

Unit One Section A: THE SEARCH FOR MEANING AND VALUES

PART THREE: CONCEPTS OF GOD

TOPIC 3.1 THE GODS OF THE ANCIENTS

Procedure

descriptions of the gods in ancient myths

Review the mythic stories that illuminate the search for meaning and value in ancient cultures and examine the manner in which God or Gods are portrayed in these stories

Review the wide variety of Gods in Hinduism and the roles that they play in the search for meaning and value in the Hindu religion.

The philosophers of ancient Greece have great differences between them over their conceptions of God.

The three main characteristics are:

1. God is conceived as an impersonal principle with no interest in the world. God is not perceived as a person.
2. They had no idea of creation. For them the world exists from all eternity. God is only the principle of order. He organizes the world. Some, notably Aristotle, even thought that God has nothing to do with the world and plays no part in it.
3. God is not conceived of as infinite, since for these philosophers infinity is synonymous with imperfection. It is whatever is unfinished, unaccomplished and incomplete.

polytheism and the emergence of monotheism

Polytheism is the norm rather than the exception in the religions of the world.

There are three exceptions to this rule, namely Judaism, Christianity and Islam – the three classical monotheistic religions.

Judaism is the earliest example of a monotheistic religion and its early history provides ample evidence of the struggle to defend this stance against the influence of polytheism in the cultures of the neighbouring peoples. Study this in early Judaic history to understand the religious and cultural context for the emergence of monotheism.

the concepts of God in the monotheistic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

Study the links between Judaism and Christianity and also the religious and cultural links that bind both religions individually and collectively to Islam.

Assessment Questions

1. Pick one of the following – Judaism, Christianity, Islam and describe the concept of God in that tradition.
2. Discuss how a person’s idea of God might influence their relationships in the world.

Resources which teachers have suggested include:

<http://www.mrswebdesign.net/teachingreligion.hinduism/god.html>

PART THREE: CONCEPTS OF GOD

TOPIC 3.2 THE CONCEPT OF REVELATION

Procedure

divine revelation: God as known through self-revelation

Brainstorm: What does the word “revelation” mean?

Take feedback from the students and note their responses on the chalkboard.

Give the students time to make a visual-verbal square using the following definition of revelation:

Revelation literally means “to reveal” or “to unveil.”	Write a word connected to revelation.
Draw a sketch showing the meaning of revelation.	Write a sample sentence using the word revelation

Take feedback from the students and conclude by explaining that the three main monotheistic religions are often called ‘religions of the book’ because of the high premium that they place on divine revelation.

Written Assignment: Explain the concept of Divine revelation

the importance of the concept of revelation for different religious texts and traditions

Read *Student Work:* REVELATION IN CHRISTIANITY (Adapted from Kairos Sept/Oct/ Nov’79) & Revelation in the Old Testament

Discuss: How is this understanding of revelation seen in a Christian religious ritual or place of worship?
How is this understanding of revelation seen in a Jewish religious ritual or place of worship?

Take feedback from students and conclude referring to the impact of the concept of divine revelation on religious practice and on the interpretation of religious texts in the two religious traditions.

Written Assignment: Explain the significance of divine revelation in two different religious traditions.

the meaning of the transcendent in some religious traditions

Brainstorm: What does the word “transcendent” mean?

Take feedback from the students and note their responses on the chalkboard.

Give the students time to make a visual-verbal square using the following definition of revelation:

Transcendent means “superior or supreme in excellence; surpassing others; beyond human knowledge or consciousness” - (Chambers Dictionary)	Write a word connected to Transcendent.
Draw a sketch showing the meaning of Transcendent.	Write a sample sentence using the word Transcendent

Case Study – Read extracts from the Story of Helen Keller

Discuss: How did Helen’s experience show the meaning of the word transcendent?

Take feedback from the students making reference to the following points:

For Helen Keller reality was confined to what she knew: herself and the nameless, faceless, personality-less bodies she bumped into. She couldn’t see the sunlight; she couldn’t hear music or conversation. But they were there. The larger world in which she was unwittingly existing was actually richer and more real than the one she was capable of immediately perceiving. But Helen had suspicions of it – all those why’s when some strange body interfered, her own inner yearning to share with someone else and above all Annie’s game in her hand. Helen’s experience at the pump made her realize that she was not alone – there was a whole world out there beyond her present world. It seemed to her more alive, more exciting, more real than the world she presently was limited to.

Simulation Games

1. Take a piece of paper and draw a circle in the middle of it.

Discuss: What is both inside and outside the circle?

Take feedback from the students and conclude - the paper is both inside and outside the circle.

2. Place a woven basket in the centre of the room.

Discuss: What is in it, around it, between the weave, inside the fibres of the reeds with which it is woven – which can’t be seen by the naked eye?

Take feedback from the students and conclude - air is in it, around it etc.

Religious traditions such as Christianity and Islam believe God is within human life and yet immeasurably transcends its boundaries. To say that God is transcendent means that God is different from everything else. God is much greater than anything else. Islam and Christianity offer some contrasting views of God’s transcendence. For instance, Muslims would reject any doctrine that might suggest the possibility of an incarnate God. Where as Christians believe that Jesus is one person of the Trinity. They believe that when Jesus ascended he did not meet his Father in a new place, but rather he went into a different way of existing.

Research assignment: Compare and contrast the Christian understanding of the transcendent of God with that of the Islamic tradition.

Or Read *Student Work*: THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD FOR ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS

Give students time to complete their research and present it to the whole class.

Written Assignment: Compare the Orthodox Christians' understanding of the transcendence of God with that of another religious tradition.

Assessment Questions

In the Islamic tradition Mohammed experienced divine revelation in his encounter with the Angel Gabriel in the cave. Pick a religious tradition and give another example of divine revelation from that tradition. Explain the importance of that revelation in the tradition

Resources which teachers have suggested include:

Great Religions of the World – Sr. L. Pastva Saint Mary's Press

GCSE Religious Studies Christianity – M. Foley & G. Geddes MACMILLAN WORK OUT SERIES

Student Work: REVELATION IN CHRISTIANITY

For the world religions in the east God is THE GREAT UNKNOWN. Where as Christianity holds that God is both PERSON and as such KNOWABLE. The word "Revelation" is used in different ways but in all its uses it is presupposed:

- Ø that there is something or someone revealed.
- Ø that the knowledge gained from this revealing is understandable in human terms no matter how mysterious the source may be.
- Ø that a relationship is established between the revealer and the knower.

In Christianity God is known in a number of ways: indirectly through his creation and through his actions in history and in a direct and unique way through His Son, Jesus Christ.

1. God Is Known Through His Creation

Looking at a beautiful sunset or a flower etc. people sometimes see only its own beauty. For others the beauty can cause them to wonder at what they see and at the source of this beauty - the Creator. In other words the person believes that what he / she sees is created by someone, and that he/she can dimly see the Creator himself through/in/ behind his creation. This person might then conclude that whoever has created such beautiful things is himself beautiful, or see the goodness of God behind his creation, for only someone who is good could create such wonderful things.

2. God Is Known In History

God is understood to have revealed himself to the people of Israel in Old and New Testament times. Bible is written primarily as a response to an experience of God - a revelation. This revelation, tells people something about God and mankind as the various happenings of the times were seen as God telling them about himself. For example in Hosea's time many of his fellow countrymen were worshipping false gods. Life was getting more and more difficult. Wars, famines, and all sorts of catastrophes added to the burden. Hosea knew what was wrong. God was angry with the people because they had turned away from him. If only they would stop and repent God would take them back. God's love was that great. But how could Hosea explain this to the people? Inspiration 'hit him' so to speak. Why not present the situation as a breakdown in a marriage between God (husband) and Israel (wife)? The wife, (Israel) has been unfaithful to her husband. Hosea presents this broken marriage as an event in his own life. His wife has left him. She lives with other men, and doesn't want to return. And yet, Hosea still loves her and can't forget her. He follows her even into the wilderness and eventually persuades her to return as his wife. If a man's love for a woman can be so strong, how much stronger is God's love for his people? The people got the message - about God and themselves! Similarly Deuteronomy 15:7-10 tells us a lot about God and mankind at the time when Israel had begun to settle in Canaan -

"If there is among you a poor man, one of your brothers, in any of your towns within the land which the Lord your God has given you. You shall not harden your heart against you brother, or shut your hand against him, but you shall open your hand and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.... Because of this, the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all you undertake."

This shows that God is someone who demands justice because he has given land and possessions to his people. Because he is just, man must also be just. Because God had to demand this of man, we can see that some people in Israel had failed to be just as their God was. The writer of this piece is saying that he understands God in this way because of the way he has seen him dealing with his people, and he tells people, as if it was God himself speaking, that they too must be just.

3. Jesus Christ Reveals God in a Unique Way

In Christianity the statement that Jesus is God and the greatest revelation people could ever have is balanced by the statement that he was also man - Jesus of Nazareth. The belief that Jesus was both God and Man leads Christians to ask what Jesus taught about God and Man. But perhaps the greatest revelation of all Jesus gave Christians was that death no longer held its terrible power over mankind. God raised Jesus up and in doing so promised eternal life to all who follow him. In this the universal nature to God's revelation is seen clearly for all human beings face death.

(Adapted from Kairos Sept/Oct/ Nov'79)

Student Work: THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD FOR ORTHODOX CHRISTIANS

Orthodox Christians stress the transcendence of God in two ways. First, they place great importance on negative statements about God. Thus it is important to say what God is not:

- God is not male or female
- God is not a human
- God is not made
- God is not touchable
- God is not visible
- God is not comprehensible
- God is not mortal
- etc

Second, they distinguish between God's essence and his energies.

- God's essence is that aspect of God that we can never know or approach
- God's energies are that aspect of God that we get to know through creation and through Jesus Christ

Orthodox Christians believe that their distinction between God's essence and energies shows that God is unapproachable, as God is so different from us and that people can approach God, through creation and through Jesus. By distinguishing God's essence and energies, Orthodox Christians maintain that God is transcendent, even though they also believe that people can get to know God.

(Adapted from GCSE Religious Studies Christianity)

Research: How is this understanding of the transcendence of God seen in the religious rituals of Orthodox Christians?
 How is this understanding of the transcendence of God seen in a place of worship for Orthodox Christians?

Or answer these questions with reference to article/poster – Visiting The Russian Orthodox Church in Dublin

(Junior Certificate Religious Education 2003 Section 3)

Orthodox Christians Religious Rituals:	Orthodox Christians Place of Worship:

PART THREE: CONCEPTS OF GOD

TOPIC 3.3 NAMING GOD, PAST AND PRESENT

Procedure

images of God in traditional and contemporary cultures

Divide the chalkboard in two with the heading Traditional on one side and Contemporary on the other.

Brainstorm: Name three traditional and three contemporary images of God.

Take feedback from the students building up a list on both sides of the chalkboard.

Written Assignment: Describe one traditional image of God and explain what it is saying about God.
 Describe one contemporary image of God and explain what it is saying about God.

Read *Student Work: IMAGES OF GOD* and give students time to complete the assignment.

Take feedback from the students.

Discuss: Which of these would you consider a traditional image of God? Why?
 Which of these would you consider a contemporary image of God? Why?

Or Read *I was there...* (Reflection on September 11 - author unknown adapted from www.godisgroovy.com)

Discuss: What is the author's image of God?
 What parts of the reflection show this image of God?
 Would you consider this a traditional or contemporary image of God? Why?

Present students with different images of Jesus of Nazareth.

Discuss: Which of these would you consider a traditional image of Jesus? Why?
 Which of these would you consider a contemporary image of Jesus? Why?
 What might have influenced these different images of Jesus?

Written Assignment: Pick one image from each row and explain what you think the artist was saying about Jesus by the way he is presented in it.

Take feedback from the students and conclude by noting that many people have an image or mental picture of God. Their image of God has been shaped by a variety of sources e.g. parents, teachers, communities of faith, literature, music, art, film etc.

the variety of religious and spiritual interpretations of contemporary human experience

Read *Student Work: THE MAKER OF THE THUMB*

Discuss: What was the experience of the sculptor?
 What interpretation did she put on her experience?

Could others have the same experience and interpret it differently?

Individual / Group Research Assignment:

Outline for students the variety of religious and spiritual interpretations of human experience - the prophetic, the mystical, the holy, the poetic and the aesthetic.

Pick one of these and research an example of it in contemporary human experience e.g.

- Examples of the prophetic could include reference to the experience of working with the marginalized.
- Examples of the mystical could include reference to contemporary forms of Buddhist meditation.
- Examples of the holy could reference to a traditional religious service.
- Examples of the poetic and the aesthetic could include the experience of 'moving beyond' through engagement with literature, music and art.

Give students time to complete their research and present their findings to the whole class.

the traditional proofs for the existence of God in the writings of Anselm, Aquinas and others

The idea that the concept of God is bound up with the search for meaning and value is most clearly seen in what might be described as the traditional proofs for the existence of God.

The traditional proofs for the existence of God can be grouped under two headings based upon two different starting points:

(i.) Briefly outline arguments for the existence of God that start with the world of the human subject:

e.g. ♦ Argument from the idea of God

For Anselm in his treatise the *Proslogion* (chapters 2 and 3) the starting point for this argument is pure reason rather than human experience. For Anselm, the definition of God as supremely perfect necessarily entails His existence. From an initial conception of God as 'something greater than which no greater can be thought', he argues to the conclusion that God since God exists in the mind then God must also exist in reality because otherwise God would not be 'something greater than which no greater can be thought'.

♦ Argument from the idea of perfection

Descartes took up this idea in the 17th century – It is based on the person's idea of God. It can be put very simply: in speaking of God I have the idea of a perfect being. If this perfect being did not exist, it would not be perfect because it would lack precisely the perfection of existence. So it exists.

He thinks that if we try to conceive of God it is no more possible to conceive of God without the perfection which is existence than that the value of the three angles of a triangle are not equal to two right angles or to imagine a mountain without a valley.

Existence can be no more separated from the essence of God than the fact that the sum of its three angles is equal to two right-angles can be separated from the essence of a triangle or than the idea of a mountain can be separated from the idea of a valley; so that there is no less contradiction in conceiving a God, that is to say, a supremely perfect being, who lacks existence, that is to say, who lacks some particular perfection, than in conceiving a mountain without a valley. - *Meditations* v Pp.144f.

Descartes also offers other 'proofs' of the existence of God 'by the idea of perfection' that we have within us in his *Discourse on Method*, Part 1V, and in his *Meditations*, 111 and V.

♦ Argument from the beauty of the world

For Augustine of Hippo in his *Confessions* refers to the way human beings question and search to understand themselves and the world in which we live. A yearning that finds expression in the search for God.

Read *Student Work: Proofs for the existence of God*

Written Assignment:

Outline in your own words Anselm's argument for the existence of God from the idea of God.

Outline in your own words Augustine's argument for the existence of God from the beauty of the world.

Outline in your own words Descartes' argument for the existence of God from the idea of perfection.

(ii.) Briefly outline arguments for the existence of God that start with the world outside the human subject:

e.g. The five ways of the thirteenth century philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) take as their starting point the cosmos – the world outside of the human subject. As Aquinas observed, we encounter the world as intelligible, ordered and purposeful and beautiful and yet the world does not possess

Leaving Certificate Religious Education Support Service - Sample Lesson Plan for teaching elements of the syllabus
within itself an explanation either for its existence or for its intelligibility or beauty. This paradox points us towards the acceptance of God as the origin and goal of the world as it is experienced.

On chalkboard or overhead outline Thomas Aquinas' Proofs for the existence of God as follows:

1. The first way argues from movement in the world. Everything that moves or changes is being moved by something else. Somewhere there must be a source of all motion, a First Mover, who is God.
2. The second way is from cause and effect. We see things around us that are caused by other things, and these other things are caused by other things again. Eventually we must come to a First Cause, God, who is not caused by anything else.
3. The third way comes from contingent things. The things we see in the world are contingent things, that is, they exist but could just as well not have existed. They must get their existence from a being who is not contingent, who couldn't not-exist, who is necessary.
4. The fourth way is drawn from the qualities of goodness and truth and excellence, which we see in the world. There must be a being who is the cause of these qualities and who is himself/herself good and true and excellent in the highest degree.
5. The fifth way comes from the order and purpose that we see in the world. There must be a Supreme Intelligence who maintains this order and causes the whole of creation to work together for the smooth running of the universe.

(Adapted from Teacher Guidelines and resource materials – The Mystery of God by Brid Greville
Page 31-32 © Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics)

Group work Assignment:

1. Divide into groups.
2. Select one of St. Thomas Aquinas' "proofs" for study in each group.
3. Each group reads the Student Work material relevant to their chosen "proof" and is given time to imagine / works out how Thomas Aquinas would have developed this argument using examples to illustrate points. Some of these arguments could be very effectively presented through visual materials/ newspaper cuttings etc.

Take feedback from each group.

Give the whole class an opportunity to question the feedback so that each group has to defend the validity of the arguments they were studying.

Written Assignment: Which of Thomas Aquinas' proofs for the existence of God are evident in the following words of Alfred Tennyson? Give reasons for your answer?

"Flower in the crannied wall, I pluck you out of the crannies, I hold you, root and all, in my hand, little flower - but if I could understand. What you are, root and all, and all in all, I should know what God and man is."

- Alfred Tennyson (1809-1893)

Read Student Work: *Other proofs for the existence of God*

Briefly outline other arguments for the existence of God:

e.g. ♦ Argument from conscience

John Newman, an English theologian who lived in the nineteenth century said that if we do something wrong then we feel bad about it. We may have enjoyed doing wrong, but our conscience makes us feel guilty about it, and we feel ashamed at what we have done, as we feel responsible for what we have done. On the other hand, if we do good, we feel pleased. Our conscience makes us feel proud because we feel we have acted responsibly. Now, argued Newman, if we feel responsible, proud and guilty about our behaviour, this implies that there must be someone to whom we are responsible - not to any human person, but to someone greater: a power beyond this world.

♦ Argument from moral order

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher who lived in the eighteenth century said that we know what is right and we know what is wrong. We also know that we should do right and avoid wrong, whatever the consequences – that is our duty. And each of us decides whether we do right or wrong. Nobody else decides for us. Now, argued Kant, if we do our duty and we do what is right, it should lead to the perfect society. And in this perfect society good people should be rewarded with a happy life. But we know that we do not have the perfect society on earth, and that good people do not always have the reward of happiness in this life. So Kant inferred from this that there must be a life after death, where good people are rewarded with happiness. And only a God could do this. So there must be a God. Kant stressed the weakness of Descartes argument from the idea of perfection by using the following comparison to show the weakness of the argument: it is not because I have the idea of hundred thalers (German money at the time of Kant) that these hundred thalers really exist in my purse! (Critique of Pure Reason, p.507).

♦ Argument from religious experience

Blaise Pascal a French man, who lived in the seventeenth century, said there was no convincing argument for or against the existence of God. Yet he said none of us can ignore this matter. We all have to decide how to live our lives. We have to decide either to behave as God wants us to, or to behave as we want to. Thus we have to decide whether to believe there is a God or to believe there is no God. And as there is no convincing evidence, we have to choose. Well, which should we choose to believe? Which one will we bet on? If we choose to believe that there is no God, and we lead selfish lives, what might we gain? Punishment in hell! What might we lose? Heaven! If we choose to believe in God, and we lead our lives the way God wants us to, what might we gain? Heaven! What might we lose if there is no God? Nothing, because we will not exist! Thus Pascal thought it was obvious that we should choose to believe in God. Pascal makes a distinction between 'the heart' and 'the reason'. The heart has its reasons which are unknown to reason . . . It is the heart which is aware of God and not reason. This is what faith is: God perceived intuitively by the heart, not by reason. In making this distinction, he is continuing the dichotomy noticed in Aquinas:

The heart = 'the intuitive spirit' The reason, mind = 'the geometric spirit'

In religion, unlike Descartes, he applied the logic of the heart. In mathematics and physics, however, Pascal used the same geometry as did Descartes. He puts forward the idea of 'The Wager' - Christianity cannot be proved conclusively by the reason, but neither can it be disproved. If it turns out that Christianity is true, we have everything to gain; but if it turns out to be false, we have nothing to lose. We should accept the inevitable risk of faith, and gamble on the truth of Christianity. This was the essential step of Pascal: that doubt leads to faith, because doubt makes it certain that there is no answer to the question of self-consciousness.

◆ Argument from the design of the world

Etc.

Read the following extract from Thomas Merton's autobiography Elected Silence.

"I was in my room. It was night. The light was on. Suddenly it seemed to me that Father, who had now been dead more than a year, was there with me. The sense of his presence was as vivid and as real and as startling as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me. The whole thing passed in a flash, but in that flash, instantly, I was overwhelmed with a sudden insight into the misery of my own soul, and I was pierced deeply with a light that made me realise something of the condition I was in, and I was filled with horror at what I saw, and my whole being rose up in revolt against what was within me, and my soul desired liberation from all this with an intensity and urgency unlike anything I had ever known.

And now I think for the first time in my whole life I really began to pray - praying not with my lips and my intellect and my imagination, but praying out of the very roots of my being, and praying to the God I had never known, to reach down towards me out of his darkness and to help me to get free of the thousand terrible things that held my will in their slavery." - Thomas Merton (1915-1968)

(Adapted from The Mystery of God – D. Forristal pages 36-40 © Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics)

Discuss: Which of the arguments for the existence of God best describes Thomas Merton's experience? Why?

Written Assignment:

1. Outline in your own words Cardinal Newman's argument from conscience for the existence of God.
2. Outline in your own words Immanuel Kant's argument from moral order for the existence of God.
3. Outline in your own words Blaise Pascal's argument from religious experience for the existence of God.
4. Outline in your own words William Paley's argument from the design of the world for the existence of God.

Assessment Questions

Summarize the proof(s) for the existence of God as offered by Anselm, **or** Aquinas **or** another theologian you have studied.

Resources which teachers have suggested include:

The Mystery of God – D. Forristal © Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics

Teacher Guidelines and resource materials – The Mystery of God by Brid Greville © Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics

Imagination and the Development of Religious Concepts in Watson, B. (1993) *The Effective Teaching of Religious Education* London: Longmans Chapter 5 p.54 - 71.

Student Work: IMAGES OF GOD

Tick the images of God listed below which you consider traditional or contemporary. Name another traditional and another contemporary image of God opposite the boxes already ticked.

IMAGES OF GOD

	TRADITIONAL	CONTEMPORARY
God as father		
God as creator		
God as omnipotent (all-powerful /almighty)		
God as love		
God as mother		
God as friend		
God as liberator		
	ü	
		ü

Student Work: THE MAKER OF THE THUMB

Once, we worked on a statue of Stalin.
 During the work, my wife asked me: ‘Husband, how about the thumb?
 If we could not oppose the thumb to the other fingers - if the fingers of the hands were like toes - we could not hold a hammer, a mallet, any tool, a book, a piece of bread. Human life would be impossible without this little thumb. Now, who made the thumb?
 We both learned Marxism in school and know that heaven and earth exist by themselves. They are not created by God. So I have learned and so I believe.
 But if God did not create heaven and earth, if he created only the thumb, he would be praiseworthy for this little thing. We praise Edison and Bell and Stephenson who have invented the electric bulb, the telephone and the railway and other things.
 But why should we not praise the one who has invented the thumb?
 If Edison had not had a thumb he would have invented nothing.
 It is only right to worship God who has made the thumb.’
 The husband became very angry . . .
 ‘Don’t speak stupidities. You have learned that there is no God. And you can never know if the house is not bugged and if we will not fall into trouble.
 Get into your head once and for all that there is no God. In heaven there is nobody.’
 She replied: This is an even greater wonder.
 If in heaven there were the almighty God in whom in stupidity our forefathers believed, it would be only natural that we should have thumbs.
 An almighty God can do everything, so he can make a thumb too.
 But if in heaven there is nobody I from my side am decided to worship from all my heart the "Nobody" who has made the thumb.’

(adapted Teacher Guidelines and resource materials – The Mystery of God by Brid Greville from page 29 © Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics)

Student Work: *Proofs for the existence of God*

<p><i>Argument from the idea of God</i> Anselm (1033 – 1109) was a Christian who was born in Italy, moved to France where he was abbot of Bec in Normandy, and then to England, where he became archbishop of Canterbury. He thought that we could prove that God exists simply by looking carefully at the idea of God. His argument is short.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do we mean by God? • Something perfect in all ways. We could not think of anything more perfect. • But suppose God does not exist. • Then he is not the most perfect thing we can think of. • So, if God is the most perfect thing we can think of, then he must exist. 	<p><i>Argument from the beauty of the world</i> If we gaze at the stars and imagine how vast the universe is or if we consider how extraordinary and complex the human body is; or if we are amazed by a flower, a cloudy sky or mountains; or if we marvel at a calm sea - then we may feel that there has to be some power behind everything. Augustine of Hippo a North African Christian who lived in the fourth and fifth centuries wrote: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you” “Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea question the beauty of the air . . . question the beauty of the sky . . . These beauties are subject to change. Who made them if not the Beautiful One who is not subject to change?” This approach reflects a desire to understand the world in which we live; a yearning for truth and a search for happiness and peace that finds expression in every generation and in every culture.</p>
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(Adapted from GCSE Religious Studies Christianity – M. Foley & G Geddes)

<p><i>The argument from the design of the world</i> William Paley, an English Christian who lived in the eighteenth century suggested that if we</p>	<p><i>The argument from religious experience</i> This is based on the fact that some form of religious belief has been found in every country and among every people. Tribes and races completely</p>
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look at a watch we notice that all the parts fit together: all the wheels, cogs, springs and other parts depend on each other. And they fit together for a purpose, so we cannot explain the operation of the watch by chance. We have to infer that the watch has a maker. Paley maintained the same argument applies to the world.
All the parts of nature fit together in a purposeful way. As the world is far more complicated than a watch, so we cannot explain the world by chance. There has to be a maker.

separated from one another, some of them primitive and others highly civilised, have all worshipped God under one name or another. It is not possible that something so widespread could be without any foundation in reality.
As well as this belief among mankind in general, there are individual people who have been given a direct awareness of God that made them certain about his existence and presence.
St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, had an experience of God shortly before his death. He did not try to describe it except to say, "After what I have seen, everything I have written seems like straw."
The French philosopher and scientist, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) also experienced God directly. He jotted down his impressions immediately afterwards and carried the paper around his neck for the rest of his life.

Written Assignment: Pick another argument for the existence of God and write a paragraph explaining in your own words the points on which it is based.

(Adapted from GCSE Religious Studies Christianity – M. Foley & G. Geddes & The Mystery of God – D. Forristal pages 36-40 © Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics)

STUDENT WORK: Thomas Aquinas' proofs for the existence of God

Proof from causality –

A thing must exist before it can act: nothing therefore can make itself. When anything new come into existence it must have been brought into existence by something else. That which is brought into existence is called an effect; and that which brings it into existence is called a cause.
If the cause of any particular effect is itself an effect, we have not yet arrived at a satisfactory explanation of the first effect. Take, for example, the electric light that suddenly springs up and floods a room at nighttime. It is an effect. But what is its cause? The current. The current however is an effect of the moving dynamo. Now, if the moving dynamo is the last cause that we can name, we are still without a full and satisfactory explanation of the electric light. Why? Because the dynamo itself is an effect. Therefore, at the end of our series of questions, we find ourselves in the presence of an effect that needs explanation quite as much as the effect from which we started.
The First Cause therefore of all things in nature must necessarily be uncaused (if it were caused it would not be the first cause). It was not brought into existence; thus, it must have existence of itself, it must be self-existent. The first cause, the self-existent source of all things, according to Thomas Aquinas' argument is God.

Proof from degrees of perfection to perfect being -

There are things in life people call good, noble, true. People say that some things are less good, or on the other hand, that some things are better than others. This leads to the conclusion that there are degrees of goodness. Now if there are degrees, there must be a highest degree - the best, truest, noblest and consequently also the greatest being. There must be something that is the cause of being, of goodness, of every perfection in all things. That something according to Thomas Aquinas' argument is God.

Proof from the laws of nature –

All nature is obedient to law. Astronomy, physics and chemistry show that inanimate matter, from the stars of heaven to the smallest speck of dust is in all its movements and changes, subject to fixed laws. The same holds for living things - plants, animals, and men. Each species grows, develops and acts in the same way. The entire universe is bound together into one vastly complicated whole, and is like a great machine the parts of which are admirably fitted together. The orderly movement of the heavens, the marvellous structure of living things and their organs, such as the organs of sight and hearing, the wonderful instinct of the lower animals, as instanced in the work of insects and the nest-building of birds, the free activity of man, his great achievements in science, literature, and art - all these marvels are the gifts of nature and in conformity with its laws.
It is unthinkable that laws, producing effects so vast, and yet so orderly in their entirety and in their smallest detail, could have sprung from chance, or from any unintelligent cause we choose to name. They must have been imposed by a wise lawgiver, who so framed them, and so directed them in their working as to achieve the ends desired. That lawgiver must be a being of vast intelligence. He must possess free will for he has given that faculty to mankind. He must possess power beyond mankind's capacity to measure, a power to which a person's mind can affix no limit.
Newton who discovered the laws of the motions of the heavenly bodies wrote as follows: "This most beautiful system of sun, planets and comets could nowise come into existence without the design and ownership of a Being at once intelligent and powerful . . . This Being governs all things, not as if He were the soul of the world, but as the Lord of everything . . . We admire Him for His perfections, we venerate Him and we worship Him for His Lordship."

Proof from motion –

Everyday experience shows people that things move. Nothing in the visible world can move entirely of itself, i.e. without help. No moving thing contains in itself the complete explanation of its movement. Consider the particular case of inanimate bodies. They move only as they are moved. They do not move themselves in any way. They get all their motion from without.

Applying these observations to the earth and to the heavenly bodies it is obvious that some of these bodies are in motion; the movement of the earth on its axis is a proved fact; its motion round the sun is likewise certain.

How did the earth get its motion? Many physicists say that it got its motion from the sun, which, while spinning round, flung it off as a fragment. But whence did the sun get its motion? Some say that the sun got its motion from a larger body of which it once formed a part, while others assert that the sun with its motion is the result of a collision between two stars. But how did the motion of the larger body or the stars originate? Science gives no answer, and even though it did, the answer would still be as far as ever from a final and satisfactory explanation of the motion of the earth. The only real reply, which excludes all further inquiry, is that the motion is due immediately or ultimately to some unmoved source of motion, to the first mover.

There must exist, therefore according to this argument, a being distinct from the world who gave it motion. That being is either the first mover or a being moved by some other. If that mover is moved by another, whence did that other derive his motion? The question as to the source of motion can be answered satisfactorily only when, at last, we reach a first mover who is not moved by any other. That first mover according to Thomas Aquinas' argument is God.

Proof from contingency (necessity / dependence) –

Everything in the world depends for its existence on something else. A baby depends for existence on his/her parents, they on their parents, and so on. But sooner or later we must come to someone who does not depend for his / her existence on someone else, someone who is him/herself the reason for his/her own existence. This someone according to Thomas Aquinas' argument is God.

There is a difference between a possible being and a necessary being, that is, between a "might" and a "must". When I think about myself I can see that I am only a "might". If my father had never met my mother, I would never have come into being. The world I live in is a "might". If the matter from which the solar system was formed had fallen into a different pattern, this planet earth would not exist today. The whole universe is a "might", for it does not contain anywhere in itself the reason for its existence. So it must depend for its existence on a being who is a "must", in other words, a necessary being. The objection is sometimes made that the universe could have always been in existence. But even if it had and if existence had been passed on from one being to another in an endless chain, we would still have to explain where the universe and everything in it got their existence from. If we plug an electric lamp into the mains and it lights up, we know that at the far end of the cable there must be a source or power. It would be no explanation to say that the fire was plugged into an endless series of cables, each one drawing power from the one beyond it, because no amount of cables can produce electricity: they can only pass it on. Watching the things of the world coming into being and passing away again, leads to the conclusion that there must be someone who does not get being from anything else but is the source of all being.

According to Thomas Aquinas' argument there are no circumstances under which God might never have existed or might cease to exist. He did not come into being, he will not cease to be. He was from all eternity and will be for all eternity. He is the reason for his own existence and the existence of everything else. Nothing caused him, nothing made him. He just is.

(Adapted from Teacher Guidelines and resource materials

The Mystery of God by Brid Greville page 31-32 © Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics)

What life experiences/observations could have led Thomas Aquinas to develop this argument and draw this conclusion? Use examples / visual materials to illustrate your points.