

UNDERSTANDING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

In this book, Paul K. Moser offers a new approach to religious experience and the kind of evidence it provides. Here, he explains the nature of theistic and nontheistic experience in relation to the meaning of human life and its underlying evidence, with special attention given to the perspectives of Tolstoy, Buddha, Confucius, Krishna, Moses, the apostle Paul, and Muhammad. Among the many topics explored in this timely volume are religious experience characterized in a unifying conception, religious experience naturalized relative to science, religious experience psychologized in merely psychological phenomena, and religious experience cognized relative to potential defeaters from evil, divine hiddenness, and religious diversity. *Understanding Religious Experience* will benefit those interested in the nature of religion and can be used in relevant courses in religious studies, philosophy, theology, biblical studies, and the history of religion. The book will enable enquirers about religion to:

- understand the importance of religious experience;
- identify where key religious evidence can be found in religious lives;
- and understand how religious experience bears on the meaning of human life from a range of diverse and influential religious perspectives.

Paul K. Moser is Professor of Philosophy at Loyola University Chicago. He has published widely, most recently as author of *The God Relationship* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). He serves as editor of *Cambridge Studies in Religion, Philosophy, and Society* and *Cambridge Elements in Religion and Monotheism*.

Understanding Religious Experience

From Conviction to Life's Meaning

PAUL K. MOSER
Loyola University Chicago



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*All religious expressions are an expression of a sense of meaning, and a
penumbra of mystery surrounds every realm of meaning.*

—Reinhold Niebuhr (1966)

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page ix</i>
1 Religious Experience Characterized	1
1 The Maze of Human Life	1
2 Core Religious Experience and Life's Meaning	7
3 Concepts and Diversity	21
4 Whither Religion?	24
5 Why Be Religious?	33
6 Two Extremes on Religious Experience	37
2 Religious Experience Interpreted	42
1 Experience beyond Interpretation	42
2 Interpretation and Sensemaking	49
3 Nontheistic Religious Interpretation	52
4 Theistic Religious Interpretation	67
5 Prospects and Questions	96
3 Religious Experience Practiced	100
1 Practice in Action	100
2 Practicing Religion	104
3 Peril in Religious Practice	128
4 Lessons for Religious Practice	135
4 Religious Experience Naturalized	137
1 A Natural World	137
2 Agents in Nature and Religion	153
3 The Bearing of Naturalism	177

5	Religious Experience Psychologized	180
1	Freud's Psychological World	181
2	Religion after Freud	199
3	Religious Experience in Psychology	208
6	Religious Experience Moralized	209
1	Religion Moralized Reductively	209
2	Religion Moralized Nonreductively	221
3	Moralizing without Replacement	238
7	Religious Experience Cognized: Foundations	239
1	Cognized Religious Experience	240
2	Interpersonal Inquiry	241
3	Tested in <i>Agapē</i>	247
4	Led by God	254
5	Convicted in <i>Agapē</i>	258
6	Discerning God	268
7	Convictional Knowledge	272
8	Gift for Imitation	277
8	Religious Experience Cognized: Defeaters	283
1	Skepticism and Defeaters	284
2	Explaining God and Evil	293
3	Divine Hiddenness	313
4	Religious Diversity	316
5	God's Gambit in Redemptive Duress	320
6	Normative Meaning in Religious Experience	327
	<i>References</i>	335
	<i>Index</i>	341

Preface

“Religious experience,” as commonly understood, includes the bizarre and the banal, among other things. Many inquirers wonder if any religious experience is reliable, and many are altogether skeptical in this area. This book identifies a unique value in *some* religious experience, including as evidence for some people about the real world. So, it offers a positive approach to some religious experience on the basis of positive evidence. In doing so, it gives special attention to core religious experiences involving Tolstoy, Gautama, Confucius, Krishna, Moses, Paul, and Muhammad.

The book explains religious experience as one’s experience of the sensed value underlying life’s overarching meaning for one. It does so in connection with these topics: religious experience characterized in a unifying conception (Chapter 1); religious experience interpreted as theistic or nontheistic (Chapter 2); religious experience practiced with distinctive intentions (Chapter 3); religious experience naturalized relative to science (Chapter 4); religious experience psychologized in terms of merely psychological phenomena (Chapter 5); religious experience moralized reductively or nonreductively (Chapter 6); religious experience cognized, or made cognitively relevant, by its role in a person’s foundational evidence (Chapter 7); and religious experience cognized relative to potential defeaters from evil, divine hiddenness, and religious diversity (Chapter 8).

The book explains how religious experience and commitment differ from scientific experience and belief. It identifies why they do not either reduce to or yield to evaluation as scientific phenomena, contrary to various critics of religion. A distinctive feature of religion consists in the role of *experienced religious meaning* as overarching existential meaning for a person's life. Such meaning is formative in a person's existence and identity, and thus it does not figure *just* in a general explanatory hypothesis, let alone a hypothesis just in terms of general laws. In the book's approach, religion should be *conservative* in conforming to supporting evidence from actual experience, but it also should be *progressive* in pursuing and considering new evidence from experience. In being guided by overall evidence, religion can avoid a charge of being dogmatic, authoritarian, or vulnerable to wishful thinking. It thus can save its experienced existential value and meaning from easy dismissal by critics. This benefit is needed and overdue for religion.

The book introduces a notion of *convictional knowledge* to clarify how religious experience can be cognitive, including well grounded in experiential evidence. Such knowledge goes beyond factual knowledge, in one's being convicted in moral conscience. A key issue is whether being thus convicted can supply evidence of a God worthy of worship. The book contends that it can, owing to a unique intentional component in the relevant evidence. It also contends that the familiar defeaters of evidence for God fail to undermine the intentional convictional evidence in some contexts. So, the book offers a distinctive approach to the evidential foundations of theistic religion. In doing so, it seeks an audience not just in scholars and teachers but also in college students and readers outside the university. The topic of religious experience has importance that merits a wide audience.

Chapters 7 and 8 rework some parts of my following essays: "Doxastic Foundations: Theism," in *Theism and Atheism*, ed. Joseph Koterski and Graham Oppy (New York:

Macmillan, 2019), pp. 103–118; “Divine Hiddenness, Agapē Conviction, and Spiritual Discernment,” in *Sensing Things Divine*, ed. Paul Gavrilyuk and Frederick Aquino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); and “Theodicy, Christology, and Divine Hiding,” in *The Expository Times* 129 (2018), 191–200.

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