Preface

This work comes late in a career dominated by the topic of religious experience. From my first days an undergraduate at Texas Tech University, I have been in turns fascinated, frustrated, and possessed by a desire to understand what is going on in religious experiences and what they mean. My first publication, my dissertation, and my first book were on the topic. As a result, a large number of people over the last forty-odd years have contributed to my understanding, far too many to acknowledge in a short preface. Obviously, my work owes a deep debt to the late William P. Alston, my dissertation director and inspiration, both as a philosopher and as a human being. I also owe gratitude to the students in my Spring 2024 seminar in the Philosophy of Religion for input on Section 2 and to my wife, Virginia Downs, for various contributions throughout.

The central aim of this work is to examine the idea of religious experience in the context of the monotheistic religious traditions, for all of which it seems to play an important role. This examination involves two closely related concerns. First, does it make sense to speak of an experience of God as conceived by those religions? That is, can a being of that kind, infinitely beyond our ordinary experience and completely different from the physical universe, be the object of a human experience? Second, if it is possible for human beings to experience such a being, can those experiences play an evidential role in religious beliefs? That is, can such experiences ever be good reason for religious belief? I hope to show that the answer to both questions is "Yes," and that various prima facie problems for thinking so can be answered using only the resources of the religions in question.

Section 1 is a minor reworking of my Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on religious experience and Section 2 is a minor reworking of my essay "Meaning and Value in Religious Experience," which appeared in the *Cambridge Companion to Religious Experience*, Paul Moser and Chad Meister, eds., New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

1 Religious Experience

There is a certain strain in Christian theology and apologetics according to which the existence of God and the major truths of religion can be established by argument, evidence, and good old-fashioned proof.[1] There

[1] For example, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Saint Anselm, Moses Maimonides, and Ibn Rushd are paradigms of the idea in the medieval period. The project has continued until the present day, with such figures as Richard Swinburne and William Craig.

are similar strains of Islamic and Jewish theology. There is another strain in Christian theology according to which knowledge of God is an internal matter, attributable to an inner witness, illumination of the spirit, or the like. Both strains of thought are present from the beginnings of the religious traditions they address. Thinkers in the first group are often suspicious of the claims of thinkers in the second group. How, they ask, can the objective reality of *anything* be known by inward feelings? "I just feel it is true" has never been a good answer to a question of why a person believes a thing.

There is a hymn sung in many evangelical churches called "He Lives"; it contains the line, "You ask me how I know he lives; he lives within my heart."[2] A teacher of a course called "Christian Evidences" in Lubbock, Texas was locally famous for scoffing at that line. He would hold his hand over his heart and simper, saying, "I feel it in my heart," remarking that such a claim made the assertion both unanswerable and unverifiable. He wrote, "God has never left it for people to learn of gospel truths by subjective interpretations of their personal experience."[3] Instead, he thought, we can – and must – rely on objective facts to prove that the New Testament speaks the truth, and so we can *know* Jesus lives. Not only can we know it, we can prove it to others. He has a point, at least about subjective experiences. One need only look at the human history of psychics, fortune tellers, proponents of the alleged "law of attraction,"[4] and others who speak with assurance (and presumably some are sincere) about what is true but turn out to be wrong. Even in the cases when we don't have any way to tell whether they are right or wrong, instances in which the deliverances of one person's feelings contradict the deliverances of someone else's feelings are legion. It is a pervasively unreliable method of forming beliefs. There is serious danger in relying on inner feelings for guidance on important topics.

It is tempting to think that most people know wishful thinking is a terrible way to form beliefs, but even the sensible among us are prone to being misled by our feelings. The problem is heightened when we realize how prone we are to pareidolia, self-deception, and motivated reasoning.[5] Pareidolia is the human

[2] This is a popular hymn written by Alfred Henry Ackley in 1933, and can be found in almost every Protestant hymnal.

[3] Edward C. Wharton, *Christianity: A Clear Case of History*, West Monroe: Howard, 1977, p. 201. Ed. Wharton was known to his students as "Doctor Know."

[4] Famously promoted by books like *The Secret*, by Rhonda Byrne, which is still dismayingly popular.

[5] These various psychological phenomena are often used in Cognitive Science of Religion as a naturalistic explanation of religious experience and the arising of religious belief. See Justin L. Barrett, "Exploring the Natural Foundations of Religion." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 4,

tendency to perceive patterns in random data and so contributes to false attributions of agency. This is most clearly illustrated by the phenomenon of seeing Mary or some other figure in the grain of a piece of wood and thinking that appearance was miraculously produced. A prudent person doesn't trust such things, even in him or herself. The possibility of illusion, delusion, or hallucination can never just be dismissed. As the prophet Jeremiah lamented, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?"[6]

It seems that, for reasons like these, we should dismiss people's claims of having encountered God. But this conclusion is in tension with another mundane fact about the human epistemic condition: In most instances, human beings rightly treat other human beings as excellent sources of information. When someone tells us what they saw or heard, we generally believe them, and rightly so. We wouldn't get very far in acquiring knowledge if we relied on only what we can gather with our own built-in equipment. Fortunately, most people tell the truth, so we can pool our knowledge, and thus each of us has access to a vast amount of information. Of course, there are people who abuse the trust we extend them and lie to us. There are innocent mistakes, too. These are situations in which the other person's report is not so helpful. Fortunately, through long experience, we have developed techniques for sniffing out the unreliable claims. We apply rules of thumb, which highlight situations in which someone is likely to lie (generally, they have something to gain from your believing them, whether what they say is true or not) or likely to be mistaken (they don't have the kind of expertise they would need, their eyesight is not so good, what they say contradicts something else we have excellent reason to believe, etc.). It is not a perfect system by any means. Not only does it not catch all the insincere or unreliable people, it also will falsely eliminate some sincere and competent people, whom we should believe. Nevertheless, these caveats help us make better decisions about whom to believe and whom to dismiss.[7]

The amount of credence we should extend to a person's claims can vary not only with how sincere and competent the person is, by also by what the content of the claim is. Some categories of claim are clearly unproblematic (though in a particular case there may be reason for skepticism): what our parents tell us when we are children; what scientists speaking in their area of expertise say;

(2000), 29–34 and Pascal Boyer. *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 2001.

[6] Jeremiah 17:9, New American Standard translation.

[7] For examinations of why (and under what conditions) we should trust one another, see Axel Gelfert, *A Critical Introduction to Testimony*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014; and Cecil A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*, New York: Clarendon Press, 1992.

what people report about their own lives and experiences, and the like, to give just a few examples. Likewise, some categories of claims are problematic (though in a particular case there may be reason to be less skeptical): a salesperson's claim about the condition of what he wants to sell you; the claims of a person known to you to be a habitual liar; an untrained layperson making claims that contradict what the scientists say, and the like, for example. We tend to agree about which categories of claims deserve more scrutiny and which do not.

An interesting problem arises when there is a category of claim some say is problematic, and some say is not. This is the case with the category of claim I am discussing in this Element: claims about religious experiences. Some say, for a variety of reasons, that they are simply illusory, like hallucinations, so we should group them with other claims made by unreliable people, or people using unreliable means and methods. Others say they are experiences, like any other, and so we should accept the claims, just as we generally accept people's reports of what they saw, heard, etc. Still others say whether they are real experiences or not, we should withhold belief from all of them, as there seems to be no way to settle who is right. There are good, principled reasons in favor of all of these responses.

The idea of religious experience captures the imagination in a way no other theological idea does. The thought that God (or a god, or a saint, or an angel) might choose to reveal himself to me, a mere mortal, is exciting. It is the prospect of an ordinary life turning into a world-changing, special life. This is part of the reason we find the stories of Abraham, Moses, Muhammad, and many others so compelling. The Buddha is a transcendental figure not because he teaches a life transforming truth, but because he discovered it, came face to face with it, in his own inner quest. The thought that a mortal can "pull back the curtain" and experience the basic realities is intriguing and exciting. This Element is about what it means to pull that curtain back and find, behind it all, a single God.

1.1 Delineation of the Topic

Before we get anywhere, we will need be clear on what kinds of experiences count, and what kind don't.[8] We need to distinguish religious experiences properly so called from various nearby phenomena. First of all, we want to distinguish religious experience from objectless feelings. It is tempting to call

[8] The following two sections are taken from my article, "Religious Experience," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall Ed.), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), 2022, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/religious-experience/.

feelings of elation religious experiences, especially when they are brought on in religious settings. Two important recent theorists of religion, Rudolf Otto and Friedrich Schleiermacher, began their inquiries into the nature of religion with examinations of religious feelings. For Schleiermacher, the essence of religious experience is the "feeling of absolute dependence."[9] He identified as the essential feature of religious experiences that they take us out of ourselves. They decenter us with the intense awareness that we are not our own makers, that we depend for our very being on something other than ourselves. Otto extends this account by isolating particular features of those feelings, including features that attribute properties to the cause of the feelings, which he calls the "numinous." In order to distinguish the feeling from other kinds of feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, or smallness, he identifies the special feeling of encounters with the numinous as "creature feeling." The idea is that it is not mere dependence, but the feeling of being "submerged and overwhelmed . . . in contrast to that which is supreme above all creatures."[10] While Schleiermacher and Otto offer a penetrating phenomenology of what we may call religious experience, they still give an account only of the feelings involved; what is missing is the idea of experience as a relation to something other than my own feelings. What are we adding to the story when we add to the analysis of the feeling an account of a cause of that feeling that is objectively real and outside of me?

Another kind of experience often called religious experience is the experience of something ordinary, but as having special religious significance. An aspect of the natural world, like the sea, or the starry sky, can often come to a person with the conviction that there is a creator behind it. The photographer Thomas Oord describes the experience eloquently:

> Several years ago, I felt God's presence while photographing in the Owyhee Mountains of Idaho. A beautiful cloud formed one evening, and the setting sun painted its underbelly an array of colors. As the sky-canvas developed, I ran about positioning my camera and making photos. The beauty prompted me to "get on my Pentecostal." I repeatedly shouted "Hallelujah!"

In monotheistic traditions, it is thought that we can learn about God through the book of scripture and also through the book of nature. As Saint Paul says to the Romans, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."[11] The same thought is expressed

[9] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, Richard Crouter (trans. & ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
[10] Rudoph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, New York: Oxford, 1950, p. 10.
[11] Romans 1:20, New American Standard translation.