William James and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

James’ four characteristics of mystical experience in detail
William James was a philosopher and psychologist, and the author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a study in the human nature*. In his book, James aims to survey the types of religious experience as a psychologist and to present the findings of this survey and its implications for philosophy.

James felt that religious experience was at the very heart of religion. He said that religion was ‘the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine...’ (Varieties: Lecture 2).

Much of his book concentrates on descriptions and first-hand accounts of experiences. Sceptics viewed some of these as examples of psychological disorder, but James disagreed and placed such accounts as central to any understanding of religion.
1. **Ineffable:** The experience is beyond proper description. The direct experience of God goes beyond human powers of description.

2. **Noetic:** Mystics receive knowledge of God that is not otherwise available. In this sense religious experiences are direct revelations from God.

3. **Transient:** The experience is a temporary one that cannot be sustained, although it may have long-lasting effects.

4. **Passive:** The experience is not initiated by the mystic but rather they feel that something is acting upon them. *James saw this as evidence against arguments claiming that a religious experience can be explained by saying a person willed it.*

James suggested that religious experiences were ‘psychological phenomena’; a part of a person’s psychological make-up. However, he did not see this as a criticism of his argument, but explained that religious experience is natural to a person, just like other psychological experience like thinking and self-awareness.
William James believed that all religious experiences indicated the probability of God (although as a pluralist he referred to ‘the spiritual’ and ‘higher aspects’ of the world and the self). He was more interested in the effects of religious experiences. To James, the validity of a religious experience rests upon the effects it produces – are lives changed? James’ argument for God is very general; the phenomena of religious experiences point to a higher order of reality.

**Your Task**

1. Apply James’ Four Characteristics to the account of Saul on the road to Damascus.

2. Explain how James defines religion in your own words.
Rudolf Otto
Rudolf Otto and the numinous

Rudolph Otto pointed out that a central element of direct experiences of God was an ‘apprehension of the wholly other’. He described this wholly other as ‘numinous’ – meaning the world that is beyond the physical observable universe in which we live. Therefore, Otto refers to direct experiences of God as being completely outside of our possible knowledge and experience.

Otto also noticed that people who have had religious experiences describe them using words like ‘awe’ and ‘wonder’, but the actual nature of the experience was *ineffable* (experiences which it is beyond human powers and abilities to fully describe and communicate).
Discussion Point

Watch the following clip (0:00-2:16). Can you come up with a simple explanation for what ‘the numinous’ is?
Numinous: Religious experiences of awe and wonder in the presence of an almighty and transcendent God. It is the awareness of human nothingness when faced with a holy and powerful being.

In his book The Idea of the Holy, Otto coined the term ‘numinous’ to describe the event; the individual was both attracted and repelled by a sense of awe and wonder. Simon Peter’s words to Jesus after the miraculous catch of fish express this paradox well: ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’ (Luke 5:8).

He analysed this type of experience in terms of the Latin phrase ‘mysterium tremendum et fascinans’.