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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: spectral evidences

> The whole business is become hereupon so *snarled*, and the determination of the Question one way or another, so *dismal*, that our Honourable Judges have a Room for *Jehoshaphat's* Exclamation, *We know not what to do!* They have used, as Judges heretofore have done, the *Spectral Evidences*, to introduce their further Enquiries into the *Lives* of the persons accused; and they have thereupon, by the wonderful Providence of God, been so strengthened with *other evidences*, that some of the *Witch Gang* have been fairly Executed.
>
> Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692)[1]

Ever since Schleiermacher exalted feeling when addressing religion's "cultured despisers," apologists have periodically exploited religious experience. With all the more traditional avenues of theism's defense generally in disrepute, modern theologians and religious philosophers have repeatedly sought to justify religious belief rationally by reference to the individual's experience. Charles Darwin in 1876 remarked on the prevalence of this strategy. "At the present day the most usual argument for the existence of an intelligent God is drawn from the deep inward conviction and feelings which are experienced by most persons."[2] This argument left Darwin rightfully unpersuaded. Experience has recently once again, however, become the focus of those aiming to vindicate the rationality of religious belief. This time the apologists hail from the ranks of

[1] *Cotton Mather on Witchcraft* (New York: Dorset Press, 1991), p. 70.
[2] *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, Nora Barlow, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969), p. 90.

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analytic philosophy.[3] Increasingly, we find philosophers defending the justification of theistic beliefs based on extraordinary experiences (so-called "perceptions of God"). In this study I concentrate on this latter-day revival and ultimately deny that religious experiences rationally justify religious beliefs.

Both of the central concepts in this discussion, experience and justification, reward careful scrutiny. The philosophers sympathetic to an experiential justification of theism subscribe to congenial analyses of experience and justification. They stake out a position on each which, when taken together, license beliefs based on extraordinary religious experience. My inquiries into a proper understanding of experience and justification bring to the fore two features suppressed or ignored in this prevailing philosophical approach to religious experience: explanation and historical context.

First, I emphasize the ubiquity of explanation in both experience and justification. Experience is, and justification should be, informed by commitments about what constitutes the best explanation of the phenomena in question. Experience exhibits explanatory logic; we experience what we (usually unreflectively) suppose the best explanation of the experiential situation. Similarly, in justifying our beliefs about some domain, we should refer to our best overall explanatory account relevant to that domain. In a philosophical account of justification, to isolate it from explanation artificially segregates our epistemic resources. The apologetic character of much previous philosophical literature on religious experience accounts for its tendency to marginalize explanation; properly attending to the explanatory element in these issues opens the door to unsympathetic explanations.

[3] To name a few: William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), ch. 13; Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), ch. 5; Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

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Second (in part, because of the contextually conditioned nature of "good" explanations), I stress the paramount importance of historical and cultural context for philosophical inquiry about religious experience. The analytic style of the previous literature helps account for its tendency to pay little attention to historical, linguistic, and cultural context. Analytic philosophy generally neglects context. Indeed, it calls to mind Nietzsche's ironical observation, "As is the hallowed custom with philosophers, the thinking of all of them is *by nature* unhistorical."[4] When applied to religious experience, an analytic approach usually includes a few excerpts from different cultures or historical periods which serve merely to exemplify a "type" of experience. Such passages spin their wheels; rarely do the philosophers engage the texts in any deep way. A disciplinary parochialism within the humanities results whereby philosophers regularly laud philosophical works about religious experience which scholars of religion dismiss as inaccurate and anachronistic. Sampling the reviews of Nelson Pike's recent *Mystic Union*, ironically a book intended to surmount these weaknesses, reveals a case in point.[5] McGinn, the historian of Christian spirituality, objects that "Pike's account of Christian mysticism is at least as seriously limited and erroneous as those he criticizes" and claims that "it would be difficult to find a more recent expression of so outdated and narrow a view."[6] By contrast, Wainwright, a philosopher, declares *Mystic Union* "the best book of its kind to have appeared since . . . the early part of the century. It is superior . . . in its analytic acumen and philosophical sophistication."[7] The same disciplinary insularity which results in potted history and shallow textual interpretation on the philosophers' part conversely leads many scholars of religion to discount the questions addressed by the philosophers. To remedy this situation (for, as the epigraph evinces, I believe the philosophical questions potentially have tremendous

[4] *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, trs. (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 25. Italics original.
[5] Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. I discuss the shortcomings of Pike's hermeneutic in chapter 6.
[6] Bernard McGinn, *The Journal of Religion*, 74 (1994), p. 99.
[7] William Wainwright, *Faith and Philosophy*, 11 (1994), p. 495.

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practical importance), I bring to the philosophical discussion of religious experience the full weight of an historicism and a careful study of one prominent Christian mystic: Saint Teresa of Avila. In Emerson's words, "Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history."

Few terms have as many incompatible uses as "historicism." I employ it to call attention to an unexceptional relativism which allows for communication and rational commensuration between historical contexts but fully recognizes the extent of the difference and discontinuity between them. "Historicism" as I define it reminds us that *serious attention to history is integral to textual or philosophical understanding.* This dark saying requires some explication. First, I do not mean to say that serious attention to history is necessary for *any* textual or philosophical inquiry. The relative importance of history will depend on our interests. I rest with the minimal claim that historical study provides insight not necessarily available otherwise. Second, my historicism does not necessarily hold that history is integral to *solving* philosophical problems. One familiar stance today maintains that serious attention to history sometimes enables us to *dissolve* or dismiss philosophical problems. In my chapter on justification, I rely on historical understanding in this way to evade a whole range of standard issues in the analysis of justification that I link to a long-obsolete obsession with skepticism. The overall argument of this book, however, uses historical understanding to answer straightforwardly, rather than evade, the philosophical question about the experiential justification of religious beliefs. Third, the history referred to in "historicism" can be either philosophical history or cultural and social history. I rely on both in my arguments. Fourth, by the admittedly uninstructive phrase "serious attention to history" I mean that historicism should try (as much as possible) to view the historical data in light of the concerns of the subjects of history, rather than viewing the data in light of contemporary preoccupations. The understanding of a text or philosophical problem which historical research can offer derives from this insight into the relatively alien.

In chapters 2 and 3 I present my case for the centrality of

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explanation and historicism to experience and justification respectively. Chapter 2, "The explanation in experience and the explanation of experience," compares the fuller account of experience William James offers in his *Principles of Psychology* with remarks he makes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In arguing that the *Varieties* does not present as accurate nor as subtle a picture as the *Principles*, I adopt a view of experience wherein expectation and cognition play a crucial role. Expanding on some passages in James, I describe experience as including implicit explanatory commitments, commitments about the best explanation of the experience's cause. We experience what we suppose the best explanation of an event or series of events impinging on us. Obviously, the best available explanation will largely depend on context.

I must qualify my description of experience as including an inference to the best explanation. I do not mean that all experience includes conscious consideration of evidence leading to an adopted conclusion. Nor do I mean that experience relies on deductive argument. Rather, I do mean that experience includes tacit commitments as to how best to interpret a stimulus. These commitments rarely reach the light of day. The logic of experience comes most completely to light when we realize we have erred in a perception and can then view our mistaken presumptions. Historical allies of mine have occasionally referred to the explanatory character of experience as "unconscious inference." James astutely notes that this phrase sounds so preposterous because the process usually functions through habit. We must remember, moreover, to disambiguate phenomenological immediacy from epistemic immediacy. Much of our experience, unlike memory or cogitation, exhibits phenomenological immediacy or givenness. We usually do not *feel* ourselves bringing our background beliefs and commitments to bear on our experience. This fact does not mean, however, that experience is immediate in any sense that excludes the considerable influence of our epistemic background on it. The hypothesis of epistemic immediacy does not, in fact, comprise the best explanation of the cognitive mechanism of experience.

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Explanation I construe as description relevant to a set of circumstances. I have in mind no conception of explanation as satisfying formal criteria. I understand explanation as a pragmatic notion, subordinating its structure to the uses mandated by the thinker's interests, and allowing the standards for an acceptable explanation to vary with a community of inquirers' interests. Roughly, an explanation answers a "why-question." For something to count as an explanation, the why-question need not be explicit, consciously recognized nor especially profound. In this sense, every experience answers a tacit why-question about sensory stimuli.

In chapter 3, "Justification by reasons alone," I explore the intuitions motivating the philosophical use of the term "justification," the seeming focal point for those debating the rationality of religious belief. A copious literature has grown around the explication of the concept. Naturally, a philosopher's intuition about justification depends on the epistemology of which it forms a part. I argue here that the early modern worry about skepticism continues to guide the discussion. Abjuring those concerns allows the philosophical use of "justification" to resemble more closely its non-philosophical uses. A justified belief is one for which someone has offered explanatory reasons, reasons that contribute to the best overall explanatory account of the relevant phenomena. Evidential goodness, on this view, presupposes explanatory goodness. I characterize a justified belief as one for which the reasons offered exemplify the good in the way of belief. Clearly, this conception of justification involves judgment. We must judge the goodness of reasons. Furthermore, judgments of goodness presuppose values. This conception of justification presupposes social standards for acceptability, reflecting shared epistemic values. I view our epistemic values as one species, alongside others like ethical values, constituting our conception of human flourishing. If one claims an experience justifies a belief, I argue, one must make its implicit explanation explicit and submit it to debate based on shared values.

In the next two chapters, which do not directly contribute to my positive argument, I undertake limited engagements against

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two recent philosophical works in the philosophy of religious experience. In chapter 4, "Perennialism revisited," I contend with Robert Forman's defense of a type of experience entirely unaffected by the subject's prior background beliefs. Forman challenges Steven Katz and promotes the possibility of a trans-cultural experience of pure consciousness, a waking, non-intentional consciousness.[8] He maintains that mystics in many traditions have perfected techniques for achieving experience unclouded by cognitive activity. Naturally, these different mystics enjoy the qualitatively identical experience because their differing background beliefs and expectations do not operate in this pure consciousness.

Forman's work ostensibly has little to do with religion *per se* because contentless consciousness cannot have an intrinsic religious importance; religious importance could only enter with a religious interpretation of this pure consciousness. The great interest his work generates stems in part, I think, from the central role the possibility of unmediated experience plays in the justification of religious beliefs. Forman himself notes that for some scholars "a transcultural perennial philosophy . . . supported an argument for the existence of a (variously defined) divinity on the basis of experience."[9] Unmediated experience occupies such a place of prominence in discussions of religious experience because if other background beliefs or cognitions enter into the experience, then the justification conferred on the experiential beliefs depends at least in part on the background beliefs. When exploring the rationality of religious beliefs generally, the apologist cannot then, without vicious circularity, use the experiential evidence to justify the beliefs. Unmediated experience amounts to a protective strategy, whereby the scholar can "bracket" significant considerations to render the religious claims more convincing.[10]

In chapter 5, "The miracle of minimal foundationalism," I

[8] Robert K. C. Forman (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[9] Ibid., p. 4.

[10] In this book I frequently use the term "protective strategy" borrowed from Wayne Proudfoot's book *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). I mean to employ it in a manner analogous to the specific sense outlined in his work.

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address the work of William Alston (among others) who has provided the most nuanced and thoughtful version of an epistemological argument justifying religious beliefs based on direct perceptions of God. Alston's position works as a foil not only for my theory of justification, but also for my project as a whole. On his theory, the human epistemic makeup relies on a multitude of socially established doxastic practices, or belief-forming mechanisms. We cannot justify our doxastic practices, he sensibly maintains, in a non-circular manner. We cannot, for example, support our beliefs formed on the basis of sense perception without further recourse to sense perception. These doxastic practices nevertheless constitute the basic sources of *prima facie* justified beliefs (subject to defeat). Because none of our generally reliable belief-forming mechanisms has a more secure justification than any other, we cannot use the standards of one practice to indict another. Alston portrays the non-sensory perception of God as one of our basic, but unjustifiable, doxastic practices. To employ the criteria appropriate to sensory perception in order to judge religious perception unsatisfactory amounts to an unfair privileging of the characteristics of one practice over another. Doxastic practices thereby counter a whole range of standard objections to the argument from religious experience.

If, for example, we seek to debunk religious perception because it doesn't evince the sort of universal distribution enjoyed by sensory perception, we illicitly use the traits of one practice to judge another. Alston here parries those like Darwin who, farther into the passage I quoted above, rejects an analogy between religious experience and sense perception.

> It may be truly said that I am like a man who has become colour-blind, and the universal belief by men of the existence of redness makes my present loss of perception of not the least value as evidence. This argument would be a valid one if all men of all races had the same inward conviction of the existence of one God; but we know that this is very far from being the case. Therefore I cannot see that such

He describes those who reject the explanatory reduction of religion as attempting "to preclude critical inquiry from outside the religious life" (p. xvi).

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inward convictions and feelings are of any weight as evidence of what really exists.[11]

Darwin argues that the parochial character of religious experience vitiates any analogy with sense perception. Alston's doxastic practice approach attempts to preserve the analogy while disarming the significant disanalogies. As a result he licenses the isolation of our different sources of belief from one another. Obviously, he employs his epistemology as a protective strategy.

Although seemingly discrete issues, the possibility, raised by Forman, of pure consciousness shares both content and strategy with the attempt by Alston and others to justify religious beliefs by recourse to religious experience. They both arbitrarily narrow the scope of the experiences they consider in order to render their contentions more plausible. Forman distinguishes hallucinations, visions, and auditions from what Roland Fischer calls "trophotropic" states marked by low levels of cognitive and physiological activity. He limits his discussion to only these non-sensory, introvertive experiences. Alston, for his part, limits his aim to justifying beliefs based on non-sensory perceptions or awarenesses of God acting in some relation to the mystic. He excludes the types of experiences that Forman considers and also excludes the sensory sorts of experiences which Forman likewise shuns. By focusing on such specific agendas, they give the impression of greater unanimity between the mystical traditions than a broader sampling would suggest.

Additionally, Forman and Alston, despite the epistemological niceties of their theories, finally resort to intuition as a court of last appeal. They grant the fact that someone undergoes an extraordinary experience far too much weight in assessing the experience. This failing results from neglecting adequately to distinguish the event which causes an experience from the first-person experience of the event. Forman, for instance, in labeling contentless consciousness a "Pure Consciousness *Event*" (italics added), rather than a "Pure Consciousness *Experience*," lends the experience of putative pure consciousness greater authority. The insistence on unmediated experience

[11] Darwin, *Autobiography*, p. 91.

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forms another case in point. Both Forman and Alston argue from the phenomenological immediacy of an experience, that it feels unmediated, to its actual epistemic immediacy, that it provides a source of evidential grounds at least relatively independent of background beliefs. In speaking of similar confusions, William James coined the phrase "the psychologist's fallacy." It occurs when psychologists impute their knowledge of a phenomenon to the mental state of the subjects. They introduce their explanations into the others' descriptions. These methods, shared by Forman and Alston, contribute to the carapace which privileges the claims of the mystics and fends off explanation from outside the religious life.

The protective intentions prevalent in the philosophy of mysticism finally shine most clearly in the repeated injunction to treat the mystics' claims as "innocent until proven guilty." This maxim follows from the epistemologies many contemporary philosophers promote, but plays to apologetic aims as well. The judicial conceit, gaining plausibility, no doubt, from its resonance with Plato's canonical *Apology*, enjoys a durable and prominent history in the philosophy of religion, first appearing no later than Thomas Sherlock's 1729 *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus*. By setting his dialogue as a court proceeding, Sherlock effectively shifts the onus of proof onto the religious skeptic. With religious believers literally on trial, it seems natural for the skeptic to bear the burden of proof; the believer need only provide a defense. The counsel for the defense argues, "And this I take to be the known Method of proceeding in such Cases; no Man is obliged to produce his Title to his Possession; it is sufficient if he maintains it when it is called in question."[12] Beliefs remain innocent until proven guilty. Sherlock cleverly extends juridical conventions beyond their accepted range of application and imports them into the philosophy of religion. This apologetic tactic has proved successful and is increasingly common. In the coming chapters I will subject to scrutiny the epistemological credentials for this

[12] London, p. 7.

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