

## Christian Conversion Experiences

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### God in Religious Experiences

- God attempts to convert people, but God only attempts to convert people who are willing to let him or something fill their heart rather than materialism and temporary joy.
  - The conversion process generally only happens to people at 'extremes', they can go from being a staunch atheist to someone filled with faith in mere moments after an experience.
  - The majority of 'church-goers' are women. Men are more likely to have no belief in God and never go to church, or completely believe in God and go to church every week.
  - Every conversion causes a dramatic change in a person's behaviour because the experience is so intense, they generally become a more 'grounded' and 'disciplined' person.
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### Mystical Experiences

- Mystical experiences are where believers claim to have an overwhelming sense of God, Paul writes about this in Corinthians and says that these experiences are the Holy Spirit.
- A Christian may believe that the experience was special, personal and rare. That God has taken time out to reveal himself to that person for a specific purpose. It is unique to that person.
- Many Christians who have never had an experience of God may find it terrifying and exciting because they are experiencing something overwhelming.
- Most people who have a mystical experience will not reject it, if they believe they see God or the Holy Spirit then it will reinforce their faith. Some Christians will downplay their significance.
- Leaders of a church or Christian group may believe that mystical experiences will scare normal people away from a church and so try to say that people can be Christians without such things.
- Saint Teresa claimed to have incredibly intense experiences of God starting at the age of 14 at which point her mother died and she devoted herself to the Virgin Mary.
- She was sent to study in a monastery, but unfortunately suffered from several illnesses throughout her studies which left her time for reflection and meditation.
- These periods of reflection were often when the experiences happened and she called them 'devotions of ecstasy', a description of perfect union with God.
- During this time she realised that she couldn't deal with her sin alone, so she emphasised the importance that every Christian devote themselves entirely to God.

## Visions

- **Vision** – When someone sees something supernatural that cannot be logically explained.
  - Some Christians believe that God uses visions today to show his presence in the world.
  - The churches that hold this view seem to have growth in the number of believers in them, the belief also seems to encourage people to have faith in Jesus.
  - Visions could be psychological episodes, misinterpreted experiences. However, Richard Swinburne argues we should trust the testimony of people, especially if we know them.
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## Religious Experiences

- Religious experiences are a specific type of communication with God, different from rituals such as baptism or prayer (though they may happen at these points) because they provide a direct channel to God where someone actually sees and talks to God.
  - Such an experience usually changes someone with little or no faith to someone who has full faith in God because they have seen him with their own eyes; it may change behaviour and beliefs of that person specifically because they make a conscious decision to obey.
  - William James (a psychologist) argues that the nature of a conversion means that when someone is converted they have previously had sub-conscious beliefs in a God, or thought about it before, but the conversion unlocks the truth of these beliefs.
  - He says they take a 'central place' in the mind compared to the 'peripheral' ideas present prior. They will devote most of their energy to the religious aims they believe in.
  - The nature and ideas behind the majority of the conversions are that they are spontaneous events with people who have mostly had little to no experience of God prior to the event for one reason or another.
  - Other conversion events show people who lived nearby a church or had gone to church as a child, but never believed in God, it was just their parent or guardian who forced them there.
  - Conversion events are different to a slow, faithful building up of a relationship with God, they are sudden and the faith is immediately there with no reluctance.
  - This begs the same question as with miracles, as to why certain people are chosen for conversions and others aren't. The belief in a personal God is not unreasonable, provided that YOU have evidence for it in your own mind and that you think you have seen or heard God.
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## Saul becomes Paul

- Sometimes, a religious experience will result in a conversion where a person of no faith or of another faith believes that they have to change their direction towards that of God.
- One person who was converted in the Bible was Saul, whose name was changed to Paul after the experience, as Abram's name was changed to Abraham. Saul's conversion experience was more dramatic. As he was riding away from Damascus a blinding light appeared from Heaven and blinded Saul meaning he could not eat or drink for three days. From the blinding light a

voice came and said to Saul, 'Why do you persecute me?' as Saul hunted followers of The Way.

- After the conversion, however, Saul preached 'in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God'. This is an example of an extreme conversion where Paul committed himself to Christianity for the rest of his life spreading the Christian faith through letters to the various Churches.
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## Key Definitions

- **Religious Ecstasy** – You enter a state where you are less aware of the physical world but become more focused and energised by the power and presence of God.
- **Slain in the Spirit** – Being overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit and being knocked into a sense of Religious Ecstasy, often laying on the floor or sitting down, as if unconscious.
- **Baptism in the Holy Spirit** – Surrendering yourself to the Holy Spirit through being baptised, in Pentecostal or Evangelical churches this will be full immersion, though it may be more conserved in an Orthodox church by pouring water over the head.
- **Glossolalia** – A gift of the spirit by speaking in tongues, you can communicate directly with God using this and ask him for miracles such as healing or other aid.