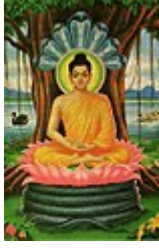


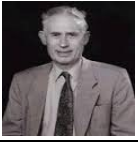
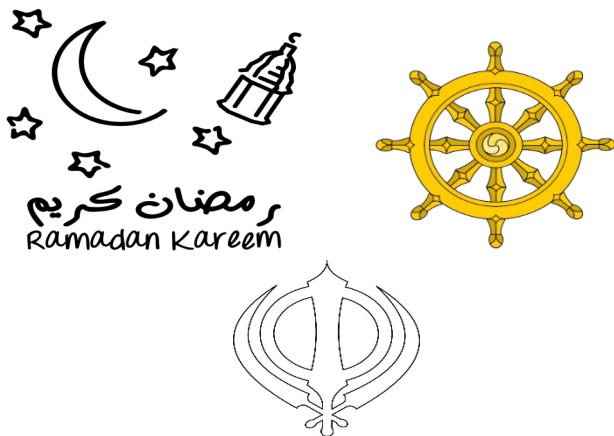


## Component 2: Philosophy of Religion

### Theme 3: Religious experience Booklet 2

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| D.  | <p><b>The influence of religious experience on religious practice and faith:</b><br/>Value for religious community including: affirmation of belief system; promotion of faith value system; strengthening cohesion of religious community.<br/>Value for individual including faith restoring; strengthening faith in face of opposition; renewal of commitment to religious ideals and doctrines.</p>   |   |
| E.  | <p><b>Miracles the definitions of:</b><br/><b>St Thomas Aquinas</b> (miracles different from the usual order), David Hume (transgression of a law of nature),<br/><b>R.F. Holland</b> (contingency miracle),<br/><b>Richard Swinburne</b> (religious significance).<br/>Consideration of reasons why religious believers accept that miracles occur: evidence from sacred writings; affirmation of faith traditions; personal experience.</p>   |   |
| F.  | <p><b>A comparative study of two key scholars from within and outside the Christian tradition and their contrasting views on the possibility of miracles:</b><br/><b>David Hume</b> – his scepticism of miracles including challenges relating to testimony based belief; credibility of witnesses; susceptibility of belief; contradictory nature of faith claims.<br/><b>Richard Swinburne</b> – his defence of miracles, including definitions of natural laws and contradictions of Hume’s arguments regarding contradictory nature of faith claims and credibility of witnesses.</p> | <br> |
| <p><b>Issues for analysis and evaluation will be drawn from any aspect of the content above, such as:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The impact of religious experiences upon religious belief and practice.</li> <li>• Whether religious communities are entirely dependent on religious experiences.</li> <li>• The adequacy of different definitions of miracles.</li> <li>• How far different definitions of miracles can be considered as contradictory.</li> <li>• The effectiveness of the challenges to belief in miracles.</li> <li>• The extent to which Swinburne’s responses to Hume can be accepted as valid.</li> </ul> |   |  |

## D. The influence of religious experience on religious practice and faith:



**Religious practice** includes ritual, religious ceremonies, religious festivals and way of life.

**Religious faith** is often defined as a mixture of will, propositional belief and trust.

**Martin Luther identified three components of Christian faith**

- Faith is personal – beyond accepting facts
- Faith concerns trust in God's promised – being prepared to act upon belief
- Faith unites the believer to God



Candidates should demonstrate both knowledge and understanding of the value of religious experiences for religious communities in this section. Key to this section is the use of pertinent exemplification from one or more religious traditions. Demonstrating understanding of how various experiences can validate the tradition for the community is required. Centres may wish to refer to such events as the appearance of key religious figures in visions as one such example of the affirmation of a belief system. Equally the experience of a miraculous event may also be used to show the effect on the believing community in terms of strengthening community cohesion. In terms of considering the influence of religious experience on the individual, candidates should be able to show how such experiences can strengthen the individual's faith (as in the case of mystical experiences) or reaffirm commitment to religious ideals or doctrines (as may occur in a conversion or religious renewal experience). Candidates are not expected to provide lengthy theoretical explanations of the religious experiences – the focus is on the influence of such experiences on religious practice and faith.

**Value for religious community including: affirmation of belief system; promotion of faith value system; strengthening cohesion of religious community.**

One argument that religious communities can derive value from religious experiences is that the experiences form the foundation of religions, which has influenced how people have believed in, and worshipped, the Divine through-out the centuries, and even in the modern world.

**Islam**, for example, is arguably founded on the basis of Muhammad's experience of the Angel Jibreel at Mount Hira while he was meditating in a cave. The angel appeared to him and ordered him to 'recite'. Once the angel began speaking about the name of Allah, Muhammad began to recite the words, believing them to be the words of God. This experience led him to challenge the system of wealth in Mecca which exploited the poor, whilst the direct content (the words he recited) formed the basis of the holy book of Islam, the Qu'ran. In one sense, value can be derived from this experience by the liberated poor peoples of Mecca who began to experience increased equality – the teachings of justice and equality could even be seen as valuable concepts for people of any or no faith.

**Sikhism** is thought to be founded upon Guru Nanak's experience when he went down to a river to wash one morning. He disappeared for three days, during which time he was thought to have been brought into the court of God, where he learned the Mool Mantra and the concept that all people are equal. This led him into removing the caste system for his followers which was directly valuable for the people of the lower castes who were previously unable to associate with people of higher castes.

While in the cases of these religions, the experience was valuable for those who were directly liberated, and for those who still recite the Mool Mantra (Sikhism) or the information received about Allah (Islam). If knowledge of God or the Divine is possible, then religious experiences (with noetic quality) can be seen as valuable for not only the one who has had the experience, but for others, who receive new knowledge about God.

**Christianity** - Many argue that we can in fact gain knowledge of God through his revelations in the world, such as the revelation of his 613 commandments to **Moses on Mount Sinai**, or the interpretation of the Fall of Samaria as God's displeasure. In Romans (1:19-20) it is stated that the 'invisible attributes' of God have been perceived by us ever since the creation of the world: the nature of God is revealed through creation.

Overall, it is not just those believers that undergo religious experiences that draw value from them, there is arguably some knowledge or lesson that can be derived from the experience from those in a religious community who haven't had it: this can be new knowledge of God which the individual has relayed, or even just a greater understanding of how religion and religious experiences can affect someone's life, or even how the human mind tries to make sense of the world.

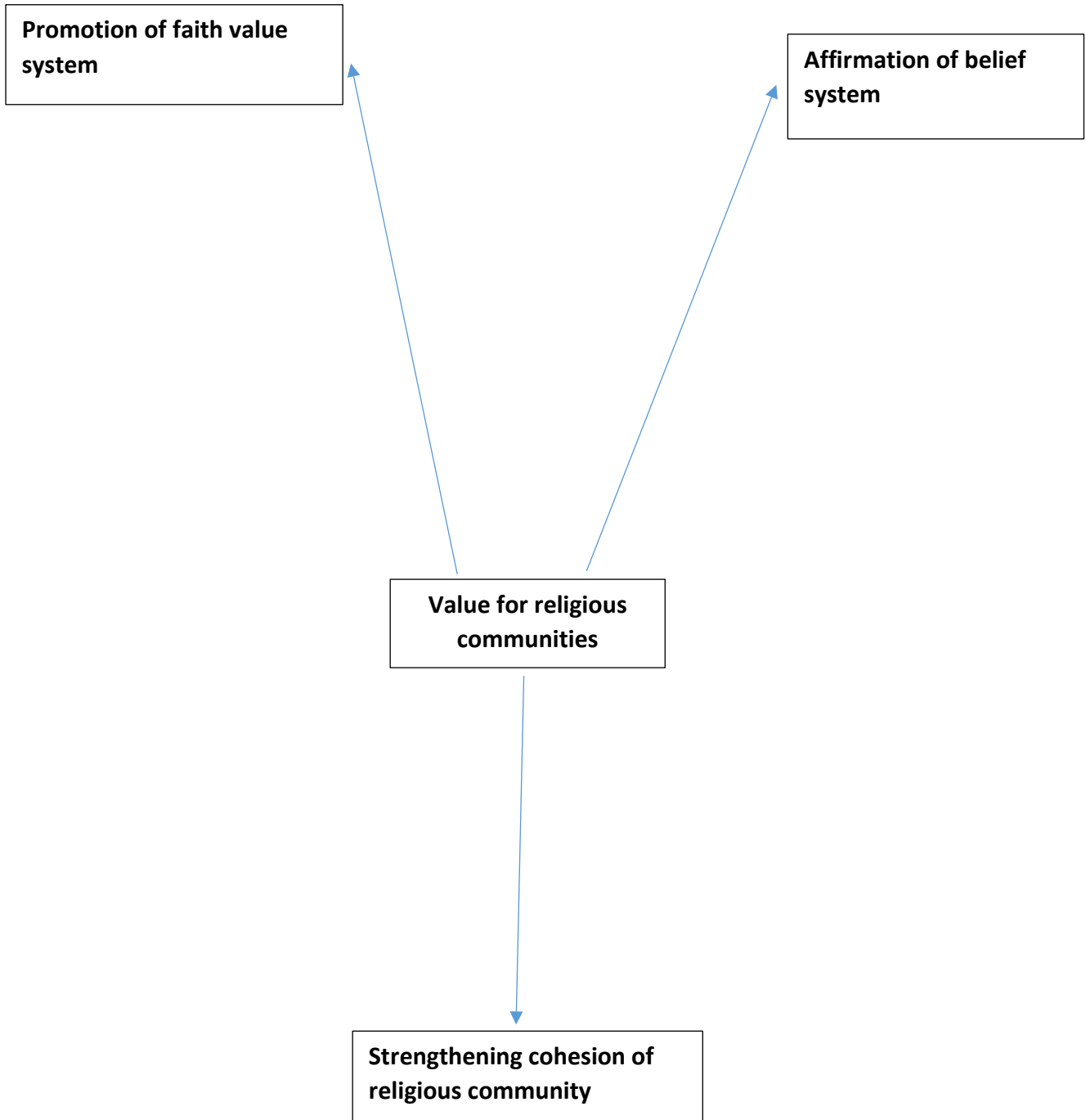
Additionally, the religious experiences leading to the development of religions is valuable for many disadvantaged and vulnerable people in modern society. Based on the tenets of their respective religions, charities offering international aid (Muslim Aid works with people regardless of religion to deal with emergency crises; Christian Aid also works with people of different or no faith) can be seen to be beneficial in the modern world to people struck by disaster, or to the needy. So in this sense, the religious experiences as the foundation of religions are valuable, as the teachings and codes of conduct derived from them lead to vulnerable people in modern society being helped by religious Aid workers. Individual people's religious experience within faiths can have an impact on others who already believe.

*'Religious practices can also be based around a religious experience. Many festivals are celebrations of a past event that involved a religious experience. For example, during Ramadan, Muslims celebrate the time when the verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad; Wesak or Vesak, known as Buddha Day, is when Buddhists celebrate the life of the Buddha and his teachings. They remember the night of his enlightenment and his revelations about the nature of death, karma and rebirth, suffering and desire.'* Peter Cole

*'Another role of religious experience relating to faith is that of **encouragement or strengthening of faith**. Paul's religious conversion on the road to Damascus, was referred to by Paul in his writings to encourage others to believe. In evangelical meetings, believers often give an account ('testimony') of their own conversion and experience of God, to encourage others.'* Peter Cole **Value for religious community**

| <b>Value for religious community</b>  | <b>Possible example</b>   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>affirmation of belief system;</b></p> <p>In most religions, there is unique figure linked to the founding of that religion.</p> <p>Many of these figures experience a significant event that marks the start of their ministry. Their authority derives from their religious experience as it is seen as confirmation and affirmation of their message.</p> <p>Is also provides affirmation for the believer that this figure is a source of authority/beliefs.</p> | <p>In Christianity, the appearance of angels to Mary and Joseph affirms the doctrine of the incarnation and virgin birth. In terms of practice, this forms part of the Christian celebration of Advent/Christmas</p> <p>The experience of the disciples of the resurrected Jesus affirms beliefs about life after death and the efficacy of Jesus' sacrifice to forgive sin. In terms of practice, this forms part of the Christian celebration of Easter and Pentecost and is reflected in the baptism rite.</p> |
| <p><b>promotion of faith value system;</b></p> <p>religious experience can also be the source of revelatory ethical standards</p>   | <p>Moses and the Ten Commandments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reflected in Jewish beliefs about the Mosaic covenant and use of the Torah.</li> </ul> <p>Jesus statement "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength and love your neighbour as yourself. – reflected in Christian charity work such as Christian Aid.</p>   |
| <p><b>Strengthening cohesion of religious community.</b></p> <p>A religious community celebrating a past religious experience or having a collective religious experience can strengthen the community's faith.</p> <p>Leads to a greater sense of unity, sharing one's faith with others, develops a common identity, etc.</p>   | <p>Celebration of festivals such as Pesach which remembers God saving his chosen people from slavery and leading them to the Promised Land. The practice of the various rituals during the Seder reflect this.</p> <p>Toronto Blessing – leading to growth of evangelical churches and religious practices related to being filled with the Holy Spirit.</p>  |

1. Read the information above and use your prior knowledge about religious experiences to complete the spider diagram below – use the internet for more information if necessary or Peter Cole quotes/summaries



**Value for individual including faith restoring; strengthening faith in face of opposition; renewal of commitment to religious ideals and doctrines.**

**An individual’s experience can be life changing for them.**

*‘If an experience happens to you personally it may change your perception of what is true. If it happens to someone else, it is less likely to change your perception, even if you accept that the experience has happened and that logically proves the existence of an outside force (God).’ Peter Cole*

**Knowledge of God is possible**, so religious experiences can have value for an individual as a basis of knowledge – noetic quality.

For many people, the move from a **belief-that to a belief-in**, is brought about by personal religious experience. Clearly the religious experience of conversion is central.

**Value for religious individual.**

**Martin Buber – types of belief**

**Belief that** – accepting propositions to be true based on some form of evidence e.g. ‘I believe that the Pope is the head of the Roman Catholic Church’

**Belief in** – conveys an attitude of commitment, trust, or loyalty on the part of the believer.

| Value for individual   | Possible example   |
|--|--|
| <p>Value for individual including faith restoring</p> <p>A testimony of someone else's religious experience or conversion may lead to a renewal of an individual's faith. A personal religious experience may also do the same.</p>  | <p>This may lead to renewed enthusiasm for active participation in religious practices such as Friday morning prayers for a Muslim or celebration of Shabbat for a Jew.</p>  |
| <p>Strengthening faith in face of opposition</p> <p>An individual may be strengthened in their faith by the opposition they face or they may hear of things that other believers experienced when they faced opposition.</p>   | <p>The formation of the Khalsa in Sikhism which has led to Sikhs throughout history joining the Khalsa and carrying out certain practices such as wearing the 5ks.</p> <p>The account of the Early Christians' religious experience at Pentecost whilst facing persecution, providing inspiration for other individual Christians as reflected in the festival of Pentecost.</p> |
| <p>Renewal of commitment to religious ideals and doctrines</p> <p>Most religions have occasions where believers faith have the opportunity to renew their commitment to the faith, usually in the form of a public commitment. This decision to make such a commitment and the experience itself can be forms of religious experience.</p> | <p>Muslims who go on Hajj perform a number of religious practices which reflect their renewal to religious ideals and doctrines such as the stoning of the Devil in the form of the three pillars.</p>   |

2. **Research an example of a conversion experience that led to a strengthening of faith and renewal of commitment to religious ideal and doctrines. E.g. Martin Luther, John Wesley**

### 3 E

#### What is a miracle?

For a religious believer, a miracle is something that reveals the existence of God. Although many people use the term 'miracle' to describe nothing more than a welcome or surprising occurrence, or a special event such as the birth of a baby, religious believers use the term to refer to something much more significant.

#### E. Miracles the definitions of:

**St Thomas Aquinas** (miracles different from the usual order),

**David Hume** (transgression of a law of nature),

**R.F. Holland** (contingency miracle),

**Richard Swinburne** (religious significance).

Consideration of reasons why religious believers accept that miracles occur: evidence from sacred writings; affirmation of faith traditions; personal experience.

#### Information from Eduqas

##### The Possibility of Miracles

1. One definition of a miracle is "*An event brought about by God*". By God is meant the God of the Christians, Jews and Muslims. The defining properties which Christianity, Judaism and Islam ascribe to are very similar – e.g. omnipotence, omniscience, all goodness etc. Therefore it seems valid to say that Christians, Jews and Muslims worship the same God. However, that is not to deny that they hold different further properties. For instance, Christians unlike Muslims believe in the Trinity.

If we do define miracles in this way then it is of course logically necessary (that is, necessary in virtue of the meaning of the terms used) that there can be no miracles unless the Christian God exists. Thus there cannot be miracles which are evidence of his existence because accepting a description of an event as a miracle commits a person to accept the existence of God. The problem is that miracles are said to occur in the context of other religions, whilst others argue that beings other than God could have brought these about. But this is not possible if the definition of a miracle is an event brought about by God. For these reasons to require that a miracle be an event brought about by God seems to place a restriction on the use of the term that is not justified. Possibly the definition should be widened to include any agent, not necessarily God, to work miracles. But can a human being perform a miracle? In the Bible it suggests that various Apostles such as Peter and Paul did miracles. But it might be argued that God did the miracle in response to being asked to do it. It was God who did the miracles not the Apostles.

(Adapted from *The Concept of Miracle* by Swinburne)

2. A miracle has been defined as "an event brought about by God". This suggests that naturalism (the belief that nothing exists beyond the natural world) leaves no room for miracles whilst a theistic position that affirms the existence of a creator of the natural order does allow for miracles. This then implies that any argument from miracles to the existence of God can only succeed if there is some prior reason to assume the existence of God. Only then can the idea of a miracle make sense. Some argue that some reported events, such as the resurrection of Jesus, do infer the existence and activity of God since it is the best explanation of the occurrence of the event. Also appeal is made to the classic arguments for the



existence of God. So when evidence supporting “miraculous events” is offered, it is valid to refer to them as possible miracles. The concept of a miracle should make perfectly good sense to critics of theism. The idea of an exception to the laws of nature by a creator of nature makes sense. So the question arises – does the naturalistic scheme or the theistic scheme offer the best account for our total experience of the world? It is no use arguing about whether miracles can occur until that question has been settled. (Adapted from *In Defence of Miracles* edited by Geivett and Habermas)

3. A miracle is defined as “an event above or contrary to nature which is explicable only as a direct act of God.” However, the definition is such, that whatever scientists may say, it can be doubted whether miracles have in fact occurred. If the scientist has claimed that a certain event “is inexplicable in terms of natural causes and must therefore be ascribed to supernatural agents,” she is speaking as a philosopher rather than a scientist. She may say that it is inexplicable in terms of the laws of nature and so not explainable by natural agents - though that is doubtful. But to say that it must be ascribed to supernatural agents is to say something that no one could possibly have the right to affirm on the evidence alone. To offer an explanation is very different from reporting the evidence of an occurrence of an inexplicable event. No matter how strange an event someone reports, the statement that it must have been due to a supernatural agent cannot be part of that report. (Adapted from *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* edited by Flew and MacIntyre)

## **Laws of nature**

1. The task of the theoretical scientist is to set forth the laws of nature. In any field they will have a number of observational results. They seek the most natural generalisation or extrapolation of those results, or, as I shall put it, the simplest formula from which past results can be deduced. Sometimes the scientist will be able to see no simple formula, that is formula of sufficient simplicity, compatible with a collection of data in some field, and in that case will not feel justified in adopting any one formula and making predictions on the basis of it. This means that laws of nature do not just describe what happens. They describe what happens in a regular and predictable way. When what happens is entirely irregular and unpredictable, its occurrence is not something describable by natural laws.

### **Given this understanding of a law of nature, what is meant by a violation of a law of nature?**

**Hume** seems to mean an occurrence of a non-repeatable counter-instance to a law of nature. This assumes that the operation of a law of nature is logically compatible with the occurrence of an exception to its operation. However, some may argue that a universal law has the form “so-and-sos always do such- and- such” which seems incompatible with a counter instance reported by “this is a so-and-so and did not do such-and-such.” It is argued that both statements cannot be true together and so the law is wrong. However, if it could also be the case that if we left the law unmodified, we have good reason to believe it would give correct predictions in all other conceivable circumstances, then it seems valid to claim that there is a law of nature and in this one instance it has been violated. Hence the idea of a law on nature being violated is coherent. (Adapted from *The Concept of Miracle* by Swinburne)

2. **Alastair McKinnon** argues that laws of nature do not in any way constrain the course of nature. They exert no opposition or resistance to anything, not even to the odd or exceptional. They are simply highly generalised shorthand descriptions of how things do in fact happen. Hence there can be no suspensions of natural law rightly understood. It would be better to replace the phrase “natural law” with “the actual

course of events". In this understanding, nothing in the definition of natural law would exclude such events as the resurrection of Jesus. Hence, to define miracles as a violation of a law of nature is a contradiction in terms. In this view, no question of miracles can therefore arise. Whatever happens must be included in his understanding of natural laws. Since miracles are unique events, not necessarily repeatable in the same circumstances, a "natural law" about human death would have to take the form "when human beings are dead, they stay dead, except Jesus, Lazarus, the son of the widow of Nain etc". (Adapted from In Defence of Miracles edited by Geivett and Habermas)

3. A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined. Nothing is esteemed a miracle, if it ever happens in the common course of nature. It is no miracle that a man, seemingly in good health, should die suddenly: because such a kind of death, though more unusual than any other has yet been frequently observed to happen. But it is a miracle, that a dead man should come to life; because that has never been observed in any age or country. There must, therefore, be a uniform experience against every miraculous event, otherwise the event would not merit that appellation. And as a uniform experience amounts to a proof, there is here a direct and full proof, from the nature of the fact, against the existence of any miracle.....the knavery and folly of men are such common phenomena, that I should rather believe the most extraordinary events arise from their concurrence, than to admit of so signal a violation of the laws of nature. (On Miracles by Hume)

**3. Explain David Hume’s definition of miracles**

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## **Aquinas on Miracles** - miracles different from the usual order

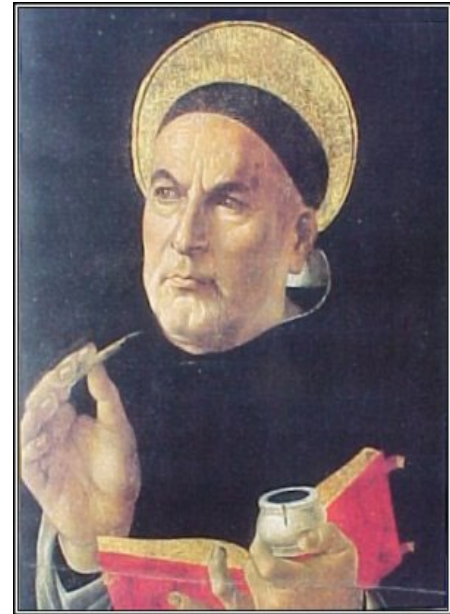
Aquinas distinguishes between three different types of God's interaction with the world

**God's sustaining activity** which does not involve specific actions but refers to the earth's continuing dependence upon God for its existence.

**Primary actions** which refer to God's specific interventions in human history, where the course of events is changed by God - Lazarus

**Secondary actions** which refer not to God's direct interference in the world but the way in which God works indirectly through human choices and actions to bring about God's will – Judges 3:12-15

He defines a miracle as, *'Those things... which are done by Divine power apart from the order generally followed in things'*. Thus, like Hume, Aquinas distinguishes between 'natural' and 'supernatural' activities. .



### **Aquinas describes miracles as:**

Aquinas divided miracles into **three categories** and did not limit them to violation of the laws of nature. He defined them as:

1. Events that God did, which nature could not, and are breaches of the laws of nature; for example, the reversal of the course of the sun or raising the dead.
2. Events that God did which nature could, but not in the same order or speed; for example, the instant recovery from paralysis or a terminal illness. Nature can bring about a spontaneous remission or recovery, but we would not expect this to happen. Hence, if it does, it may be attributed to the direct intervention of God.
3. Events that God did which nature could, but that God did without using the forces of nature; for example, the recovery from a fever without any intervention from nature. The cure happens perhaps after prayer, through the miraculous intervention of God.

#### **4. What is the difference between these three types of miracle?**

By doing this he allows for the possibility of miracles to be events that occur within the 'system' of 'natural activity'. For example, someone being cured by God of a fever has witnessed a miracle yet without any 'natural laws' being broken. Rather than the fever being cured naturally it was cured by God.

**However, if miracles can happen within the system of 'natural activities' how are we to tell when a miracle has occurred?**

Consider the following example:

*Suppose... that a crucial bolt on an airliner is about to fail, and that in response to prayer for the safekeeping of those on board God miraculously fuses the bolt. To all outward appearances the flight is uneventful; nevertheless the safe arrival of the plane is a miracle (Evans p.110).*

God has worked within the system of 'natural things' and a miracle has occurred. Yet how can we begin to validate this miracle? There are no visible signs and there is no 'evidence' that anything has happened. Yet something has happened. Are miracles to remain beyond human validation and merely speculated on as to when, or if, they have occurred?

## 5. Outline what type these three types of miracle are

| Type of miracle explained | Example   |
|---------------------------|---|
|                           | <p><u>Joshua 10:13</u><br/>           The Sun stood still and the moon did not move until the nation had conquered it's enemies....the Sun stood in the middle of the sky and did not go down for a whole day. (Joshua 10. 13).</p>   |
|                           | <p><u>Mark 1:31</u><br/>           He went to her, took her by the hand, and helped her up. The fever had left her, and she began to wait on them. (Mark 1. 31)</p>   |
|                           | <p><u>Mark 2:5</u><br/>           Seeing how much faith they had, Jesus said to the paralysed man, "my son, your sins are forgiven." (Mark 2. 5)...<br/>           "I tell you get up, pick up your mat and go home!" (Mark 2. 11).. While they all watched, the man got up, picked up his mat and hurried away. (Mark 2. 12)</p> |

6. What are the implications of Aquinas' interpretations of the ways in which God interacts with the world e.g. an 'interventionist God'.

Miracles that are violations of nature clearly indicate a God who interferes with the natural workings of the world, rather than one who just works within nature and uses its laws in order to bring about events. Such violations do not indicate that God determines all other events that happen naturally. Indeed the fact that God needs to interfere could be taken to imply that God did not determine everything. Anne Jordan

7. Looking at these different types of miracle, is there the possibility that miracles can occur **without** laws of nature being broken

**Richard Swinburne's definition of miracles – use old WJEC textbook 58-59**

***'A violation of a law of nature by a god that is a very powerful rational being who is not a material object.'***

***"If He (God) has reason to interact with us, He has reason very occasionally to intervene and suspend those natural laws by which our life is controlled"***

- Swinburne acknowledges that it is difficult to outweigh the scientific evidence, but that we do have enough historical evidence to suggest that there is a God and that God can violate the laws of nature.
- It is perfectly probable that there could be one off exceptional and unrepeatably occurrences. The laws of nature do not have to be rewritten. If God is omnipotent, then he quite clearly could suspend the laws of nature although not too often as this will interfere with scientific progress and free will.
- He argues from first principles and argues that future predictions could always nullify a law. When an event violates the Law of nature, the appearance may simply be that no one has thought of the Law that could explain the event

**8. What are Swinburne's two criteria for a miracle?**

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**Richard Swinburne's examples of violation of the laws of nature taken from the Bible:**

*Levitation and resurrection from the dead in full health of a man whose heart has not been beating for twenty four hours and who was dead also by other currently used criteria; water turning into wine without the assistance of chemical apparatus or catalysts; a man getting better from polio in a minute.*

Richard Swinburne (ed.), *Miracles*, 1989



**9. Why did Richard Swinburne regard turning water into wine, and other similar miracles recorded in the Bible, as a violation of the laws of nature?**

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**10. Explain Swinburne's Principles of Credulity and Testimony.**

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**11. How can Swinburne's Principles of Credulity and Testimony support his claim that miracles can occur?**

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## R.F. Holland - Coincidence Miracles

Given the difficulties that arise in connection with the suggestion that God causes a miracle to occur, a non-causal account deserves consideration. **R.F. Holland** (1965) has suggested that a religiously significant coincidence may qualify as a miracle.

Like a violation miracle, such a coincidence occurs contrary to our expectations, yet it does this without standing in opposition to our understanding of natural law. To conceive of such an event as a miracle does seem to satisfy the conception of a miracle as an event that elicits wonder, though the object of our wonder seems not so much to be *how* the train came to stop as the simple fact *that* it should stop when it did.

While discussing the category of miracles that might be seen as signs with religious significance, **R. F. Holland** used the example of a young boy on the railway line who was saved by the driver's collapse, just in time to bring the train to a halt before it hits the boy.

### 12. Read the story below and write up a summary in your notes –

*Suppose a child who is riding a toy motor-car gets stuck on the track at a train crossing. A train is approaching from around a curve, and the engineer who is driving it will not be able to see the child until it is too late to stop. By coincidence, the engineer faints at just the right moment, releasing his hand on the control lever, which causes the train to stop automatically. The child, against all expectations, is saved, and his mother thanks God for his providence; she continues to insist that a miracle has occurred even after hearing the explanation of how the train came to stop when it did. Interestingly, when the mother attributes the stopping of the train to God she is not identifying God as its cause; the cause of the train's stopping is the engineer's fainting. Nor is she, in any obvious way, offering an explanation for the event- at least none that is intended to compete with the naturalistic explanation made possible by reference to the engineer's medical condition. What makes this event a miracle, if it is, is its significance, which is given at least in part by its being an apparent response to a human need.*



For a believer, this story proves that God worked within the system of 'natural things' and a miracle occurred. For the non-believer this event would be considered a coincidence.



Another example of a miracle that may or may not be seen as a sign with religious significance is provided by **Peter Vardy and Julie Arliss**:

*Life magazine reported that all fifteen members of a Church choir in Beatrice, Nebraska, came at least ten minutes too late for their weekly choir practice which was supposed to start at 7.20 p.m. They were astonishingly fortunate because at 7.25 p.m. the building was destroyed by an explosion. The reasons for the delay of each member were fairly commonplace; none of them was marked by the slightest sign of a supernatural cause. However, nothing remotely resembling the situation that all members were prevented from being on time on the same occasion had ever happened before. Furthermore, this singular event took place precisely when it was needed, on the very night when they would otherwise have perished.*



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Peter Vardy and Julie Arliss, *The Thinker's Guide to God*, 2003

While a coincidence such as this can easily be given a natural explanation, many would view the event as miraculous due to the sheer improbability that the only night on which all the members of the choir were late was the one night when they all (unknowingly) needed to be.

**13. Would you consider the story of the young boy on the railway line a miracle or a coincidence? Explain your answer.**

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**14. Has any *law of nature* been broken in this example? Explain your answer**

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**15. Are miracles to remain beyond human validation and merely speculated on as to when, or if, they have occurred?**

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A similar account of the miraculous comes from **John Hick's** conception of religious faith as a form of "experiencing-as." Inspired by **Wittgenstein's** discussion of *seeing-as* in the *Philosophical Investigations* (194e), Hick has argued that while the theist and the atheist live in the same physical environment, they experience it differently; the theist sees a significance in the events of her life that prompts her to describe her experience as a continuing interaction with God (1973:Ch. 2). A theist, for example, might benefit from an unexpected job opportunity and experience this as an expression of divine providence; the same event might not move an atheist in this way. **Regarding miracles in particular, Hick (1973:51) writes:**

*A miracle, whatever else it may be, is an event through which we become vividly and immediately conscious of God as acting towards us. A startling happening, even if it should involve a suspension of natural law, does not constitute for us a miracle in the religious sense of the word if it fails to make us intensely aware of God's presence. In order to be miraculous, an event must be experienced as religiously significant.*

Holland gives no indication that he wants to describe the miracle of the train in terms of experiencing-as. It is also possible to dispute whether Hick's account is faithful to Wittgenstein's conception of seeing-as. Nevertheless it seems reasonable to say, with Hick, that in Holland's example, while the child's mother has seen the same thing that the skeptic has- the stopping of the train- she understands it differently, experiencing it *as* a miracle, and *as* an expression of divine providence.

If the question of whether an event is a miracle lies in its significance, and if its significance is a matter of how we understand it, then it is hard to see how the determination that some event is a miracle can avoid being an entirely subjective matter. In this case, whether or not a miracle has occurred depends on how the witnesses see it, and so (arguably) is more a fact about the witnesses, and their response to the event, than it is to the event itself. (See Smart 1964:35) But we do not typically analyse human agency in this way; whether or not Caesar crossed the Rubicon is not a matter of how anyone experiences things. The question of whether Caesar crossed the Rubicon is an objective one. Surely the theist wishes to say that the question of whether God has acted in the world, in the occurrence of a miracle, is objective as well. And surely this fact accounts for the attractiveness of a causal account of miracles; any dispute over the cause of a putative miracle is a dispute over the facts, not a dispute about how people *view* them.

**Holland believes that an event does not have to break the laws of nature to be miraculous.**

**He defines a miracle as an extraordinary coincidence: what makes it a miracle is the sense of divine purpose and religious significance**

*'A coincidence can be taken religiously as a sign & called a miracle'*

**Explain your answer here.....**




If you prayed for the safety of a friend who was known to be in danger and if a remarkable and unexpected series of events brought about the persons safety, would you call it a miracle or a coincidence?



**Holland's view makes a miracle dependent on personal interpretation: this is subjective, and will vary from person to person. One person calls an action a miracle the other calls it a coincidence. It very much depends on the *'eye of the beholder'*.**

**The woman in the train story felt there was good reason to interpret the event religiously & as an act of God, irrespective of how others interpret the event.**

Therefore, a theist and an atheist would interpret the same extraordinary event very differently.

|  |   |
|--|---|
|  <p>David Hume:<br/> <i>'A miracle may be accurately defined as a <b>transgression of a law of nature</b> by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent'</i></p> |   |
|  <p>Aquinas:<br/> <i>'<b>That which has a divine cause</b>'</i><br/> Or<br/> <i>'Those things done by divine power apart from the order usually followed in things'.</i></p>                              |   |
| <p>Swinburne:<br/> Miracles are infrequent events that break the laws of nature.</p>   |   |
| <p>R.F. Holland:<br/> <i>'A remarkable and beneficial <b>coincidence</b> that is <b>interpreted</b> in a religious fashion'</i></p>   | <p>The <b>contingency</b> definition of miracles.</p> |
| <p>Wiles:<br/> The only miracle is the act of creation. God does not intervene in individual cases.</p>  | <p>An extra scholar for AO2</p>                       |

**Evidence from sacred writings**

Miracles are a significant feature of both the Old Testament and the New Testament and they raise interesting questions about the nature and extent of God's activity in the world.

**Old Testament** - they are used as examples of God's saving power and of His love for, and special interest in, His people, e.g. parting of the Red Sea at the Exodus

Examples from the Old Testament can be used to illustrate St Thomas Aquinas's highest rank of miracles, events in which God acts in ways that are physically or naturally impossible, e.g. parting of the Red Sea, stopping the sun and the moon to allow time for Joshua and his men to destroy their enemies (Joshua 10:13) or where God made a shadow move backwards a sign to Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:7-8.)

**New Testament** Christian biblical tradition, miracles are used as

1. Proof by the gospel writers to show that Jesus really was the messiah the Jews were expecting to fulfil the Old Testament prophecy
2. To confirm Jesus as the Son of God and show that Jesus had God's absolute power over nature, for example in miracle stories such as the calming of the storm (Luke 8:22-24) or Jesus walking on water (Matthew 14:22-33) and to demonstrate his ultimate power over evil, for example when Jesus drives out the evil demons from two possessed men (Matthew 8:28-34.)
3. As 'signs' or 'indicators' that the Kingdom of God is coming and of what this will involve, for example people being restored to full health, or given vision, which could work on both a literal and symbolic level
4. The miracles show Jesus's ability to give new life even to those who have died, for example in the stories of the raising of Jarius's daughter and of Lazarus.

**16. Consideration of reasons why religious believers accept that miracles occur: evidence from sacred writings; affirmation of faith traditions; personal experience.**

Often miracles are not first-hand experiences. They are reported to us by and from others. They are, in a sense, second-hand. Philosophers therefore speak of the 'testimony' of individuals.

## Examine what philosophers understand by the term “miracle” AO1 20 marks

A general definition of miracles is a type of religious experience that has the great power to convert people and to confirm religious beliefs. Philosophers aim to redefine the meaning of a miracle to give it greater depth and to help classify experiences which are miracles and experiences which are not.

David Hume described a miracle as a “transgression of a law of nature, by a particular volition the Deity or the interposition of some invisible agent.” Simply put; Hume believes that in order for an event to be classed as miraculous a law of nature, which has been established over thousands of years through empirical experience, must be broken.

Aquinas believed that miracles were separated into three types;

1. An event that God did, which nature could not such as stopping the sun in the sky for an entire day.
2. An event that God did which nature could, but not in the same order or speed, such as instantly healing someone from a terminal illness.
3. Events that God did which nature could, but that God did without natural interaction. This could be something like recovering from a flu after praying.

Aquinas did express that the final type of miracle was very open to interpretation and an individual’s faith altered whether the event was miraculous or not.

The philosopher Swinburne defined a miracle as an event of religious significance and stated that was a primary characteristic of a miracle. If someone witnessed something that defied the laws of nature it could not be described as a miracle unless it had a religious significance. To explain this point he said, “if God intervened... to make a feather land here rather than there for no deep ultimate purpose... it would not be described as a miracle.” The breaking of a natural law is not enough in Swinburne’s eyes to be described as a miraculous event.

Holland believed that “a coincidence can be taken religiously as a sign and called a miracle”. He, like Swinburne, felt that a law of nature did not have to be broken for an even to be classed as miraculous and used an example of a young boy who was almost hit by a train but was saved by the driver passing out and hitting the emergency stop button at the exact right time. The mother perceived this event as miraculous because of her religious faith, whilst another might see this as merely a coincidence. A miracle is all down to an individual’s interpretation, therefore sometimes coincidences are miracles and sometimes they are not.

### 17. Mark this answer.

- a. List three strengths
- b. List three weaknesses
- c. What level would you give it?

**A comparative study of two key scholars from within and outside the Christian tradition and their contrasting views on the possibility of miracles:**



**David Hume** – his scepticism of miracles including challenges relating to testimony based belief; credibility of witnesses; susceptibility of belief; contradictory nature of faith claims.

**Richard Swinburne** – his defence of miracles, including definitions of natural laws and contradictions of Hume’s arguments regarding contradictory nature of faith claims and credibility of witnesses.



**David Hume**

Miracles are a ‘violation of the laws of nature’, but what do we mean by ‘laws of nature’?

18. Recap

A law of nature is . . .



**It is impossible to prove that a miracle has happened.**

**Miracles are improbable.**

Modern theologians, such as Swinburne, would object to Hume’s definition of miracles as it misses out the most important bit about miracles which is their revelatory nature – **events of special significance, revelations from God.**

David Hume reasoned that it is not possible to prove that miracles occur, as they are a *violation of natural laws*. His argument may be summarised as:

- **The laws of nature are based on past experience.** It would be reasonable to reject the claim of a miracle because it would be contrary to human experience. The evidence that the laws of nature are not broken outweighs the evidence of miracles. Therefore, based on empirical probabilities, miracles do not occur.
- **The reliability of the witness is in doubt.** Witnesses tend to be of insufficient good sense, education and learning. Miracles tend to be observed by ignorant and barbarous nations.
- **The witness is sympathetic to the idea of miracles.** They are therefore more likely to believe in them and describe an event as a miracle.
- **Stories of miracles tend to be common amongst ignorant and barbarous communities**
- **All religions base their truth claims on the miraculous,** but they cannot all be right. The existence of miracles in each faith cancels out the claims of truth of each faith.

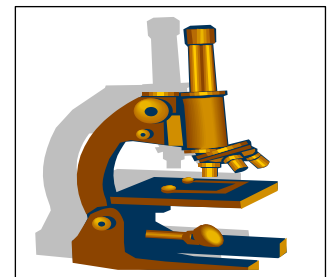
### Contrasting view . . .

**Richard Swinburne** – his defence of miracles, including definitions of natural laws and contradictions of Hume’s arguments regarding contradictory nature of faith claims and credibility of witnesses.

Swinburne argues against the idea that natural laws always outweigh evidence in favour of miracles.

He claims there are three types of historical event that could support miracles

1. Our apparent memories
2. The testimony of others
3. The physical traces left by the event in question.



In anticipation of Hume’s challenge that scientific laws are more objective Swinburne emphasises that our knowledge of scientific laws is based on these three types of evidence. If such evidence is not sufficient to establish the occurrence of miracles, neither is it sufficient to establish the certainty of a natural law.

**Peter Vardy** supports Swinburne's argument, criticising Hume by arguing that people don't just believe in a faith because of a miracle.

- But surely the whole Christian faith is based on miracles such as Jesus's birth and resurrection?



**John Polkinghorne** also supports Swinburne, arguing for an **interventionist God**.

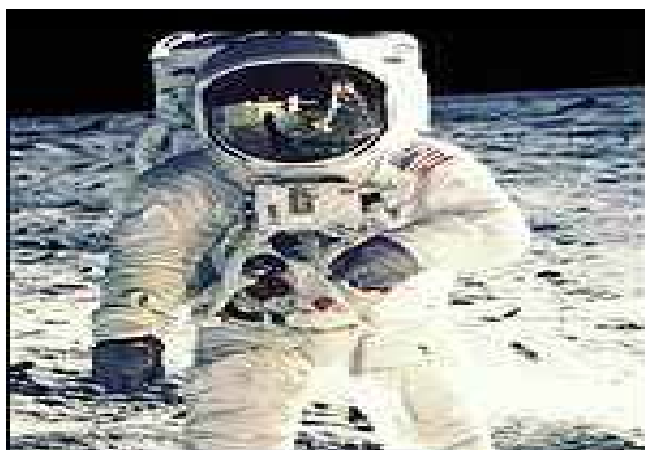


Swinburne defends miracles but argues that it is important to know what the **laws of nature** are, as he contended that they weren't necessarily fixed truths. He believed that many of the scientific laws that we adopt are merely statistical laws – they tell us what will almost certainly happen *“One must distinguish between a formula being a law and a formula being (universally) true, being a law which holds without exception”*. Swinburne acknowledges that it is difficult to outweigh the scientific evidence, but that we do have enough historical evidence to suggest that there is a God and that God can violate the laws of nature. Perhaps God can suspend laws on occasions in the way that a parent sometimes relaxes the boundaries they give to their children?

Hume talks of **'laws of nature'** as fixed, and that they cannot be broken, that our knowledge of these laws is secure and cannot be shown to be false. However, scientific knowledge is not secure and is simply a current version of the truth. Many scientific developments in recent years have forced us to accept as possible, things that would once have been considered impossible upon the basis of past experience.

**Example given by Brian Davis** - In Hume's day the law of nature was that man did not walk on the moon

- This was based on past experience
- However, when this happened it obviously contradicted past experience and laws of nature!



'We might say (thought rather oddly) that until someone walked on the moon, people were regularly observed not to walk on the moon. And people, in time, have come to do what earlier generations would rightly have taken to be impossible on the basis of their experience'

*Brian Davis, An introduction to the philosophy of religion.*

- Therefore scientific laws of nature are **descriptive** not **prescriptive**
- They cannot dictate what must happen, they just summarise what has been found to happen in the past
- You can make predictions about what will happen in similar situations in the future, however, as we have seen, there are exceptions to the rule! (man walks on moon!)

Swinburne also states if God is benevolent, he would want to interact with his creation and may do so via occasional miracles. He believes that miracles are by their nature occasional events and that if they were more regular, we would not know whether laws such as gravity were going to operate. He also believes that it encourages humans to be active in trying to make progress because for example, if we knew that God regularly healed cancer, humans would not actively seek a cure. Swinburne also recognises the problem that God's intervention would have on human freedom which is why he argues that God doesn't intervene too often

It is perfectly probable that there could be one off exceptional and unrepeatable occurrences. The laws of nature do not have to be rewritten. If God is omnipotent, then he quite clearly could suspend the laws of nature although not too often as this will interfere with scientific progress and free will.

He argues from first principles and argues that future predictions could always nullify a law. When an event violates the Law of nature, the appearance may simply be that no one has thought of the Law that could explain the event

We rely on the evidence of senses and perception to give us information about the world, why do we not rely on the evidence and the testimony of those claiming miracle.

- The Principle of Credulity: If it seems that X is present, then probably x is present. In short what one seems to perceive is probably the case (It is a principle of rationality). He puts the onus on the sceptic to disprove religious experience otherwise it should be taken at face value.
- The Principle of Testimony: In the absent of special consideration it is reasonable to believe that the experiences of others are probably as they report them. In other words you should believe other people as well.

| David Hume's challenges to miracles   | Swinburne - Arguments in defence of miracles   |
|---|--|
| The <b>laws of nature</b> are based on past experience.   |  |
| The reliability of the witness is in doubt.   |  |
| Communities <i>'It forms a strong presumption against all supernatural and miraculous relations, that they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations; or if a civilized people has ever given admission to any of them, that people will be found to have received them from ignorant and barbarous ancestors, who transmitted them with that inviolable sanction and authority, which always attend received opinions'</i> . | Swinburne criticises this point, calling Hume arrogant   |
| The witness is sympathetic to the idea of miracles. Hume argued that religious people have a <b>psychological need to believe in miracles</b> ; they are biased, and suspend reason in favour of belief: <i>"A religionist may imagine he sees what has no reality."</i>  | <b>Richard Swinburne</b> attacks this point, saying that belief doesn't affect sight - if you genuinely see something, it doesn't reflect your faith |
| All religions base their truth claims on the miraculous, but they cannot all be right <i>'Let us consider, that, in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary; and that it is impossible the religions of ancient Rome, of Turkey, of Siam, and of China should, all of them, be established on any solid foundation'</i>  |  |



## Component 2: Philosophy of Religion

### Theme 3: Religious experience

#### Evaluation D, E and F



Issues for analysis and evaluation will be drawn from any aspect of the content above, such as:

1. The **impact** of religious experiences upon religious belief and practice.
2. Whether religious communities are **entirely dependent** on religious experiences.
3. The **adequacy** of different definitions of miracles.
4. How far different definitions of miracles can be considered as **contradictory**.
5. The **effectiveness of the challenges** to belief in miracles.
6. The extent to which Swinburne's responses to Hume can be accepted as **valid**.

| Reasons to accept religious experiences | Reasons to reject religious experiences |
|---|---|
|   |   |
|   |   |
|   |   |
|   |   |



**'Religious experiences only have a significant impact upon the religious belief and practice of the individual who has it.'** Evaluate this view. Use booklet 2 pages 2 to 5

Introduction

| Argument – only have an impact on the individual     | Counter-argument – have a wider impact e.g. on community   | Evaluation   |
|--|--|--|
| Peter Cole states that . . .                         | <p>However, Swinburne's Principle of Testimony</p> <p>William James – can see the change in people's lives</p> | Can challenge Swinburne - J.L. Mackie and Michael Martin |
| It can lead to a change of the type of faith – Buber | Individual people's religious experience within faiths can have an impact on others who already believe.       |  |
| Can't be verified so not significant to others       | Origin of world religions based on religious experiences – believers unconcerned about verification            |  |
|  |  |  |

In conclusion,

## 2. 'Religious communities are entirely dependent on religious experiences.' Evaluate this view

### Introduction

| Argument – Religious communities are entirely dependent on religious experiences  | Counter-argument – Religious communities are not entirely dependent on religious experiences   | Evaluation |
|---|--|------------|
| All major world religions were founded on religious experiences   | However,   |            |
| Prayer is a religious experience – all religious communities stress the importance of prayer.<br>St Teresa of Avila taught . . .                                    | An alternative view has been presented by D.Z. Phillips – When someone prays, it is not about presenting facts. We must ask what a person is doing when they pray. It may be an appeal to their inner strength, for example. This would mean that prayer is not a religious experience . . . |            |
| Religious communities develop their ideas about God based on religious experiences e.g. Moses and the 10 commandments<br><br>Moses and burning bush 'I am who I am' | Theological challenge - Knowledge of God is not possible – God is transcendent, outside space and time and does not reveal Himself to humans – Nelson Pike and Maurice Wiles.  |            |
| Religious practice is based on religious experience<br>Islam – Ramadan<br>Christianity – Easter<br>Buddhism - Wesak   | Other things in religious have greater importance . . .  |            |

In conclusion,

**3. 'There is no adequate definition of miracles.' Evaluate this view**

This will involve working with the definitions of miracle and assessing their adequacy

**Introduction** - What do we mean by adequacy?

| Definition   | Argue – no definition is adequate  | Disagree – a definition could be adequate  | Evaluation |
|--|--|--|------------|
| Miracle is a break in the laws of nature   | The 'laws of nature' can't be broken – they are generalisations or hypotheses based on past experience | An opposing viewpoint would be that it is adequate to say that a miracle is a break in the laws of nature as the law is the best explanation we have for the way the world has worked up until now. The law is so well established that a break of it would be extraordinary.<br>For example – |            |
| A coincidence can be a miracle<br><br>A miracle is what the individual defines it as     |  |  |            |
| Event of religious significance – not a violation of laws of nature – Aquinas third type | Some definitions are too restrictive/too broad.  |  |            |

In conclusion,



**4. 'All the different definitions of miracles can be considered as contradictory.' Evaluate this view**

Introduction – What do we mean by contradictory? Why is this significant?

Argument – all the definitions are contradictory

Counter-argument – all the definitions are not contradictory

Evaluation and conclusion

## 5. 'Challenges to belief in miracles are effective.' Evaluate this view

**Challenges to belief in miracles are effective** e.g. Hume, science – complete using this booklet and pages 79-81 of the old WJEC textbook

David Hume reasoned that it is not possible to prove that miracles occur, as they are a *violation of natural laws*. His argument may be summarised as:

- **The laws of nature are based on past experience.**
- **The reliability of the witness is in doubt.**
- **The witness is sympathetic to the idea of miracles.**
- **Stories of miracles tend to be common amongst ignorant and barbarous communities**
- **All religions base their truth claims on the miraculous, but they cannot all be right.**

In an AO2 answer you need to evaluate and not list each challenge – are they effective

### **Nelson Pike – additional scholar**

Pike questioned the existence of miracles as he believed that it was not possible for God to intervene in the world, because God is outside time, with no past, present or future.

This view has been challenged by religious believers who claim that Pike misunderstood the idea that God is outside time. They would claim that timelessness does not prevent God from acting in the world. Aquinas believed that God acted timelessly and the events that God brings about are in time.

Believers who support Pike would claim that if they accept miracles they would have to believe that God exists in time.

Swinburne responded by stating that time doesn't affect God in the same way it affects humans. Time doesn't harm God. God is in time and therefore can't have knowledge of the future. He believed that God is omnipotent but it is not logically possible to accept that even an omnipotent God can know the future.

## Challenges to belief in miracles are not effective – response to challenges and support for miracles

### Hume's challenges are not effective

#### Problem 1

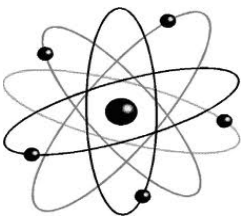
- Hume only deals **with reports of miracles**
- Nothing in his argument says that you should ignore a miracle you have experienced for yourself
- If Hume himself had experienced a miracle, he probably might have believed it, even if he insisted on rejecting second-hand reports!
- *We can apply Swinburne here* "The principle of..." "

**Activity - apply the above principles to an example of a claimed miracle**

#### Problem 2

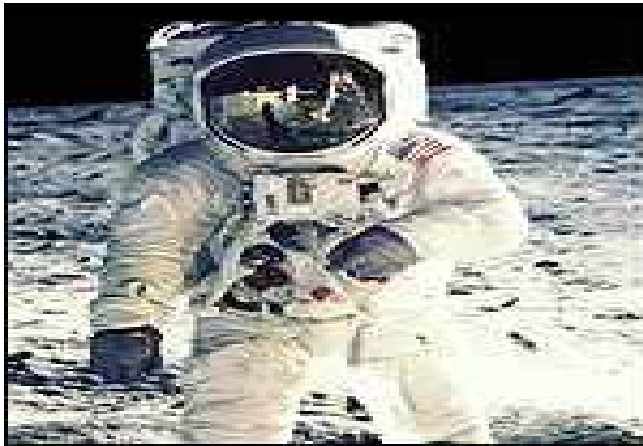
- Hume talks of '**laws of nature**' as fixed, and that they cannot be broken, that our knowledge of these laws is secure and cannot be shown to be false
- However, scientific knowledge is not secure and is simply a current version of the truth
- Many scientific developments in recent years have forced us to accept as possible, things that would once have been considered impossible upon the basis of past experience

**Activity - What ideas can we use to support this point here? Paradigm shifts?**



**Example given by Brian Davis** - In Hume's day the law of nature was that man did not walk on the moon

- This was based on past experience
- However, when this happened it obviously contradicted past experience and laws of nature!



'We might say (thought rather oddly) that until someone walked on the moon, people were regularly observed not to walk on the moon. And people, in time, have come to do what earlier generations would rightly have taken to be impossible on the basis of their experience'

*Brian Davis, An introduction to the philosophy of religion.*

- Therefore scientific laws of nature are **descriptive** not **prescriptive**
- They cannot dictate what must happen, they just summarise what has been found to happen in the past
- You can make predictions about what will happen in similar situations in the future, however, as we have seen, there are exceptions to the rule! (man walks on moon!)

### Problem 3

- Hume was writing at a time when the only support for miracles came from word of mouth reports
- Today, claimed miracles are sometimes supported by scientific evidence
- At Lourdes there have been 68 attested claims that natural laws, as an independent team of doctors and scientists understand them, have been broken
- The Church, therefore, has declared that a miracle has occurred

### Problem 4

- Modern theologians would object to Hume's definition of miracles as it misses out the most important bit about miracles which is their revelatory nature – **events of special significance, revelations from God.**

### Problem 5

Swinburne argues against the idea that natural laws always outweigh evidence in favour of miracles.

He claims there are three types of historical event that could support miracles

4. Our apparent memories
5. The testimony of others
6. The physical traces left by the event in question.

In anticipation of Hume's challenge that scientific laws are more objective Swinburne emphasises that our knowledge of scientific laws is based on these three types of evidence. If such evidence is not sufficient to establish the occurrence of miracles, neither is it sufficient to establish the certainty of a natural law.

## Support for the miraculous

Several reasons are put forward by philosophers and theologians as to why miracles should be accepted as evidence of the existence of God and therefore the challenges are not effective.

### These include:

The theologian, Charles H. Dodd, considers 'A miracle is not so much a breach of the laws of nature, but rather a remarkable or exceptional occurrence which brought an undeniable sense of the presence and power of God.'

A miracle may be seen as an event that is caused by an everlasting or timeless God; this is either in accordance with natural laws or brought about by another person.

A miracle is evidence of an 'ultimate agent' at work in the world.

Miracles still continue in the world today. Within Christianity, and especially Catholicism, there are still events that appear to go against the laws of nature. Example – Lourdes



## Miracles - Lourdes



Lourdes is a village in southern France. Many healing miracles are reputed to have occurred there since 1858, when a 14 year old girl claimed to have 'seen' a beautiful lady that Roman Catholics believe was the mother of Jesus. Of the estimated 200 million people who have sought a cure there, millions claim to have been healed.

Where possible, people claiming healing are examined on the spot by a medical bureau, and the information is reviewed by an international commission of medical specialists, independent of the Catholic Church and including sceptics. To be regarded as authentic, claims have to satisfy four requirements:

- the illness and cure was well documented,
- the illness was serious and was unable to be effectively treated,
- the symptoms disappeared within hours, and
- the healing lasted for sufficient time to ensure the 'cure' was not just a temporary remission (e.g. in the case of leukaemia, 10 years is required).

## The miracles

Most claims lack sufficient evidence to be verified, but 68 miracles have passed this stringent checking and have been proclaimed as authentic, while several thousand other remarkable cures have been documented. Some examples of claimed healings include:

- Vittorio Micheli, cured of a malignant tumour of the hip in 1963.
- Serge Francois, cured of a herniated disc in 2002.

| Argument – challenges to miracles are effective | Counter-argument – challenges to miracles are not effective | Evaluation |
|---|---|------------|
|   |   |            |
|   |   |            |
|   |   |            |
|   |   |            |
|   |   |            |

6. 'Swinburne's responses to Hume can be accepted as valid.' Evaluate this view

Introduction

| Argument – what Hume said | Counter-argument – Swinburne's response | Evaluation – is the response valid? |
|---------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
|                           |   |                                     |
|                           |   |                                     |
|                           |   |                                     |
|                           |   |                                     |
|                           |   |                                     |

**'It is unreasonable to believe in miracles'. Evaluate this view.**

1. David Hume argued that it was unreasonable to believe in miracles. He claimed that a wise man proportioned his belief to the evidence. But as the laws of nature had been established and supported over a period of many hundreds of years, then it will always be more reasonable to believe that the law of nature has held and has not been broken, than to believe testimony claiming that the law of nature has been broken. He challenged the reliability of testimony by five arguments. He argued that no miracle had a sufficient number of witnesses. People are prone to look for marvels and wonders. The sources of miracle stories were from ignorant people. The writers had a vested interest and so there was bias. Religious traditions counteract each other. These five arguments show that testimony is always unreliable. Some people point out that Hume seems to be begging the question and arguing in a circle. Do laws never change? Hume rejects miracles regardless of the evidence. But he was an empiricist! No it is not unreasonable to believe in miracles if there is enough evidence. 2. David Hume argued that it was unreasonable to believe in miracles. He claimed that a wise man proportioned his belief to the evidence. But as the laws of nature had been established and supported over a period of many hundreds of years, then it will always be more reasonable to believe that the law of nature has held and has not been broken, than to believe testimony claiming that the law of nature has been broken. He argued that testimony to miracles had inherent weaknesses and so were always likely to be unreliable and weaker than our everyday experiences of the regularity of nature. He challenged the reliability of testimony by five main arguments. Hume pointed out that miracle stories lacked a sufficient quantity of educated trustworthy witnesses – people who would have a lot to lose if found to be wrong. However, it is not clear what Hume regarded as a sufficient quantity. Hume identified further weaknesses such as people's natural desire to spread stories of marvels, noting that most of these stories originated amongst ignorant people. In his essay he seemingly contradicts himself and cites a case that was attested to by witnesses of credit and distinction, only to dismiss it on the grounds that it was absolutely impossible. As an empiricist this seems contrary to his philosophical views. Hume's accusation that the writers of miracle stories had a vested interest is aimed at religion and Christianity in particular. However, this seems to imply that all believers were either deceivers or the deceived. He fails to take into account the possibility that some people are natural sceptics, including some religious people. Overall it is questionable how far Hume has shown that miracle accounts are unreliable.

3. There are various views as to what is meant by the term "miracles". The different understandings will be crucial in deciding whether it is reasonable to believe in miracles. Perhaps the most well known definition is the one given by Hume. This refers to events that violate a law of nature. The difficulty is that laws of nature have been arrived at by regular observation whilst violations to natural law are by definition very rare if indeed they have ever occurred. Hence Hume argues that it will always be more reasonable to believe that the law of nature has held and not been broken, than to believe testimony that the law of nature has been broken. He then gives a number of reasons why testimony of miracles casts some doubt on its reliability. The claim that no miracle has a sufficient number of witnesses has been challenged as being far too stringent and that many events in history would not pass the test. Nevertheless most events in history are not involving the supernatural so is it so unreasonable to demand more evidence for claimed miracles? However, Hume himself gave an example in his essay "On Miracles" which was indeed witnessed publicly by a large number of creditable people – yet he dismissed the account as unreliable on the grounds that it was impossible. This suggests Hume decided it was unreasonable to believe in miracles regardless of the evidence. Of course if the definition of miracles were to be taken as an event of religious significance, then the issue about assessing whether the event took place or not diminishes. Now it is more a case of how the observer interprets the event. If it has significance for them, then it can be classed as a miracle. The assessment has moved from the objective to the subjective. Those who see the event as coincidence may then well explain it without recourse to a God and so having no religious significance. However, the person who sees it as having religious significance may still interpret the "coincidence" as being God guided. The concept of reasonable also needs examining. For something to be reasonable implies that the argument and lines of reasoning are capable of moving an unprejudiced person to accept the conclusion as persuasive. As can be seen from the argument above, it is far from clear whether it is unreasonable to believe in miracles.



**'Science makes clear that miracles cannot happen.' Evaluate this view.**

1. The definition by Hume defines miracles as events that involve violations of the law of nature. The view of science is that events that appear to break laws of nature have a natural explanation. There is no need for recourse to a "God of the gaps" argument. The law of nature is a law - a formula of what must happen in certain conditions. If there is an apparent

Of course some argue that there is no entity called "science" that can authoritatively rule whether miracles can or cannot happen. Science is neutral and science also has limitations. Also modern science seems to favour some degree of unpredictability with the advent of quantum physics. Maybe events can seem to break laws of nature but not because of God but because of the workings of the universe.

2. Certainly science seems to persuade us that miracles can't happen. Science assumes that there are laws and the universe is mechanistic in its workings. Therefore, there is regularity and order. Indeed, we experience it everyday. Indeed, when things happen unexpectedly we will find that there has been some change in the conditions to account for the change. No law of nature has been violated. It just means that new conditions require different laws to apply. Events still act according to laws of nature. Indeed, developments in science in the area of quantum physics suggest an element of unpredictability and so supposed "miracles" have a natural explanation without recourse to some supernatural being. Science explains so called "miracles". Some people define miracles as events that have religious significance. The classic example of Holland who tells of a child caught between the rail tracks with a train fast approaching out of sight. The mother could see the child on the tracks and the train approaching. She realised the child would be hit by the train and there was too little distance for the train to stop, once the driver saw the child. However, the train suddenly started to slow down even though the driver could not see the child. It stopped about a metre from the child leaving the child unharmed. The mother looking on saw it as a miracle. Even when she learnt that the driver had had a heart attack and the automatic braking system stopped the train, she still saw it as a miracle. Clearly in such cases, science does not stop miracles happening. In fact they explain them.
3. Science and religion have always been in conflict and no more so than in the area of "miracles". Of course the extent of the conflict depends on the definition of the concept of "miracles". The weaker version argued for by such people as Holland see the emphasis on the interpretation of events. If they are beneficial and unexpected, they can still be accounted for in the idea of natural laws and there is no sense in which the natural laws are broken. Hence, science sees no conflict. However, implied in this religious significance interpretation is hidden the idea that there is a God who at some moment in time is directing events to this particular beneficial end even though the beneficial coincidence looks random. Indeed, the actual events such as Holland's example of the train stopping before hitting a child can be explained without any need of a breaking of a law of nature. The driver had a heart condition and the automatic braking system came into action. It is compatible with science as long as there is no claim that a supernatural being was at some point involved. Of course the problem is that the observer is claiming God is involved, after all, the event has religious significance. In this case science seems at odds with the "miracle" since it takes into account only the "natural". The supernatural is excluded. However, the debates about miracles and religion have been fought mainly over Hume's understanding of miracles, in which the laws of nature are said to be violated. This seems contrary to the scientific understanding of the universe that is mechanistic, orderly and regular. Given a certain set of conditions the same effects will always follow. Miracles seem to challenge that. If "miracles" happen, then the basis of science which takes into account only the "natural" is, at its very core, wrong. Hence, science does seem again to say that miracles cannot happen. Nevertheless, in recent times the development of quantum physics has challenged this mechanistic understanding of the universe in favour of unpredictability. However, this is hardly an explanation of miracles, which always seem to be linked to benefit and purpose rather than random non-significant events. Overall, it does seem that there remains

a clash between the scientific view of the universe that considers only the natural, and the religious understanding that involves the supernatural. Does science make clear that miracles can't happen? Well, if it excludes the supernatural and God, then yes. But maybe it is more the case that science just has limitations. It cannot rule, in advance, as to whether laws of nature can or cannot happen. That would be to go against the scientific method.

**QUESTION 2. 'No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle.' Evaluate this view.**

1. This is the view argued by Hume in his chapter "On miracles". Hume is involved in an exercise in probability. Which is more likely: that a miracle occurred or that a witness is either lying or mistaken? People lying or being mistaken is common; exceptional events are, by definition rare. The probability is therefore against the miracle occurring. The balance of probability swings in favour of the miracle having occurred when the chance of the people reporting the miracle lying or being mistaken is as inconceivable as was the miracle occurring in the first place. Therefore, Hume sets out the criteria by which to establish the virtual impossibility that the witnesses are lying or mistaken. They are a sufficient number of witnesses who are educated, trustworthy and witnesses to a public event. They must be people who would have a lot to lose if they were found to be lying. Hume does not deny the possibility of miracles as such but makes clear that such testimony required can never be forthcoming, and so miracles cannot be shown to have happened. He gives a number of reasons why testimony is insufficient: i) people are prone to look for marvels and wonders ii) the sources of miracle stories are from ignorant people iii) the writers had vested interests and so are bias iv) religious traditions counteract each other. Also there have never been a sufficient number of witnesses of the calibre he required. Therefore Hume concluded that testimony could never outweigh our present-day experience of the regularity of nature. No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle. The testimony would have to be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavoured to establish. 2. Although Hume's chapter on miracles in his book "Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding" is scarcely 20 pages long, it is regarded as a major contribution to the debate. He wrote his famous chapter on miracles to demonstrate that no one could use the argument of miracles to demonstrate the truth of Christianity or religion in general. A wise man proportions his belief to the evidence. Where the experience has been constant then this constitutes a full proof. A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature that have been established by firm and unalterable experience. Indeed, there must have been a uniform experience against such an event for it to be called a miracle. In such cases even the most impressive testimony would merely balance the counter-evidence provided by the improbability of the miracle. When Hume considers the criteria of the testimony that would be required he points out that the testimony is never of this order e.g. a sufficient number of witnesses of educated trustworthy kind and witnesses to a public event. However it is not clear what constitutes a sufficient number. In his own essay Hume does actually cite a case that seems to match this criteria but then dismisses it as impossible an event. He gives a number of reasons why the testimony is always suspect. For instance people are always prone to look for marvels and wonders and miracle stories acquire authority without critical or rational inquiry. There is an additional problem in that writers have vested interests in propagating miracle accounts especially if the account was used to establish a religion. However it does not seem reasonable to assume that all people giving testimony about miracles are either deceivers or the deceived. Testimony is not the only evidence for miracles. Physical effects could be seen. For instance – a healed withered arm. Also X rays may demonstrate the before and after situation. The clear conclusion is that testimony is not sufficient to establish a miracle. 3. This is the view argued by Hume in his chapter "On miracles". The problem of reliable testimony arises mainly in relation to Hume's definition of a miracle since his definition involves an event that breaks the law of nature and so is counter to our usual everyday experience of the world. Hume argues that a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence and our evidence of the world is that it is regular and orderly. Nature does indeed keep to its laws, which therefore allows us to accurately predict the outcome of events. As Hume points out, it would require a quality of testimony to be convinced that the law of nature has been violated or suspended in some way. It would need to be a public event that was witnessed by large numbers of educated, trustworthy people. Hume claims there has never been such an instance. However, he does actually cite a case in his own essay

but then declares that the event was impossible so he dismisses the testimony. That does seem to imply that as far as Hume is concerned no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle. Certainly testimony can have weaknesses. Hume pointed out that people are prone to recount marvels and wonders as fact even when they don't believe it. He also saw the origin of most miracle stories acquired authority without critical or rational inquiry. However, if a person believes in God for other reasons, then this interventionist understanding might well be seen as consistent with a Supreme Being. Swinburne argues that we should expect miracles since God needs to communicate with his creatures and to authenticate his message. He further argues that if the event happens in response to prayer and is consistent with the nature of God, then it is acceptable historical evidence. Other scholars, such as Wiles, sees such supposed interventions as trivial acts whilst others dismiss the testimony on grounds that God cannot enter time and space since he is outside of time. Hence the debate focusses not just on testimony itself but also on the coherency of what the testimony is claiming. The alternative definition of miracle as an event of religious significance also faces problems over testimony. In one sense, if the testimony states it has religious significance, then is it a miracle? However, hidden behind that is the idea that God is somehow involved and so once again the coherency of the testimony raises doubts about the reliability of the testimony. It seems to demand that God providentially orders the world so that natural causes of events are ready and waiting to produce certain other events at the right time, perhaps in answer to prayer which God knew would be offered. Many would find that difficult to accept and so both understandings of miracles seem to suggest that testimony is insufficient to establish a miracle.