

## Introduction: Religious Experience

PAUL K. MOSER AND CHAD MEISTER

Many religious people hold that their religious commitment should be understood in terms of something that has *happened* to them, and they believe that what has happened to them is a distinctive *experience*, a *religious* experience. This experience, in their perspective, does not reduce to a belief, hypothesis, or theory. Instead, it includes something qualitative that has been *presented* or *given* to them in their direct awareness. It is, in their judgment, a qualitative experience, and it is religious. This book examines the nature, scope, context, and significance of religious experience, in search of a good explanation. In doing so, it raises many questions about religious experience that are important to religious studies, philosophy, theology, psychology, sociology, and history. This introduction clarifies some of these questions.

### EXPERIENCE AS RELIGIOUS

Some theorists doubt that there is a well-formed category of *experience*, but we shall not digress to that extreme view. We can make do now with a notion of experience as qualitative awareness, and let it be illustrated by familiar cases of direct attention-attraction by something qualitative (not to be confused with attention-focusing or attention-selection). We may think of it as broadly “perceptual” or “observational,” without reducing it to “sensation” in any narrow sense. So, one might experience, or have a sense of, a duty or an honor, without this being sensation in a narrow sense. Given this approach, one can have an experience of something that is not a sensory object.

A key issue concerns when an experience is *religious*. A quick answer would be when it involves *religion*. Perhaps this is true, but it is not adequately illuminating. The notion of religion is as much in need of clarification now as the notion of religious experience. The terms “religion” and “religious” are among the most elusive in circulation regarding their precise meanings (if such meanings are to be had for

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them). We call everything from being a sports fan to worshiping God “religious.” We thus hear: “His commitment to his baseball team is religious.” People, of course, may use words as they wish, but we should not lose a hold on clear communication with our words.

Many people think of being religious as somehow involving God, and thus theology, in some way. We prefer a broader understanding, however, in the light of nontheistic religions, such as some versions of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. One broader understanding takes being religious to involve *overarching meaning* for a person’s life. Such an understanding seems to be indicated by Leo Tolstoy’s description of his life-forming religious experience:

All that was around me came to life and received a meaning . . . And I was saved from suicide. When and how this transformation within me was accomplished, I could not say. Just as [earlier in my life] the life force within me was gradually and imperceptibly destroyed, and I encountered the impossibility of life, the halting of life, and the need to murder myself, so too did this life force return to me gradually and imperceptibly . . . I returned to the conviction that the single most important purpose in my life was to be better, to live according to this . . . (1882, pp. 76–77; trans. first two sentences, Aylmer Maude, and remaining sentences, David Patterson)

Tolstoy had struggled with the prospect of suicide, but this struggle, like his Christian theism, is not essential to his life-changing religious experience.

Something *happened*, or *was presented*, to Tolstoy in his experience, or qualitative awareness, and this was not just a belief, hypothesis, or theory. He directly experienced new *meaning* for his life. This meaning arose for him in all surrounding things as well as “within” him, including in the “transformation within” him. It thus was *overarching meaning* for his life. He comments: “All that was around me came to life and received a meaning.” This was something Tolstoy experienced directly, and it engaged him in a practical way. It prompted his forming an intention to become conformed to it, that is, to become “better.” So, the life-forming experience was important for his practical life. It was not merely speculative or abstract in the way many philosophical reflections are. We could explore religious experiences with overarching meaning in a range of major religions: Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, among others. The book’s chapters offer some illuminating examples for further exploration.

A significant question for any experience, including any supposed religious experience, is whether it is veridical, or accurate, regarding reality independent of human minds. In other words, does it go beyond merely subjective experience to an experience of something “objective” as independent of human minds? *Realism* about some religious experiences implies that those experiences are objective, relating one to reality independent of human minds. For instance, an apparent experience of God (however one understands “God”) is veridical in a realist sense if, and only if, it relates one to a God whose existence is independent of human minds.

We need a clear distinction between the *ontology* and the *epistemology* of religious experience. The ontology concerns what such experience consists in, regardless of how we come to know what a particular religious experience involves. The epistemology concerns conditions for evidence and knowledge regarding religious experience. One familiar epistemological question is: Does one know, or at least justifiably believe, that God exists, on the basis of a specified religious experience, such as a life-changing experience of the kind identified by Tolstoy. Two questions arise here. First, can one know that God exists on the basis of evidence from a religious experience? Second, what kind of religious experience would be suitable as evidence for the existence of God? These are large questions that call for careful examination, and they resist any quick answers. Some of the book’s chapters touch on them.

Some theorists, such as Sigmund Freud (1933), Daniel Dennett (2006), and Richard Dawkins (1996), try to account for religious experience *just* in terms of nonreligious factors, such as human psychology, sociology, or biology alone. In doing so, they seek either to reduce or to eliminate claims to religious experience on the basis of factors that are not religious, such as *merely* psychological, sociological, or biological factors. This is a bold effort if it aims to cover the whole range of religious experience. It would call for a case that bears negatively on *all* religious experiences as reducible or eliminable. It is unclear, however, that we have the evidence needed for such a broad case against religious experiences. For instance, we seem not to have the broad kind of evidence needed to support Freud’s sweeping position that all religious experience is ultimately a matter of psychological delusion.

We face three main options regarding religious experience, and they correspond to the theological options of theism, atheism, and agnosticism. First, one can be a *realist* about some religious experiences, claiming that some of them relate us to features of reality (such as God)

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that do not depend for their existence on human minds. Second, one can be a *nonrealist* about all religious experiences, claiming that none of them relates us to features of reality independent of human minds. Third, one can be a skeptic about all religious experiences, proposing that we lack the needed evidence to affirm either the realist or the nonrealist position. Skeptics thus propose that we withhold judgment on the disagreement between realists and nonrealists about religious experience. They find our evidence inadequate to settle the matter in favor of either group.

Some alleged religious experiences seem more plausible, at least to many of us, than others regarding being veridical. For instance, some ecstatic religious experiences, including altered states of awareness, seem to result from delusions of some sort, such as delusions of guilt or of grandeur. Troubling cases arise when people lose their moral bearings in religious ecstasy, taking leave of anything like ethical discernment regarding their attitudes or actions. Religious experience can go bad in this way, and hence religion can too. The history of religion confirms this lesson, abundantly. An important lesson is that neither religious experience nor religion need be morally good. Each can be morally bad and harmful for people, even if some instances are morally good. The history of each of the major religions gives evidence of religion going bad in some cases, and therefore one must try to separate the good from the bad in religious experience and religion, across the range of major religious perspectives.

If religious experience and religion are anchored in overarching meaning for human life, one might recommend aspiring to *morally good* meaning for a life. So, one might recommend against evil religions as a basis for a meaningful life. This might include the religion of, for example, ISIS (or Daesh) in our own time, on the ground that its evils in practice (murder, rape, torture, and so on) disqualify it as a fitting model for human life. In any case, one can subject religious experience and religion to moral evaluation regarding their bearing on a morally good life. In doing so, one can let go of the view, sometimes circulated, that “all religion is good.” It is, we suggest, partly an empirical matter whether some aspects of a particular religion are morally good, and the same is true of a religious experience.

#### VALUING RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Why care about religious experience at all? We have a straightforward answer if religious experience contributes importantly to overarching

meaning for a human life. Insofar as such meaning is valuable to us, we can find value in religious experience as a significant contributor to that meaning. It can contribute as an experiential ground for life's meaning, as it reportedly did in the case of Tolstoy. Even if one lacks a full explanation of a life-changing experience, that experience can be valuable to one's life by contributing to its overarching meaning.

We can distinguish meaning *in life* from the meaning *of life*. A meaning in life for a person is just an aim, purpose, or goal that person has for life. We can create such meaning, then, with our intentions for life, and we can remove such meaning with a change in our intentions. One's meaning in life does not transfer automatically to meaning in life for other people, because those people need not share one's intentions. Such relativity of meaning is a live option among humans, but it does contrast with what some theorists call "the meaning of life."

If there is such a thing as the meaning of life, it has a singularity foreign to meaning in life. It would bear on all human lives, and thus it would not be just a result of individual human intention. It would have a basis in something less variable than the intentions of individual humans. A controversial issue concerns what that basis would be. If such meaning requires an intention, one might look for its source in an intentional agent of a special sort. Some theorists take God to be that intentional source of the meaning of life. Given that view, the reality of the meaning of life will be as debatable as the existence of God. In addition, the value of the meaning of life for humans then will share the value of God for humans.

One value of God for humans, according to some theorists, is God's sustaining *lasting* meaning for human life, beyond any merely temporal meaning. If God is everlasting and has a lasting overarching purpose for human life, then God would be in a position to support lasting meaning for human life. The meaning of human life, then, could be lasting in virtue of its lasting support from God. If God is omitted, and no lasting replacement arises, meaning for human life will be merely temporary, lasting only as long as its temporary basis or source, whatever that may be. Theorists who favor physicalism, reductive or nonreductive, about reality typically think of life's meaning as merely temporary, lasting only as long as its temporary physical basis. They find no basis for lasting meaning for human life, even if some people would prefer such meaning. The main point now, however, is that God could make a difference in this area. We need to look more carefully at a potential role for God in religious experience.

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#### RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND GOD

People have described religious experiences of God in vastly different ways, with no clear indication of a common core to the experiences. So, the topic can be confusing and frustrating. A problem results from the widely differing conceptions of God in circulation. People may share the term “God,” but they often mean very different things by it. Traditional monotheism seeks to add some conceptual unity by portraying God as worthy of worship and hence morally perfect, without any moral defect. In this approach, God must meet a distinctively high moral standard to satisfy the perfectionist title “God.” So, power alone will not qualify one for being God. Moral character matters, and it cannot be defective in the case of God.

We should expect evidence for a God inherently worthy of worship to be morally significant in a way that represents God’s perfect moral character. If God is inherently an intentional moral agent, seeking to actualize what is morally good, then any decisive evidence of God’s reality will indicate a moral agent at work. It follows that any decisive evidence of God in human experience will be evidence of an intentional moral agent seeking to actualize what is morally good. Inquirers about God, then, should give due consideration to whether such morally significant evidence is present in human experience, such as in moral conscience. If some people find such evidence present and others do not, we should ask what accounts for this difference. In this regard, we should consider whether God would self-reveal in human experience in ways sensitive to the receptivity of inquirers. It could be that God would not want divine self-revelation to alienate inquirers who would not welcome such revelation. This consideration may figure in a kind of divine self-hiding for redemptive purposes. In any case, evidence that does not indicate God’s moral character will not yield a God worthy of worship (for relevant discussion, see Paul Moser 2020).

A psalmist in the Hebrew Bible identifies a morally significant kind of religious experience that involves God:

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
 you discern my thoughts from far away.  
 You search out my path and my lying down,  
 and are acquainted with all my ways.  
 Even before a word is on my tongue,  
 O Lord, you know it completely.  
 You hem me in, behind and before,

and lay your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
it is so high that I cannot attain it.  
(Psalm 139:1–6)

This is a religious experience of being *morally searched* by God, in one's moral conscience. The talk of God's "hemming me in" is talk of a moral challenge from God, a challenge to conform to God's perfect moral character. Moral conscience can be like that: It can nudge one, without coercion, away from what is morally bad and toward what is morally good.

One might think of moral conscience as an avenue for divine moral intervention in human experience. It offers an opportunity for God to self-manifest the divine moral character in a way that challenges and guides cooperative humans in relation to God's will. Being thus challenged and guided can be central to a religious experience of God, if the psalmist is right. Even so, moral conscience is fallible for humans; we can be misled by it at times as a result of various defects in our history and experience. Fallibility, however, does not exclude all genuine moral goodness from conscience. Our visual experience, for instance, is fallible, but it would be rash to portray it as always misleading relative to the visual world.

We can correct for distortions in our moral experience in various ways. For instance, we can compare one moral experience with a range of other moral experiences we have, to check for coherence. In addition, we can compare a moral experience we have with the moral experience of other people, again to check for coherence. We do not have an easy recipe here, but we do have some checks and balances, as in the case of visual experience. As a result, we need not throw the baby (good moral experience) out with the dirty bath water (misleading moral experience). Sometimes people opt for wholesale skepticism in an area too quickly, but good judgment advises against such haste. Religious moral experiences merit our careful attention and discernment, because it is a live option that they will signal moral illumination and even theological illumination.

A person's religious experience, such as the psalmist's moral religious experience, can be best explained for that person by a claim that God has actually intervened in that person's experience. This is an empirical matter, and we should not try to settle it simply on a priori grounds. We therefore need to examine actual religious experiences carefully, to see what they include and what best accounts for them.

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Some apparent religious experiences will fail to survive such scrutiny, as they are exposed to be just psychological aberrations. Other religious experiences will not succumb so clearly. For instance, our sciences have not excluded as aberrant all religious experiences of the sort described by the psalmist above; nor has anything else. They are thus candidates worthy of our careful attention.

We face a kind of relativism about experiences in general and religious experiences in particular. All people do not share the same experiences. The fact that you experience the common cold does not require that everyone else does too; many people do not experience the common cold at all. Similarly, some people could have a religious experience while others do not. We cannot exclude this option, and it should temper any quick dismissal of religious experience on the ground that some people do not have any such experience. The people who do not experience the common cold would do well not to infer that nobody experiences the common cold. So, one person's (or a group's) not having a religious experience is not an adequate ground to generalize to the skeptical conclusion that nobody has a religious experience. The person-relativity of experience allows for the person-relativity of evidence from variable experience. Inquiry about religious experience will benefit from attention to these lessons.

#### RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND SCIENCE

Our best sciences do not pose a universal threat to the reality of religious experience, including such experience regarding God. Stephen Jay Gould has made a general case that supports this point. His main point is that our best sciences, our academic sciences, operate in an empirical domain different from the domain of religion. Science and religion are “non-overlapping magisteria,” in his language, because they are different domains of inquiry and subject matter that do not compete. He comments:

The net, or magisterium, of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two magisteria do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for example, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty). To cite the old clichés, science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven. (1999, p. 6)



Gould rightly observes that neither science nor religion encompasses “all inquiry.” The academic sciences permit inquiry in religion that is not part of scientific explanation via what is ultimately nature alone. We can confirm this in the standard textbooks of the academic sciences. Similarly, religion allows for inquiry in the sciences that is not part of religion, as various religious scriptures illustrate. Religion, however, will be “respectful” of science in Gould’s sense only if it avoids claims to causal and factual significance that contradict empirically justified scientific claims.

As understood by Gould, religion is not in a position to support a realm of *divine* purposes, meanings, and values identifiable in nature but inaccessible to the sciences. If there were such purposes inaccessible to the sciences, religion would identify something causal and factual in a way that challenges science. Gould nonetheless allows for religion’s endorsing a kind of deism in theology. He acknowledges without objection that some scientists “still hold a conception of God (as an imperial clock winder at time’s beginning) that leaves science entirely free in its own proper magisterium” (1999, p. 22). His central demand is that religion not affirm anything that contradicts an empirically justified scientific finding.

Gould considers people who acknowledge a God personally concerned with the lives of creatures, thus going beyond a clock winder from deism:

Such people often take a further step by insisting that their God mark his existence (and his care) by particular factual imprints upon nature that may run contrary to the findings of science. Now, science has no quarrel whatever with anyone’s need or belief in such a personalized concept of divine power, but [we should] preclude the additional claim that such a God must arrange the facts of nature in a certain set and predetermined way. For example, if you believe that an adequately loving God must show his hand by peppering nature with palpable miracles, or that such a God could only allow evolution to work in a manner contrary to facts of the fossil record (as a story of slow and steady linear progress toward *Homo sapiens*, for example), then a particular, partisan (and minority) view of religion has transgressed into the magisterium of science by dictating conclusions that must remain open to empirical test and potential rejection. (1999, pp. 93–94)

Acknowledging that “science has no quarrel whatever with anyone’s . . . belief in such a personalized concept of divine power,” Gould demands

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that religion not affirm anything that contradicts an empirically justified scientific thesis. He thus rules out any claim of religion that “God must arrange the facts of nature in a certain set and predetermined way,” that is, a way indifferent to the evidence of the sciences. His main demand is that religion avoid “dictating conclusions that must remain open to empirical test and potential rejection.” *Empirical* claims, in short, demand *empirical* evidence, even if they emerge from religion.

Supporters of religion and religious experience can accept Gould’s demands for religion, given due caution about which claims “must remain open to empirical test” and about what the relevant “empirical test” involves. If one were to demand that all empirical evidence be socially readily shareable just by human means, as is common in the sciences, many supporters of religion should balk. We should not take it as an a priori truth, and arguably not take it as a truth at all, that God would have to make experience and evidence of divine reality socially shareable in the way the evidence of the sciences is. So, a supporter of religion can accept Gould’s main demand but deny that the relevant empirical test is always based on socially readily shareable empirical evidence. Gould neither affirms nor excludes this option.

Gould remarks: “Science simply cannot (by its legitimate methods) adjudicate the issue of God’s possible superintendence of nature. We neither affirm nor deny it; we simply can’t comment on it as scientists” (1992, p. 119). Perhaps he means “God’s actual superintendence of nature,” because the “possible superintendence” is just a matter of logical consistency and can be settled by consistent imagination. Gould apparently grants that God could superintend nature without distorting, undermining, or identifying as theological the evidence in the domain of the sciences. This seems right, because God could be suitably elusive in divine superintendence by hiding all identifiable divine fingerprints. God could superintend nature in various ways without corrupting or identifying as theological the scientific evidence available to humans. We have no good reason to deny this; so Gould seems to be on the right track here.

The main lesson now is that the sciences do not exclude religion or religious experiences so long as neither presumes empirical claims inaccessible to the sciences. An account of religious experience can welcome scientific contributions in the light of this consideration. The sciences may not depend on religious experience, but they may be able to illuminate, among other things, the various psychological and sociological contexts of religious experience. Religion can benefit from the sciences at least in this regard.