some fascinating difficulties. Let me mention the oldest philosophical objection ever raised against resurrection. Virtually all the Church fathers who discussed resurrection tried to answer it. What if a Christian dies at sea and his body is eaten by various sea creatures who then scatter to the oceans of the world? How can God possibly reconstruct that body? Or what if another Christian is eaten by cannibals so that the material of her body becomes the material of their bodies? And suppose God later wants to raise all of them, both the Christian and the cannibals. Who gets which bodily particles? How does God decide?'

(Stephen T Davis, 'Survival of Death', in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, 1997)

# Revelation - Experience and Scripture

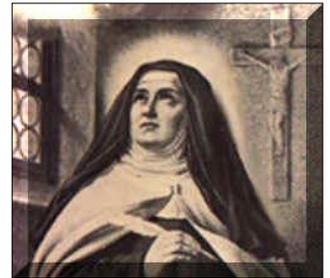
## Introduction

- Revelation means God revealing himself to people. For some, God's presence is revealed through God's work in the world (the design argument), but in this form the revelation is of an event that seems to have direct meaning and/or breaks natural laws. It conveys knowledge of God.
- Examples could include God speaking to Moses through the burning bush or the Angel Jibril speaking the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Experience of God implies a direct sensory experience.



## Visions, voices and the 'numinous' experience

- St Teresa of Avila had intense and extraordinary experiences of 'heavenly communications' including a 'mystical marriage', the 'espousal' of her soul to the person of Christ. She also had bodily manifestations of her spiritual elevation.
- Rudolph Otto (*The Idea of the Holy*, 1936) uses the word 'numinous' to mean being in the presence of an awesome power. Religion comes from a being separate from the world.
- The numinous is the holy, the ineffable core of religion. Experience of it cannot be described in terms of other experiences. Those who have a numinous experience sense dependency on an external force greater than themselves.
- Otto describes it as, 'The deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion.' It is found in personal piety rites and liturgies, religious buildings and monuments. It may be peaceful or fast moving and even violent. It can cause intoxication, frenzy and ecstasy.
- Visions and voices seem to break natural laws. Saul heard God speaking to him when he fell from his horse. Moses heard a voice within the burning bush speak to him.
- Visions may be seen, such as the three visitors who came to Abraham. In Western society today, talk of visions and voices draws scepticism from most people.

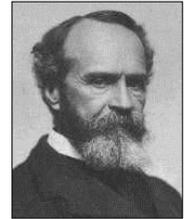


## Conversion experience

- This means a change to a religious way of life because of some experience of divine truth directly or indirectly, such as St Paul's road to Damascus experience or Siddhartha Gotama's (the Buddha's) enlightenment experience under the Bodhi Tree.
- In the mind of the person, there is a transformation and a single aim or priority replaces all others. Religious aims become central to the person's life.



- William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902) believed it was necessary for religious ideas to form 'the habitual centre of his personal energy' and it could be triggered by explosive emotions.
- Conversion involves a recognition that the current lifestyle is wrong or incomplete and a change to lifestyle to bring about a better way.
- Sudden conversion may not be permanent but gradual conversion is more likely to be permanent.
- Conversion may be seen in intellectual terms or moral terms as coming to a new point of view.



- E.D. Starbuck (*The Psychology of Religion*, 1899) said conversion may be conscious and volitional (voluntary) and is a gradual process, or involuntary (self-surrender), which may be more sudden and which we finally surrender to.
- William James argued that some people could never be converted due to cynicism or strong atheistic beliefs and that this was a weakness.

### Corporate religious experience and the 'Toronto Blessing'

- Usually, religious experiences are private, but there are cases when groups of people are involved. Corporate religious experience is public.
- An individual might see God or God's action in a public place or object. Such an event might involve a breach in natural law, such as Jesus walking on water or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

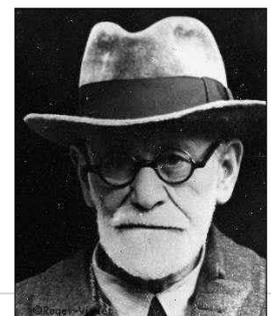


- Pastor Randy Clark encountered Howard-Browne in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and came under his influence. Clark was preaching at Toronto Airport Vineyard Church on 20 January 1994. Following the sermon, people began to laugh hysterically, cry, leap, dance, and even roar. This is seen as a result of the move of the Holy Spirit.
- The 'move of the Holy Spirit' has not stopped. Over the years, tens of thousands of people have flown to Toronto to

participate. Afterwards, many people often become zealous and spread the activities to other places. The 'Toronto Blessing' has spread to evangelical congregations around the world.

### Discussions

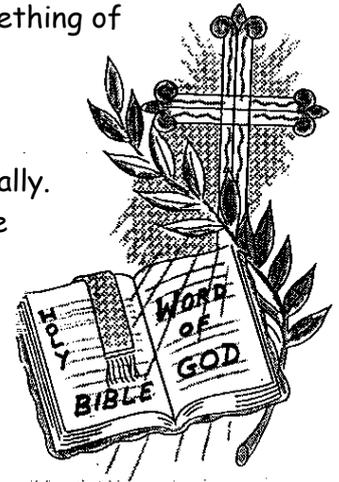
- Some see conversion as part of adolescent identity crisis as it tends to happen during that period. It could be a way of reorganising cognitive structures, seeing problems from a different perspective. However, there are cases of adult conversion.
- A psychological criticism of conversion came from Freud (1928), who considers it as a way of revitalising the ego through a positive internalised love object. Some suggest that people who have conversion experiences had prior childhood problems.



- Visions and voices can sometimes be explained through the use of hallucinogenic drugs, such as LSD. Some religions used hallucinogens to induce states of religious experience. Does this mean the experience would not be God? Can corporate experiences be explained as group hysteria?
- Religious experiences are subjective and not testable by empirical means. Even group witness statements are not necessarily a solid basis for evidence. Nevertheless, if religious people are prepared to change their life and take a more challenging course of action, they clearly believe their experience to be of divine origin. Many things we say are true cannot be tested or proven, such as whether a painting is beautiful, that a mother genuinely loves her baby rather than acting as if she does, for example.
- There may be neurological or physiological explanations of visions, or voices linked to medical conditions, or drugs. Believers argue God reveals himself in nature and through actions that do not break the laws of nature but are seen to have meaning: scientific explanations do not exclude God.
- It could be argued that genuinely-felt religious experiences make positive spiritual contributions to life.

## Revelation through Holy Scripture

- For many believers of many religions, sacred scripture reveals something of the divine and the divine will. Most religions have sacred writings, though some, such as Hinduism, do not have a central single text.
- Disagreement emerges in the interpretation of scripture, how it is understood to reveal God. Some believers interpret scripture literally. This is true of most Muslims and many Christians, for example. The truth expressed is understood to be 'true' in an actual historical direct meaning.
- For Muslims, the Arabic Qur'an is the only real Qur'an as Allah revealed the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in Arabic. Translations carry the meaning only Orthodox Jews may interpret the Torah literally, while reform and liberal Jews might interpret the message for modern times.
- Many Christians argue that scripture is divinely inspired. That is to say the words were written by a human but God, in some way, spoke through those words. Some suggest every word was intended by God. More liberal Christians may argue that the general meaning is God's intention, not every word.
- There are tensions between literal interpretations and knowledge of science, such as with the case of the miracles of the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament, as well as matters of morality
- Liberal religious believers often interpret their holy scriptures as divinely inspired but with cultural and historical influences that are relevant to the time of writing and not the present. The authors' own influence may also be responsible for some texts.
- Literalists criticise liberals for picking and choosing their interpretation. Liberal Christians might accept the story of the resurrection but not Jesus walking on water. Literalist Christians might argue that this picking and choosing is arbitrary and subjective.



## Tips for A2 exam questions

'Revelation through scripture is more reliable than revelation through religious experience.'  
Discuss.

- ▣ You could either approach the question from the general arguments about religious experience or the argument for God's existence.
- ▣ You could investigate the validity of the evidence, exploring examples of specific religious experience.
- ▣ Arguments against from verification and psychology could be examined.
- ▣ Links with religious language could be explored.

### Critical comments

*'Of course, if there is a God who does appear directly or indirectly to individuals, then this is going to be either the timeless or the everlasting God. Interestingly, Nicholas Lash in his book *Easter in Ordinary* (1988), although affirming a creator God, rejects the possibility of this God appearing in any extraordinary way to human beings. Lash says that God is instead to be found in the ordinary things of life. If Lash is right — and I am not at all sure that he is — this places even greater weight on the individual's interpretation of his or her experience and hence, again, on his or her existing presuppositions. I am not convinced, therefore, that reports of religious experiences (to be contrasted with religious experiences which you or I may have personally) provide a sound foundation for faith.'*

**(Peter Vardy, *The Puzzle of God*, 1990)**

# Revelation — Miracle

## The concept of miracle

- A miracle is held to be an action of God, or an invisible agent, which goes against the laws of nature and has some religious meaning or significance.

- Hume (*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 1748) argues that nothing which can happen in nature can be classed as a miracle.
- Hick argues that as natural laws are made by observing what has happened, miracles are a priori impossible. When new things are observed, the understanding of natural law must be widened.
- Aquinas held that a miracle was something done by God which nature could not do, or could not do in that order, or is done in nature but without the usual operation of nature, for example, the sun going backwards, a person living after death, or an instantaneous cure of someone who may have been cured in time naturally.
- Swinburne (*Miracles*, 1989) gives examples of miracles as levitation, resurrection, water turning into wine. He notes that on its own a transgression of a natural law with no meaning is not considered a miracle.
- R.F. Holland ('The Miraculous,' in *Religions and Understanding*, 1967) notes that coincidences that do not break natural laws but have religious significance can sometimes be referred to as a miracle.

- However, striking coincidences happen all the time. Are they all miracles and, if not, how do you know which is which?

## Criticisms of miracle made by Hume

### An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (1748)

- Hume argues not that miracles do not happen but it would be impossible to prove one had happened. He says we must weigh the improbability of miracles against the evidence that



- they occur. Rational people will reject the evidence.
- Rationality requires that the belief is proportionate to the evidence. Evidence from the past supports the natural laws. Evidence suggests humans do not resurrect or walk on water.
- Witnesses who claim to have seen miracles cannot be given more credence than the absence of such miracles happening now. They are often less educated and may be fascinated by the fantastical nature of it so they suspend their reason.
- Hume suggests that different miracles in different religions cancel each other out. Since different religions have different claims to truth, you cannot have real miracles in all of them.

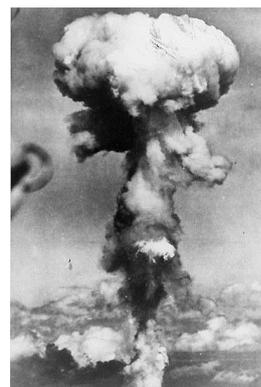
## Responses to Hume

- C.D. Broad (1887–1971) notes that Hume assumes there are known fixed laws of nature, but science has observed exceptions to laws and on that basis revised the laws. Hume neglects the possibility that some of nature's laws are incorrectly understood.
- Hume does not address miracles he might witness, only the reports, which he discounts. Are all witness reports necessarily unreliable?
- Vardy (*The Puzzle of God*, 1990) notes that there is more evidence of miracles today than in Hume's time, such as the 74 attested miracles from Lourdes, which have been tested by objective scientists.
- Religions do not usually require people to believe on the basis of miracles. In the New Testament, faith came first and Jesus resisted the devil's attempt to tempt him to use miracles for his own aggrandisement.
- The statement that not enough people of significant education report miracles is problematic. How many exactly is 'enough' and what standing is enough? Who says that uneducated people are less truthful than educated ones; where is the evidence for that? In considering other religions, Hume suggests that different miracles in different religions are mutually exclusive and cancel each other out. Swinburne notes that evidence of a miracle in one religion might challenge the other but evidence of a miracle in another religion would mean there was evidence of miracles in both religions, or one could be true, and the other false.
- Is it acceptable to reject the evidence of others when it goes against what is probably the case? Thomas Sherlock notes that a person living in a warm climate where rivers never freeze might disbelieve reports from a cold climate where they do on the same basis.

## Criticisms of miracle made by Maurice Wiles

### *God's Action in the World* (1986)

- God never intervenes for individual acts, 'the primary usage for the idea of divine action should be in relation to the world as a whole rather than to particular occurrences within it.'
- The existence of individual divine acts is problematic. Why are they so rare? Why did they not occur when terrible things happened such as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima or the massacre of Jews in the Holocaust?
- An interventionist God is a weak idea of God. If God acts in the world, it raises all the issues of the problem of evil. God would seem to be arbitrary: allowing some suffering and evil to occur despite showing the possibility of divine intervention in particular cases elsewhere.
- It is better to conceive of God as having made the world as a single creative act rather than having to keep making small changes here and there.



## Christianity and miracles

- For some believers, their religion is proved by signs and miracles, evidence of God's power and work.
- The Roman Catholic Church upholds the possibility of miracles and supports the literal interpretation of miracles in the Bible.

- Mark's Gospel suggests miracles do not come to make people believe but as a result of their faith.
- Literalist Christians hold that the stories of miracles must be taken as described and point to a divine ruler of the universe.
- Others give symbolic or metaphorical meaning to the stories — there is no breaking of any natural laws.

### Critical comments

*'A source of serious puzzlement has been that if spectacular miracles like the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, which was witnessed by over a million people and lasted for several hours, are to be believed, why is it that for centuries nothing comparable has been recorded as having happened? It may be noted that this problem constitutes part of the pressure of theists to renounce their belief that such fantastic events are genuinely historical. And, indeed, in the last hundred years or so, the denial of miracles has not been universally regarded as incompatible with theistic belief. No less a person than the Anglican bishop of Birmingham said that "miracles as they are narrated [in the scriptures] cannot in the light of our modern knowledge of the uniformity of nature, be accepted as historical".'*

(George N. Schlesinger, 'Miracles,' in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 1997)

### Tips for A2 exam questions

'Stories about miracles are an obstacle to faith for modern people.' Discuss.

- Explore the criticisms of Hume and Wiles and whether the concept of miracle is valid for modern people.
- Consider the argument that miracle stories support faith by demonstrating the nature and power of God.
- Consider the argument that miracle stories should be 'demythologised' to enable modern people to have faith without attempting to suspend their rational disbelief.

# Religious language

## The via negativa (Apothatic way)

- 'Apothatic' comes from the Greek word 'apophasis', which means 'negation'. It argues that God cannot be known in terms of human categories. God is beyond all signs and language. The great Jewish scholar Maimonides wrote that we come nearer to knowledge of God through negative attributes, for example, God is not limited, and so on.
- Arguably, speaking about God in negative terms avoids the problem of misrepresenting God.

## Verification

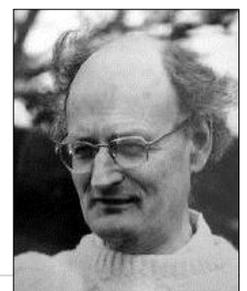
- Logical positivism, developed from the Vienna Circle (a group of philosophers), looks at how we can verify knowledge empirically.
  - The only propositions that are knowable are those which are analytic — a priori (through logical reasoning, without using external empirical evidence) and those which are synthetic (a posteriori) (which can be proved true or false (verified) through empirical experiment).
  - The verification principle states that we know the meaning of a proposition if we know the conditions under which the proposition is true or false. Anything that cannot be measured analytically or empirically is meaningless. Talk of God, art and ethics are in this meaningless category for logical empiricists.
- 
- A.J. Ayer, the British logical positivist, argued that propositions of science are meaningful as they are based on experimentation, but religious language is meaningless. Strong verification means there is no doubt about a statement; for example, 'The squirrel is red.'
  - Weak verification means there are some observations that indicate truth, such as those about historical events that cannot be experienced now; for example, 'Julius Caesar was murdered.' However, the statements made by logical positivism cannot be proved by its own criteria analytically or synthetically
  - Hick argues that at the point of death we will have evidence of God's existence as we will perceive God. God will be shown to exist to those who already thought God did exist. He calls this 'eschatological verification'.
  - Weak verification supports the claim that God is creator, with evidence from the design argument.

## Falsification



Dr. Antony Flew

- Anthony Flew argues that religious statements have no facts that can be proved true or false. An assertion must be subject to change if proved invalid and yet religious assertions can have no evidence placed before them and so cannot change. Therefore they are not valid assertions. Recently, this life-long atheist has begun to confess that he believes a creator God probably does exist.
- Richard Swinburne argues that we can still derive meaning from unverifiable statements, for example, 'The toys come out of the

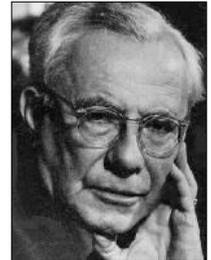


cupboard when we are not looking.' We still understand what this statement means, even though we cannot verify it.

- R.M. Hare argues that religious propositions are non-cognitive but have meaning because they affect how people view the world, such as the student who believed his teachers were plotting to kill him, despite no evidence to prove it. His behaviour was affected.
- It can be argued that believers have a prior commitment to faith in God and do not allow evidence to undermine it.

## Symbol

- Metaphors and symbols help bring understanding about God. Paul Tillich (1886–1965) believes they communicate religious experiences. Arguably, symbol and metaphor are closer to poetry more mythical and evocative of the experience. Symbols go beyond the external world and open up levels of reality and depths to our soul. They participate in the greater reality
- Some might argue, though, that symbols do not relate to factual information and are meaningless as they cannot be verified or falsified. Symbols cannot give insight to things beyond human knowledge. They cannot be tested for accuracy Symbols relate to the real world, not beyond it.
  - Paul Ricoeur (*The Metaphorical Process*, 1975) argues that 'the function of language is to articulate our experience of the world, to give form to this experience.' Through language we communicate our experience to others, forming new ways to conceive the world.
  - Rather than suspending reality for Ricoeur, a metaphor creates a new way of 'seeing' or constructing reality and opening new understandings of God that are impossible to communicate by the literal use of language.



## Analogy

- How can language about the physical world be used to describe God?
- Aquinas rejected the claim that religious language could be univocal. Human love, in time and space, is not the same as God's love, which is beyond both.
- Aquinas also said religious language cannot be equivocal. The words cannot mean entirely different things. If there was no link between the two meanings, then we could know nothing about 'God.'
- Aquinas looked to analogy He used this comparison: the animal is healthy and the animal's urine is healthy
- The health of urine and animal are different but they are connected as the animal produced the urine. God created the world and it depends on God, so when we talk of God's goodness there is a connection between it and the goodness of a human being.
- To say, 'God is good' is analogy of attribution. God is the cause of the goodness that a person has.
- Aquinas uses the example of the sun. The effects of the sun are similar to those of God. This example shows the remote resemblance between language about God's creation and language about God. You would learn very little about the sun by studying a tree.

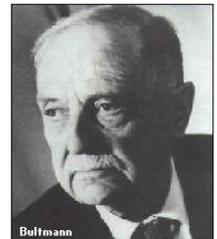


- Another analogy is analogy of proportion: 'I know what a perfect circle is, so when you say God is perfect, I have a notion of perfection.'
- With both forms of analogy we are able to use language about God but cannot fully understand the meaning of this language.

- Ian Ramsey extends analogy He talks about models and qualifiers. In 'God is good', 'good' is the model that we have a human understanding about. We add the word 'infinitely' (a qualifier) to 'good' so we can think in greater depth and get closer to an understanding of God's goodness.

## Discussions

- Problems in gaining knowledge about the attributes of God do not necessarily imply God does not exist, nor do they support the possibility of God's existence.
- People talking about God do not normally want to talk about God in terms of negation. Believers describe God in positive terms and in personal terms, rejecting the via negativa.
- Symbols and metaphors can give more imaginative understandings of God but could be too subjective to be of value. Metaphorical talk can be challenged by literal understandings. People can say, 'Is God really like that?' out of a desire for a literal understanding.
- God talk can be understood as having a truth embedded in myth. Rudolf Bultmann, in his essay 'New Testament and Mythology' (Kerygma and Myth, 1953), argued that theology must strip away to get at the truth. However, whether it is as easy to decide what is the mythological language that should be stripped away, as Bultmann suggests, is questionable. In any case, it is arguable that mythological language itself holds meaning.



## Tips for A2 exam questions

'Speaking of God using symbol and analogy creates more problems than it resolves.'  
Discuss.

- ▣ You could explore philosophers' use of symbol and analogy, referring to Tillich for symbol and Aquinas for analogy, though any modern writers you have studied for this could also be explored.
- ▣ You could consider whether symbol touches the imagination more satisfactorily than analogy; whether it offers new insights or subjective views.
- ▣ You could consider whether the use of symbol and analogy are only of use for believers.
- ▣ Symbol and analogy may be culturally determined, so you might want to argue they can be misleading — the symbol of God as a shepherd does not convey as much in an urban society as in a traditional rural one, for example. There are the feminist issues of symbol and analogy being often anthropocentric, with perhaps the need for more feminised symbols to be included.

### **Critical comments**

'It is not just a matter of saying that there must be some grounds for ascribing perfections to God. We must also insist that if we ascribe the same terms to God and creatures, then there must be a connection between the relevant criteria of evidence and truth. Thus the grounds for ascribing terms like "love", "father", "exist" and "life" must bear some relationship to the grounds used for our normal everyday application of these terms. Similarly, even if "God created the world" expressed a unique relationship, its truth conditions must bear some resemblance to our familiar uses of terms like "make" or "depends on" (which is not to say that we must expect to be able to verify the doctrine of creation empirically here and now).' (Patrick Sherry, *Analogy Today* Philosophy, 51, 1976)

