

For Edexcel students, Peter Donovan's anthology article contains a well-organised and easy to understand consideration of this question

# Can we know God by experience?

Awareness of God is vital for religious belief. But can religious experience help us gain knowledge about God?



## 1 What does it mean to know?

- Religious experience is the sense of knowledge arising from inner conviction.
- Can we know, and act, 'for sure' if we cannot give reasons for knowing?
- To have no doubts about our beliefs may be more a symptom of insanity or arrogance, rather than sound thinking.
- Yet believers claim they know God is there.

## 2 Intuition and being sure

- There are situations where we feel we know something by intuition (e.g. 'I know it is wrong to let that child starve').
- Is intuition a valid way of 'knowing'?
- Is intuition a valid way of knowing about religious issues?

## 3 Religious knowledge

- Is religious experience a valid source of religious knowledge?
- What if such knowledge comes from intuition?
- God is known through finite things (e.g. the world), but also through infinite and indirect things (e.g. prayer, meditation, visions).
- Does intuitive awareness help us to know God?

## 4 H. P. Owen

- Intuition enables us to understand the material world, through the experiences of our senses.
- We also use it to understand our relationships with other people — their minds and feelings.
- In the same way, we can know God.
- God reveals his inner nature by his outward acts (e.g. creation).
- He reveals himself through Christ.
- Thus, we intuitively encounter God through material and spiritual realities.

## 5 Intuition and religious experience

- Our intuition of the reality of God is coloured by our experience of finite things — the general features of the natural world suggest a divine creator.
- Religious experiences are a form of religious knowledge:  
*The sense of God's reality can occur in various contexts...by the contemplation of beauty and order in nature...by some event in our personal experience*

H. P. Owen

## 6 Faith

- Owen — knowing God by experience is consistent with the teaching in the Bible.
- Knowledge of God by intuition leads to the human response of faith.
- Faith is a way of knowing as an intuitive response.
- 'The essential content of revelation is God himself' (H. P. Owen).

## 7 Criticisms of this approach

- There are two kinds of certainty — 'psychological' and 'rational'. This is shown in the difference between 'feeling certain' and 'being right'.
- One can feel certain without being right. It is about having intuitive knowledge.
- Being right is not about having a state of mind, it is about having verifiable knowledge.

## 8 Can intuition be right?

- Sense perception can appear to make intuition right.
- Not all religious experiences are necessarily illusory.
- Can some religious experiences therefore be intuitively right?
- If the Bible is true, then religious experiences will happen.
- But how can we decide if someone's apparent intuition about God is reliable?

## 9 Martin Buber: I and Thou

- To encounter God suggests a meeting at first hand.
- This is different from simply knowing about God.
- If God is personal it is an I-You, rather than an I-It, encounter.
- Faith and trust are recommended when approaching God.
- Knowledge about God and experience of God are different.

## 10 The I-You encounter

- I-You relationships cannot always be explained.
- We cannot analyse or offer reasoned argument about our knowledge or awareness of a person.
- So why should we question our knowledge about God?
- We may be mistaken about our encounter.
- 'Experience of' presupposes knowledge about.
- 'Experience of' is not, in itself, knowledge about.
- 'You may not be as right as you think you are.'

## 11 Experience and knowledge

- To 'know' in the religious sense is greater than possessing knowledge.
- It involves an 'I-You' relationship of trust, obedience and respect.
- An encounter with God cannot be examined scientifically.
- Yet to understand it requires factual knowledge (e.g. I only know my wife loves me if I know she actually exists).
- Existential knowledge, therefore, requires factual knowledge too.

## 12 Experience of...

- Knowledge helps us to know what to do, and what to make of our experiences.
- It helps us to understand our existing knowledge and experiences.
- I-You encounters enable us to live alongside, share and enjoy our time with others. They are not really concerned with gaining 'knowledge about' others.
- I-You encounters with God should be the same.
- Thus, religious experiences are not concerned with gaining knowledge about God.

## 13 The value of religious experiences

- Awareness of God is vital for religious belief.
- Religious experiences generate a sense of 'knowing God'.
- But they are not a form of knowledge available to all.
- 'The sense of knowing is never, on its own, a sufficient sign of knowledge'