

**Swinburne's Typology of Religious Experience**  
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“So much for a classification of religious experiences. It is, I believe, both exclusive and exhaustive. For clearly an experience which seems to be of God, may or may not be mediated by something sensory (i.e. there may be an answer to the question ‘What was it about your experience which made it seem to you that you were having an experience of God?’). If it is mediated by something, the something may be public or private. If it is private, it may or may not be describable by normal sensory vocabulary. If it is public, it may be a common, well-known phenomenon; or something very odd, the occurrence of which may be disputed. However, even though the classification is exclusive and exhaustive, it may sometimes be by no means obvious, even to the subject, into which class a given experience falls. For example, suppose I am alone and seem to see and talk to a figure dressed in white, which I take to be an angel. The correct classification of the experience depends on what others would have experienced if they had been there—this I may not know or have any means of finding out. If others also would have seen a figure dressed in white, then the experience is of the second kind; if not, it is of the third kind.”<sup>1</sup>

religious experience				
sensory				nonsensory
public		nonpublic (i.e., private)		
common	uncommon	describable	indescribable	
1	2	3	4	5

As an exercise, think of exemplars, actual or hypothetical, of each category. Remember: The aim of the philosopher, *qua* philosopher, is not to determine whether there are, in fact, religious experiences; nor is it to validate or interpret such experiences if they occur. The aim of the philosopher, *qua* philosopher, is to analyze the *concept* of religious experience, leaving it to others, or to himself or herself while acting in a nonphilosophical capacity, to determine whether there are any such experiences, and, if there are, what they mean.

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1. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 252. The first edition of this book was published in 1979.