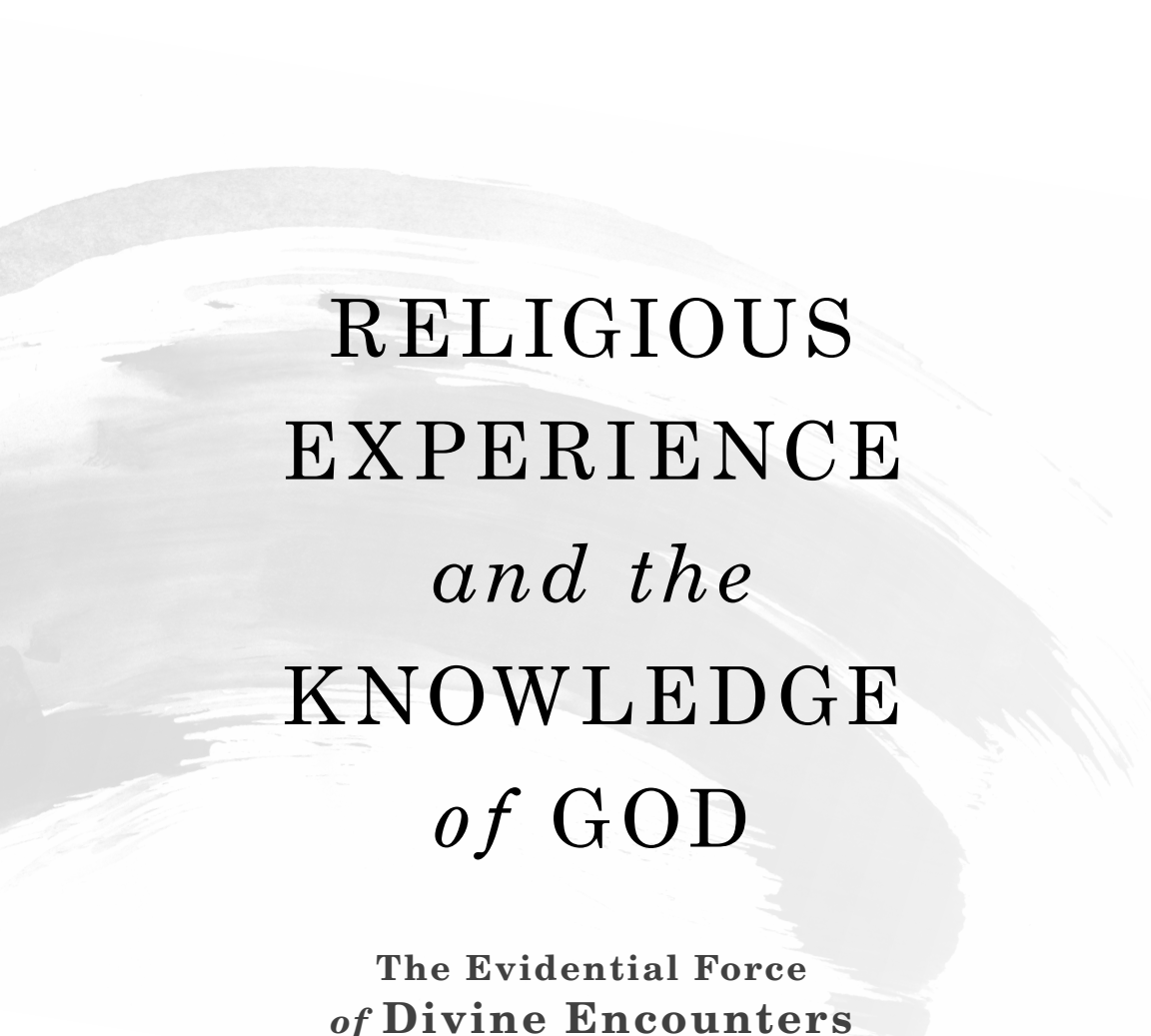


RELIGIOUS  
EXPERIENCE  
*and the*  
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The Evidential Force  
*of* Divine Encounters

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# Introduction

**I**n 1985 my wife Ruth and I moved from the lovely city of Kyoto, Japan, to a community in western Tokyo. We were expecting our first child and did not yet know many people in the area. One day my wife returned from the maternity clinic excited because she had met an American who, like Ruth, was a graduate of the University of Minnesota. Americans were unusual in that part of Tokyo, so Ruth invited her to our home for coffee, anticipating an afternoon of fun conversation about Minnesota and things they had in common. But when the woman came to visit Ruth, the conversation began on a surprising note. Upon entering our home, she immediately turned to Ruth and said, “Let me tell you how I found perfect peace and happiness in Soka Gakkai Buddhism.” She proceeded to give a powerful account of how meditation and practicing Buddhist precepts had completely transformed her life. Ruth was shocked. “Change a few key words here and there,” she remarked, “and it could have been a beautiful Christian testimony!” The woman had met her Japanese husband while he was an international student at the University of Minnesota. Through his influence, she became a Buddhist, and now the couple was living in Tokyo, where she served as a leader in the local Soka Gakkai community.

There are a number of intriguing aspects to this encounter. The woman, a white American from the Midwest, was a convert to Buddhism. She is just one of a growing number of Americans who embrace religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam, traditions generally not associated with American society. But the American religious landscape today is fluid and very diverse, with conversions and deconversions flowing in many directions.

Furthermore, in her witness to Ruth, the woman immediately went into her personal story about what Buddhism had done for her, how it met her needs by providing peace and happiness. She gave a Buddhist testimony. Many Western converts to Buddhism provide eloquent testimonies about the transformative effects that Buddhist teaching and practice have had on their lives.<sup>1</sup> But listening to reports like these can be disconcerting for Christians who have been taught that such experiences are unique to Christianity and that a personal story about how Jesus changed one's life is the most powerful evangelistic tool we can employ. The idea that Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims also have compelling personal testimonies just doesn't seem right.

At the heart of this woman's story was personal experience. She did not launch into esoteric arguments supporting the Four Noble Truths or the doctrine of dependent co-origination. Nor did she appeal to the divine inspiration of Buddhist sutras, since there is no God in Buddhism to inspire sutras. She simply shared her experience of finding peace, meaning, and happiness through Buddhist meditation. This, too, has parallels with the approach of many Christians who place a premium on a personal experience of God and minimize, if not ignore entirely, any appeal to evidence or reasons in support of Christian teachings.

But if personal experience is the sole or even primary factor in determining whether to accept particular religious claims, there would be little for Ruth to say in response to the woman's testimony. Her experience provided what she was looking for. Relying only on personal experience, an appropriate response to her would be, "I'm so glad that you have found something that meets your needs and gives you peace and meaning. As for me, I've found meaning and peace in Jesus." End of conversation. Unless one appeals to *reasons* for religious commitments that are independent of the experience itself, there is little one can say to the woman about why she should abandon Buddhist teachings and accept Jesus as Lord.

Religious experiences are significant, for in one form or another, they are a common and important part of life for many people around the world today. Despite the significant increase in those who self-identify as nonreligious, most people worldwide continue to have religious affiliation of some kind and engage in religious activities. Experiences, both personal and corporate, ordinary and unusual, are a central part of vibrant religious communities.

1. See Vickie MacKenzie, *Why Buddhism? Westerners in Search of Wisdom* (London: Element, 2002).

Experiences are an important aspect of the Christian tradition as well. Christians do not generally speak of having “religious experiences” but they do pray to God, meditate on Scripture, have feelings of guilt due to sin and then experience God’s forgiveness upon repentance, worship God through song and liturgy, hear God’s voice of guidance in perplexing times, experience God’s special peace during trials, and so on. All of this involves experience. Nor is this surprising, for the ongoing daily exercise of faith entails undergoing many kinds of experiences.<sup>2</sup> Simeon Zahl observes that, “To a significant degree, the question of Christian experience of God is the question of God’s presence as it is perceived in human lives in various forms and under various conditions and with various effects.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to ordinary experiences, there are also the more unusual and dramatic experiences of those who have visions of Jesus or dreams in which God is said to communicate directly to them. Scripture itself is full of examples of God or angelic beings appearing in dreams or visions to individuals or groups. The history of Christianity is replete with examples of those claiming to have directly encountered God, Jesus, or an angelic being in a vision, dream, or other perceptual experience. Many people around the world today report experiences in which Jesus appears to them.<sup>4</sup>

A testimony—a personal account of how one’s conversion to Jesus Christ through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit results in a dramatically changed life—gives voice to an especially important kind of experience. The narrative of personal transformation, expressed powerfully in the dramatic statement of the blind man in John 9:25—“One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!”—has always been significant for Christians. But it took on special meaning in the early modern era with the rise of the Puritans and Pietists.<sup>5</sup> The testimony of a transformed life,

2. Oliver D. Crisp, “Faith and Experience,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 69.

3. Simeon Zahl, *The Holy Spirit and Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 53.

4. See Phillip H. Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Wiebe, *Visions and Appearances of Jesus* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood, 2014). See also Tom Doyle, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* (Nashville: Nelson, 2012); and Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 2:870–84 (“Appendix E: Visions and Dreams”).

5. See D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Evangelical Conversion Narratives: Spiritual Autobiography in Early Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

accompanied by ongoing personal experiences of God's presence, has become a central feature of modern Protestant, and especially evangelical, Christianity.

Moreover, for many Christians, it is precisely this personal experience of God that provides the grounds for confidence in the truth of the gospel and one's acceptance by God. The conviction that comes from personal experience is captured nicely in this early twentieth-century hymn:

You ask me how I know He lives?  
He lives within my heart.<sup>6</sup>

Something very important is captured in this hymn. There is a sense in which Christians can legitimately claim to know the reality of God because of their experiences of God. Any biblically faithful perspective should acknowledge this. But, as we shall see, this affirmation must be qualified in certain ways and needs to be appreciated within a broader epistemic framework of beliefs that itself requires justification. One of the purposes of this book is to tease out some of the epistemological implications of this claim about the role of personal experience of God in the justification or support of Christian commitments.

When thinking of experiences of God, it is tempting to focus on the dramatic or "peak" experiences of the great spiritual giants and treat these as paradigmatic for what theistic experience is like. But this can be misleading. It is crucial that we are also attentive to the more ordinary and mundane experiences of life in which believers encounter God. In her excellent ethnographic study, *When God Talks Back*, anthropologist T. M. Luhrmann offers a rich exploration of ordinary American evangelicals' understandings of their relationship with God. Based on sustained observation and extensive interviews with evangelicals in the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, Luhrmann elucidates the thinking of many Christians about a personal relationship with God: "Many Americans not only believe in God in some general way but experience God directly and report repeated contact with the supernatural. . . . These Christians speak as if God interacts with them like a friend."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Dallas Willard, reflecting on typical experiences of ordinary Christians, says, "Many might be surprised

6. "He Lives." Text and music by Homer A. Rodeheaver, 1933. Copyright renewed by The Rodeheaver Company, 1961. *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration* (Waco: Word Music, 1986), 220.

7. T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Knopf, 2012), xi, xix.

to discover what a high percentage of serious Christians—and even non-Christians—can tell of specific experiences in which they are sure God spoke to them.”<sup>8</sup> These experiences of ordinary people in the routine patterns of life, no less than the dramatic experiences of the great saints, constitute the raw data on which theoretical accounts of experiences of God should be constructed.

### Some Epistemological Issues and Approaches

Experience plays a significant role in people coming to accept Christian commitments and to have confidence in the truth of the gospel. Religious experiences serve many different functions, both positive and negative, but an important one is helping to provide some justification for certain beliefs and practices. These experiences can take a bewildering variety of forms and come with varying degrees of clarity or intensity, but they provide some support for religious commitments. William Alston observes that for ordinary Christians,

somehow what goes on in the experience of leading the Christian life provides some ground for Christian belief, makes some contribution to the rationality of Christian belief. We sometimes feel the presence of God; we get glimpses, at least, of God’s will for us; we feel the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, guiding us, strengthening us, enabling us to love other people in a new way; we hear God speaking to us in the Bible, in preaching, or in the words and actions of our fellow Christians. Because of all this we are more justified in our Christian beliefs than we would have been otherwise.<sup>9</sup>

Alston’s point is not that Christians consciously construct formal arguments for the rationality of Christian beliefs using aspects of their experience as premises; most Christians don’t do anything of the kind. But he is highlighting the fact that for many believers there is a relation between what they take to be experiences of God and their conviction that basic Christian teachings “make sense” or are “reasonable” and thus should be accepted. Moreover, there is an important sense in which this *ought* to be the case. Alston comments, “If I could not find any confirmation of the Christian

8. Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Relationship with God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 21.

9. William P. Alston, “Christian Experience and Christian Belief,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 103.



message in my own experience, I would be less justified in accepting that message than I am in fact.”<sup>10</sup> And surely Alston is correct in this.

So there is an epistemological relation of some kind between experience and the adoption of religious beliefs. But, of course, experience can be deceptive. Even in our ordinary experience of the physical world not everything is as it seems. The stick in the water appears bent (because of water’s refractive property) until we pull it out and see that it is actually straight. Similarly, not all of our religious experiences are as they initially appear. Sometimes what seems to be the case proves to be delusory. Moreover, religious experiences are used to justify conflicting religious commitments, so we cannot simply accept uncritically any claims based on experiences. In other words, we need to be able to make responsible judgments about religious experiences, determining which should be accepted and which should not. And in working through these issues, we confront some of the more complex and controversial questions at the heart of contemporary religious epistemology.

A comprehensive discussion of the epistemology of religious experience would examine the nature and role of experience in all the major religions, comparing and contrasting phenomena from the many cultures and traditions. It would also be based on rich ethnographic and phenomenological studies of such experiences, something that scholars are only now beginning to amass. This book makes no pretense of being genuinely comprehensive in scope; its purpose is more modest: we are concerned primarily with some epistemological issues arising from theistic experiences, especially within the Christian tradition.

In considering the epistemology of theistic experiences, it is important to distinguish two kinds of questions. First, there are issues arising from within a confessional commitment to the Christian faith: From within the Christian framework, how does one distinguish genuine experiences of God from those that are not? In the Christian tradition this question is often expressed in terms of the work of the Holy Spirit: How does one distinguish the witness of the Holy Spirit from experiences that are not of the Spirit? These questions, internal to the Christian faith, are answered largely in terms of authoritative resources such as Scripture, the creeds, and the mainstream teachings of the church. Theologians have given the testimony or witness of the Holy Spirit a great deal of attention, but until recently there has been little discussion of this by Christian philosophers.<sup>11</sup> Although theological

10. Alston, “Christian Experience,” 103.

11. There is increasing attention to the subject. See William Abraham, “The Epistemological Significance of the Inner Witness of the Holy Spirit,” *Faith and Philosophy* 7, no. 4 (October 1990): 434–50; William Alston, “The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit,” in *Divine Nature*

and philosophical issues overlap, my interest in these questions is not primarily theological but rather philosophical.

A second kind of question concerns the possible role of religious experience in justifying central Christian claims: To what extent and in what ways can religious experience provide evidence for the truth or rationality of Christian theism? Does experience provide reasons for belief, either for the person undergoing the experience or for others? These questions can be asked either from the perspective of a committed Christian who is interested in the evidential force of such experiences for beliefs he or she already accepts, or from the vantage point of a skeptic or unbelieving inquirer interested in the epistemic implications of religious experiences. In the chapters that follow, I am primarily interested in questions of this sort, although we will also give some attention to issues in the first category (identifying genuine experiences of God), especially as they pertain to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit.

“Evidence” is a tricky word because it is used in different ways. It is sometimes understood in a narrow sense to mean whatever is used in a formal argument to support a conclusion. An appeal to evidence in this sense involves constructing an argument where the evidence, presented in the premises, is intended to support the conclusion. But this is an unnecessarily restrictive understanding of evidence. In ordinary life, something can serve as evidence in support of a belief even though we do not—and probably could not—construct a formal argument to that effect. Our appeal to evidential factors is often immediate and noninferential. Johnny’s mother walks into the kitchen and sees the peanut butter jar open and bread crumbs and smudges of peanut butter and strawberry jam on the counter, and she immediately thinks, “Johnny made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich again and did not put things away.” Seeing the peanut butter and jam on the counter provides the evidential grounds for her judgment, although she does not go through a formal process of deriving the conclusion from the premises. Following Stephen Evans, it is helpful to think of evidence broadly as “whatever makes some truth evident to

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*and Human Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 223–52; Marilyn McCord Adams, “The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit: Some Alternative Models,” in *The Philosophy of Human Nature in Christian Perspective*, ed. Peter Weigel and Joseph G. Prud’homme (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 83–99; Paul Moser, “The Inner Witness of the Spirit,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Epistemology of Theology*, ed. William J. Abraham and Frederick D. Aquino (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 111–25; Simeon Zahl, *Holy Spirit and Christian Experience*; and R. Douglas Geivett and Paul K. Moser, eds., *The Testimony of the Spirit: New Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

us”;<sup>12</sup> evidential factors can be used in the premises of a formal argument but they need not be. We will be using “evidence” in this broader sense in what follows.

In discussing the ways in which religious experience provides epistemic support for certain commitments, William Hasker distinguishes between what he calls the perceptual model and the explanatory model.<sup>13</sup> The perceptual model draws an analogy between our five senses and perception of the physical world and our intellectual faculties and perception of God and maintains that if the deliverances of the former are justified, then those of the latter should be accepted as well. The explanatory model, by contrast, regards religious experiences as something requiring explanation and argues that the reality of God is the best explanation for these phenomena. This approach typically makes use of the inference to the best-explanation (or cumulative-case) argument in accounting for religious experiences. Both approaches will be considered in the chapters that follow.

Our ordinary perception of objects—seeing a tree or a desk or a cat—usually involves one or more of the five senses. Despite some nagging philosophical questions, there is a broad consensus that the five senses can generally be relied on for a trustworthy understanding of the world. But can we also use sensory experience to perceive God? Some influential philosophers argue that we can. Just as we are generally justified in trusting the input of our senses in our experience of the physical world, so too we can be justified, in appropriate circumstances, in trusting our experienced perceptions of God. Some significant recent work by Christian philosophers adopts this approach. The epistemic support provided by religious experience in this case is immediate and noninferential; it is not the product of an inferential process or argument.

The perception model can be further divided into two approaches. One popular move in recent decades comes from the influential proposal by Alvin Plantinga that, in appropriate circumstances, certain beliefs about God can be “properly basic” and thus be epistemically entirely acceptable apart from any corroborating evidence or argument. Plantinga draws an analogy between such beliefs and other properly basic beliefs that we typically hold. A second approach within the perception model is advocated by

12. C. Stephen Evans, “Religious Experience and the Question of Whether Belief in God Requires Evidence,” in *Evidence and Religious Belief*, ed. Kelly James Clark and Raymond J. VanArragon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 39.

13. William Hasker, “The Epistemic Value of Religious Experience: Perceptual and Explanatory Models,” in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. Thomas D. Senor (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 150–69.

philosophers such as Richard Swinburne, who appeal to the principle of credulity to justify certain kinds of religious experience. We will consider both of these approaches.

Some philosophers within the perception model, following a long tradition within Christian theology, appeal to a special “spiritual sense” through which we are able to perceive God. There is a rich tradition of theologians using sensory language to depict human encounters with the divine, and the term *spiritual senses* is often used to denote the faculty through which believers apprehend spiritual truths and experience nonphysical realities such as God and angels.<sup>14</sup> We will consider how this theme is expressed in the works of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley.

We will also give attention, especially in chapter 7, to what Hasker calls the explanatory model, which develops an inference to the best-explanation argument for the justification of religious commitments based on the phenomena from theistic experiences. The widespread occurrence of theistic experiences across time and cultures, along with the distinctive nature of these experiences, can be regarded as phenomena demanding some explanation. The reality of God is then offered as the most reasonable explanation for these phenomena.

Much of the discussion in scholarly literature is concerned with the evidential force of the experience for the person who has the experience. But there is also the question about the force of the evidence for others who hear reports about the experience. Although related, these are separate issues, and as Doug Geivett explains, what might function noninferentially as evidence for the person having the experience could also be part of a formal argument in the case of the observer.

A subject’s belief in God may be grounded in an awareness of God who is present to the subject, either directly or indirectly, in his/her experience. But a nonbelieving recipient of a report of this experiential awareness will naturally want a reason to believe that the subject’s experience was a bona fide experience of God, an experience where God was actually present (directly or indirectly) to the subject, if the subject’s experience is to count as evidence for the nonbelieving recipient of testimony regarding the experience. What is *non-inferential evidence* for the believing subject of a religious experience is, for the nonbelieving outside observer, data for a potential *inference* to the existence of God.<sup>15</sup>

14. See Paul L. Gavriluk and Sarah Coakley, eds., *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

15. Doug Geivett, “The Evidential Value of Religious Experience,” in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser (London: Routledge, 2003), 177. Emphasis in original.

We must be attentive to the different ways in which experiences can provide evidence, both immediate and inferential, for the subject and outside observers.

Religious experiences sometimes produce a high degree of confidence in certain beliefs. And yet, experience can be a notoriously unreliable guide to truth, and this applies to religious experience as well. If we were never mistaken in our judgments about religious experience, epistemological issues concerning them would not arise. But we are sometimes mistaken. So the questions are there, and they are not restricted to philosophers or agnostic skeptics. Believers also struggle with doubt. Many believers claim to have experiences of God, but they do so with the realization that they might well be mistaken. Reflecting on her interactions with evangelicals in the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, who believe that they *do* experience God's presence, Luhrmann states, "And they doubt. They find it hard to believe in an invisible being—let alone an invisible being who is entirely good and overwhelmingly powerful. Many Christians struggle, at one point or another, with the despair that it all might be a sham."<sup>16</sup> Or, as comedian Lily Tomlin puts it, "Why is it that when we speak to God we are said to be praying but when God speaks to us we are said to be schizophrenic?"<sup>17</sup>

Although technical terms and key concepts are defined as they appear in the following chapters, three terms in particular—*truth*, *rationality*, and *veridicality*—should be clarified at the outset. Each term is controversial and contested, but since they recur throughout the book, it is important that the reader understand how I am using them.

Truth is a property of propositions or statements such that a statement is true if and only if the state of affairs to which the statement refers obtains. Otherwise, it is false. Or as William Alston puts it, a statement "is true if and only if what the statement says to be the case actually is the case."<sup>18</sup> This is closely related to what is often called the correspondence theory of truth, which maintains that "for a statement to be true, there must be some appropriate *correspondence* between true statements and actual features of the world."<sup>19</sup> Thus, "The heavy rainfall last night resulted in flooding in the basement" is true if and only if the heavy rainfall last night did indeed cause

16. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*, xiii.

17. Quoted in Willard, *Hearing God*, 22.

18. See William P. Alston, *A Realist Conception of Truth* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 5.

19. Paul K. Moser, Dwayne H. Mulder, and J. D. Trout, *The Theory of Knowledge: A Thematic Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 65. Emphasis in original.

flooding in the basement. “On the third day, Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead” is true if and only if on the third day Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead. This notion underlies our ordinary and commonsense understanding of truth and is taken for granted by most religious believers in their acceptance of the claims at the heart of their traditions.

Although we have a commonsense understanding of rationality that we use in ordinary life, it is difficult to specify precisely what the term means and the conditions of its applicability. Whereas truth is a property of propositions or statements, rationality is a characteristic of persons. Statements are true or false, but persons are rational or irrational in their beliefs. Let *S* stand for a person and *P* represent a belief. Whether *S* is rational in believing *P* is not merely a matter of the content of *P* but also other contextual factors, including the relevant circumstances of *S* at the time of belief, *S*'s background beliefs, and the reasons or grounds *S* has for believing *P*. Although we like to think that there is a tight correlation between rationality and truth, so that what is rational to believe is also true, in principle it is possible for it to be rational to believe something that is false. Given their other beliefs at the time, for example, it was rational for people in Europe in the tenth century to believe that the earth is flat.

We can distinguish stronger and weaker forms of rationality. A strong notion of rationality includes rationality norms that make accepting the relevant belief obligatory. To fail to accept *P* is then irrational or unreasonable. For example, belief in the reality of the external world or the general reliability of memory is typically regarded as perfectly rational, and failure to accept these beliefs indicates cognitive malfunctioning of some sort. It is not just that we are somehow *permitted* to believe in the reality of the external world. To the contrary, the expectation is that people who are rational and whose cognitive faculties are operating properly *will* believe in the reality of the external world.

But there is a weaker form of rationality such that it can be rational for a person in certain circumstances and with particular background beliefs to believe *P* even if others, in their own circumstances, can also be rational in not believing *P*. This sense of rationality is person-relative and context-dependent to an extent that the strong version is not. Whereas the stronger sense of rationality involves what we might call *epistemic obligation*, the weaker sense involves *epistemic permission*. With a weak sense of rationality, given appropriate circumstances and background beliefs, it can be rational for a person to believe what in fact is false. It can be rational for *S* to believe *P*, while it might also be rational for *R*, in quite different circumstances, not to believe *P*. When we come to discussions of

what it is reasonable to believe with respect to religious experiences, it is important to clarify whether we are thinking in terms of strong or weak rationality.

The final concept to be introduced here is veridicality. Roughly, veridicality is to experience truthful propositions or statements. The term *veridical* connotes accuracy, truthfulness, or veracity, so that a veridical experience is one that is not illusory or deceptive. A perceptual experience is an experience in which a person perceives a particular object or event or state of affairs. Perceptual experiences are veridical if the perceived object really is present or if the event really occurs or if the state of affairs really is as it seems to the subject. For example, if I have an experience in which I perceive a red ball on top of a table, the experience is veridical if and only if there really is a red ball on top of the table. If not—perhaps a projector is projecting an image of a red ball on the table—the experience is illusory.

Experiences occur and are understood under certain “descriptions” as we make sense of what is presented to us.<sup>20</sup> In making sense of experiences, we make judgments about them, and it is here that the notion of veridicality is especially relevant. Imagine that I have a stick in my hand, and I then place half of it under water. I then have a visual image of the stick, half of which is above water and half submerged beneath the water. The portion of the stick outside the water appears straight, but the part in the water appears crooked. If I conclude that the stick under the water *is* crooked, then my experience of the stick is not veridical, since the stick itself remains straight and merely appears to be crooked. The visual image presented to me is real enough, but my experience of the submerged stick as crooked is not veridical. This example is straightforward enough, although there are many less clear-cut cases in which determining whether an experience is veridical is more problematic. Much of the debate in the epistemology of experience deals with clarifying what criteria are appropriate for distinguishing veridical experiences from those that are not.

## Overview of the Chapters

This book provides an overview of some key issues in current debates about the epistemology of religious experience and argues that certain kinds of experience can provide some positive support for some religious claims.

20. See Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 25.

Theistic experiences in particular—what are taken to be experiences of God—can provide evidential support for some Christian beliefs, both for the person having the experience and for others.

In defending this position, I adopt what is sometimes called a critical-trust approach to theistic experience: what seems to be an experience of God can be accepted as such, so long as there are no compelling reasons to conclude otherwise.<sup>21</sup> We generally accept something like the critical-trust approach with respect to sense experience or memory or our experience of other persons. I see no persuasive reason to conclude that it cannot be applied to theistic experiences as well. What are taken to be experiences of God can provide evidential support for certain Christian beliefs for those who have the experiences as well as for others who hear about them. This does not mean that all purported experiences of God are to be accepted uncritically; there are appropriate checking procedures, both from within the Christian tradition itself and from broader epistemological principles, that enable us to distinguish what ought to be accepted from what should not.

Moreover, I argue that the acceptability of any particular religious experience depends in part on the broader epistemic context within which the experience occurs, including the background beliefs of the person having the experience or of those hearing reports of the experience. Ultimately, the question of the acceptability of an experience cannot be determined apart from considering the truth or rationality of the broader set of beliefs within which the experience is understood. This indicates the importance of what is often called “natural theology” in the assessment of religious experience. Some form of natural theology that addresses the question why we should accept basic Christian claims about God is unavoidable.

Chapter 1 clarifies the meaning of “religious experience” by exploring the concepts of experience, religion, and religious experience and by showing how our current understanding of religious experience has been shaped by intellectual developments that have arisen since the early modern period. Some basic types of religious experience are also introduced. Chapter 2 continues the consideration of various kinds of religious experience and emphasizes the role of interpretation in different types of experiences. The

21. I take the term “critical-trust approach” from Kai-Man Kwan’s excellent *The Rainbow of Experiences, Critical Trust, and God: A Defense of Holistic Empiricism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), although as we shall see in chapter 3, a number of philosophers have adopted this approach to religious experiences.



importance of background beliefs in interpreting and evaluating experiences is also noted.

The critical-trust approach to religious experience is introduced and defended in chapter 3. According to this approach, what seems to be an experience of God can be accepted as such unless there are compelling reasons to conclude otherwise. The ways in which influential philosophers such as Richard Swinburne and William Alston have developed this approach are examined. Some of the major criticisms of this approach to religious experience are also considered and responded to.

Chapter 4 provides a historical interlude by exploring the views of two of the most significant modern Protestant thinkers, Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley, on experiences of God. Both men lived during a time of intellectual upheaval as well as spiritual renewal and awakening, and both had to address questions about discerning the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. The manner in which they responded to accusations of “enthusiasm” and the perspectives they developed on the inner witness of the Spirit have had a significant influence on later Christians, especially evangelicals.

Some of the themes from Edwards and Wesley have found fresh expression among contemporary philosophers associated with Reformed epistemology. Chapter 5 looks at the ways in which thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig have used the notion of the witness of the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the claim that for the Christian, in appropriate circumstances, belief in God can be “properly basic.” Some of the possibilities and limitations of these claims are examined.

No discussion of religious experience is complete without reference to mysticism because mystical experience is often portrayed as being at the heart of religious experience. Chapter 6 shows how the concept of mysticism used today is largely the product of movements and developments of the past several centuries. Special attention is given to the work of William James and Rudolf Otto, as well as to the more recent debate between the “perennialists” and the “constructivists” over interpretation in mystical experience.

Chapter 7 takes up the thorny set of issues stemming from religious diversity and disagreement and their implications for the critical-trust approach to religious experience. After examining some of the epistemic implications of religious disagreement, I argue that some form of natural theology is necessary if we are to apply the critical-trust approach to theistic experiences. My own view is that the most helpful form of natural theology is an inference to the best-explanation argument, and the phenomena from

theistic experiences can form an important part of the data that require explanation. The chapter concludes by looking at two arguments that might be formulated on the basis of theistic experiences. Although as formal arguments neither is particularly impressive, I contend that elements from each argument can be taken and used effectively in a cumulative-case argument for Christian theism.