

My Revision Notes: AQA AS Religious Studies: Religion and Ethics and Philosophy of Religion

AS Unit C Philosophy of Religion

3.1 The Cosmological Argument

(a) Explain how Aquinas' cosmological argument attempts to prove that God exists.

The three forms of Aquinas' cosmological argument are based on the observation that the universe cannot account for its own existence. Therefore, there must be causes that have their origin in the existence of God. Hence, Aquinas' cosmological argument attempts to show that the explanation for the existence of the universe requires the existence of God.

The first of Aquinas' arguments focuses on the observation that an object has the potential to be changed (or moved). Aquinas used the example of a piece of wood that had the potential to become hot. It would become hot if it was exposed to a fire. Something that is changed must be changed (moved) by something. The heat changes the wood into something hot. However, the chain of changers (movers) cannot regress infinitely, since then there would be no first changer (mover). Therefore, there must be a first changer (mover) that is changed by no other. This first mover must contain all actuality since it is the source of all change but is not acted upon itself. Aquinas argued that this first mover is God.

The second form of Aquinas' argument focuses on the idea of cause and effect. He argued that it would be impossible for something to bring itself into existence since it would already have to exist. Therefore there must be a first cause that is caused by no other, given that infinite regress is impossible. Again, Aquinas saw this first cause as a description of God.

The final argument used by Aquinas concerns contingent and necessary beings. He observed that the universe consists of contingent beings, i.e. beings which depended upon something else for their existence and so they need not have come into existence or could have been different.

However, if everything at one time did not exist, then there would be nothing in existence since there would be nothing that could bring anything into existence. Therefore, Aquinas argued that there must exist a necessary being – a being which is not dependent on any other for their existence. He identified such a being as God.

On grounds of observing change (motion), cause and effect, and contingent beings, Aquinas concluded that the only explanation to account for these features was the existence of God. In addition, God does not depend upon further explanation since God is eternal and necessary.

Hence Aquinas' cosmological arguments attempt to prove that God exists.

(b) 'The cosmological argument has more strengths than weaknesses.'

To what extent do you agree?

Aquinas' arguments appear persuasive in that they are based on observation of features of the universe and provide an explanation of those features. We all observe change, cause and effect and contingent beings, and the explanation in terms of God seem more persuasive to many than that of infinite regression which seems to deny a final explanation. Other more recent forms of the cosmological argument have also added to the persuasiveness of the argument for God. Leibniz's principle of sufficient explanation again appeals to the need for explanation, and the beginnings argument (Kalam) seems supported by science in terms of the Big Bang theory as a start to the universe.

However, many have challenged the logic of the cosmological argument and regard it as flawed or maintain that there are other explanations which do not necessitate the existence of God. Thus the cosmological argument can be seen as weak. For instance, Aquinas' arguments rested on the rejection of the idea of infinite regress, but why is infinite regress impossible? Indeed, the Oscillating Universe theory accepts the idea of infinite regression. In response, it is argued that the Big Bang is the preferred scientific understanding of the origins of the universe and that *does* suggest the universe had a beginning, rather than infinite regress.

The philosopher Bertrand Russell challenged the need for explanation which is at the heart of the cosmological argument. He argued that no explanation was needed; the universe was just a brute fact. Hence, the cosmological argument was seen as a weak argument. However, explanation is sought in every other area of enquiry so it seems unreasonable not to seek it for the origins of the universe.

One of the strongest features of the cosmological argument is that it is based on observation. However, this is itself seen as a weakness by those that argue that it draws a conclusion that goes beyond the observed evidence. Indeed, as Hume argued, such concepts as cause and necessary beings are not open to the empirical approach and so we cannot claim knowledge of them.

As to whether the cosmological arguments have more strengths than weaknesses, will very much depend on whether the responses to the challenges to the arguments are convincing.

3.2 Religious Experience

(a) Explain the main characteristics of (i) conversion and (ii) mystical experiences.

(i) A conversion experience is a religious experience that causes an altered view of the world and one's personal place in it. Conversions vary in type and features, so not all characteristics found in one conversion experience occur in all conversion experiences. For instance, the account of Paul's Conversion on the road to Damascus seems a sudden conversion whilst some conversions are gradual and happen over a long period of time. However, Paul's encounter with Christianity may actually have been a gradual subconscious process that came to a climax with his vision of Jesus. Often conversions involve some internal battle and self-surrendering, whilst for others there is no resistance.

Paul did not deliberately seek out the religious experience; it seems to have come upon him unexpectedly. For others, they might actively seek it out. For example, they may go to an evangelistic meeting. One characteristic that does seem common is the transforming aspect. Usually the result of a conversion is a thorough-going transformation; a new person; a new creation.

(ii) A mystical experience is a religious experience that alters the state of consciousness and brings the person to claim a new awareness of ultimate reality. It can involve the experience of oneness with nature, or of one's own spirit as the Absolute, or the union (or communion) with a personal God. The psychologist William James identified four main features of mysticism. The first was ineffability as the experience often defied expression - it is difficult to find the words to describe the experience to those who have not had a mystic experience. In addition the mystic state seems to allow apparent insight into the depths of truths that are unobtainable by the intellect alone.

A third feature was transiency since the states are rarely maintained for long periods of time. Although they leave the recipient with a profound sense of the importance of the experience, the details are often imperfectly recalled. The final feature that James identified was passivity. By this, he meant that there is a sense of feeling in a mystical experience that one is taken over by a superior power.

Other characteristics that philosophers have highlighted include: the consciousness of the oneness of everything so that the ego fades; a sense of timelessness; and the sense that there is an unchanging self that is immortal and that lies behind the usual experience of self.

(b) 'It is necessary to have a religious experience in order to understand fully what a religious experience is.' How far do you agree?

Religious experiences are mostly private and subjective and so are not open to anyone else. Even if someone has had a religious experience themselves, they cannot be sure about someone else's experience. There is no way of knowing if it is the same as theirs. However, that is not true for all religious experiences. Some religious experiences have objective features. For example, the people with Paul on the road to Damascus heard the same voice. But although witnessing some objective feature may show that something is happening and the experience is real, it may not lead to understanding what a religious experience is. It merely shows that there is a religious experience.

Mystical experiences have the problem of ineffability. The experiences are beyond verbal descriptions. If this is so, then it seems that it is impossible for others to understand. However, the very fact that we can identify what a mystical experience is, since we can identify key features, means that we can understand what a religious experience is. In response, it could be argued that identifying features is not the same as understanding the experience.

Other religious experiences, such as conversions are easier to understand. The person is usually able to talk about their experience and how it has changed their lives and their thinking. Also it is possible to see the changes that experience has had on the life of the recipient.

Modern developments in science have also given us insights into religious experiences as we can see what happens in the brain and get indications about the experience that the person is having.

That which was private may now be open to examination and so help our understanding.

So, it may well be that it is not necessary to have a religious experience to understand what a religious experience is.

3.3 Psychology and Religion

(a) Explain why Jung's understanding of religious belief may be seen as more positive than that of Freud.

Freud and Jung had very different understandings of religious belief. Freud saw the idea of God as a creation of the individual human mind and its neurotic desires. He argued that we had inherited a sense of guilt passed down through the generations and so he referred to it as a collective neurosis. The cause of this guilt lay in the primal horde theory. He argued that the horde had been dominated by one powerful and jealous male who had seized the women for himself and driven off or killed all rivals, including his sons. The young males then united and killed the dominant father so they could dominate the horde themselves and gain wives, but then became burdened with guilt which each generation has inherited. Freud sees the idea of God as father and Christ as the son atoning for sin as a reflection of this collective neurosis. Freud also developed the Oedipus complex theory as another way to account for belief in God the Father. Both theories explain the resulting neurotic behaviour expressed through the belief and practices of religion. Therefore, Freud displays a very negative view of religious belief. Freud also viewed God as the projection of the human mind based on human longings and desires. It was an illusion based on wish fulfilment. Thus religious belief was seen as something based on an illusion and led to mental disorders such as neurotic behaviour. He saw it as a form of mental illness that needs to be cured.

In contrast, Jung's approach was much more positive. Religious belief was regarded as something that was helpful to balance mental health. For Jung, religion was the key to the process of integration and individuation. Individuation is the journey towards becoming a full individual and religion is necessary for personal growth. Jung argued that the collective unconscious incorporated symbolic forms (archetypes) which all people share and which generate images in the conscious mind. These primordial images resemble the images that make up the religious traditions and are images of the deeper self.

The aim of individuation is to balance the contradictory nature of the archetypes and unite opposites. Only by living in harmony with these images, by bringing our thinking into agreement with them, can we live life fully.

Through these religious images the personality achieves its goal of integration. Therefore, unlike Freud, Jung sees the experience as necessary for balanced mental health – something positive.

(b) To what extent has religion been successful in response to psychology's challenges to religious belief?

Both Freud's and Jung's theories challenge the traditional view of God as an external being. However, religion has responded and raised doubts about the validity of these theories. For instance, religion is generally seen to be positive and of value rather than a mental illness and harmful. Freud fails to explain away God since he ignores the evidence for the existence of an external God. Indeed, many challenge Freud's theories that are based on the primal horde by pointing out that there is no evidence that such primal hordes ever existed.

Jung's theories have also been challenged. For instance, uniform images can be explained by uniform experiences rather than archetypes. His theories are also unverifiable since it cannot be demonstrated that there is a collective unconscious which contains the archetypes. If Jung is correct then it is not clear why atheism exists.

The extent to which religion has been successful will be dependent upon the persuasiveness of the responses to the challenges.

3.4 Atheism and Postmodernism

(a) Explain the key ideas of a postmodernist view of religion.

One of the key ideas of a postmodernist view of religion, unlike traditional views, is that there is no objective knowledge or absolute representation of reality. It is culture or society that dictates our concepts and the way we categorise and see the world. Hence religion is seen as a cultural construct. Religious claims have no claim to absolute truth. They are merely relative and subjective. This reliance on a person's perspective therefore means that there is no grand or meta- narrative.

Truth can no longer be discovered through reason and experience. In contrast, a modernist grand narrative would be the idea of an all-powerful and all-loving God who created and sustained the universe.

This rejection of absolute truth leads to a rejection of the idea that a religion can be right or wrong. If religions are cultural constructs, then they merely reflect the culture. Being truly religious is about truly loving God and not about following specific dogmas or certainties. Postmodern religion centres on religion as a way of life rather than an intellectual faith based on a system of beliefs.

The emphasis is on personal spiritual search and allows the individual to select their own narrative. The narrative can be from a combination of several different religions, known as a 'pick and mix' approach.

(b) To what extent is postmodernism a denial of religion rather than an affirmation?

Many would argue that postmodernism is a denial rather than an affirmation of religion. They might point out that postmodernism allows any belief and therefore has no content. The denial of absolute truth rejects the traditional religions claim of revelation and ultimate truths. Indeed, the pick and mix approach is contrary to religion, since religion is not something that can be bought or rejected on the basis of what one likes or prefers. Postmodernism, some would say, is really atheism by any other name.

However, some aspects of postmodernism make others regard it as affirming religion. It puts the importance on practical actions as the outworking of religious faith. It is concerned with spiritual living which is at the heart of religion; not intellectual knowledge of God. It allows a religious interpretation of life that would otherwise have been rejected because it was not intellectually justifiable.

On balance, it seems that postmodernism affirms religion as it focuses on the practical outworkings of a faith rather than cold intellectual dogmas. The heart of religion is an active living faith not a set of beliefs. It is about a way of life and that is what postmodernism offers .