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NEW DIRECTIONS IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

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For Stephanie, Diggery, Lucy, Sheryl, Brad, and Wooten.

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Chapter One

An Argument Concerning the Epistemic Status of Religious Experience

I endeavor to show that the skeptic, even on her own terms, will never succeed in ruling out all beliefs based on religious experience by claiming they are unjustified. There is a sort of religious belief based on religious experience that, to my knowledge, skeptical thinkers have not yet considered. The expression of this sort of religious belief bears certain resemblances to natural expressions and avowals of self-knowledge as understood in Dorit Bar-On's neo-expressivist account of self-knowledge. I argue that some expressions of religious beliefs formed from religious perceptions are similar enough to self-expressions of inner states (i.e., self-knowledge) to require similar epistemic treatment. First-person ascriptions of internal states to play a very significant and relatively uncontroversial epistemic role. If we are to discount religious experience when expressed this way, we must find an appropriate reason. But, on my account, there is no such reason. Therefore, we must endorse the epistemic significance of religious experience in avowals or pay the costly price of abandoning the role avowals play in our mainstream accounts of self-knowledge.

ABSTRACTS

Chapter Two

Religious Experience and Commonsense Epistemology

It is uncontroversial that William Alston's doxastic practices approach to epistemology is a suitable home for religious experience. Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology is also compatible with religious experience. What has not been shown, however, is whether any other epistemic frameworks (particularly those not antecedently interested in religious epistemology) are compatible with religious experience. At least one is promising in this regard: commonsense epistemology. In this paper I argue that advocates for the epistemic significance of religious experience will find commonsense epistemology just as hospitable a framework for their concerns as Alston's doxastic practices or Plantinga's reformed epistemology. I consider six major principles of commonsense epistemology and argue they establish a suitable approach for those who wish to take the epistemic weight of religious experience seriously. The upshot for advocates of religious experience is that commonsense epistemology offers a simpler route (in comparison to Alston or Plantinga) for securing the epistemic status of beliefs based on religious experience. I argue that commonsense epistemology offers the advantage of inheriting minimal theoretical baggage in contrast to the aforementioned religious epistemologies, and it does this while also avoiding the appearance of giving religious subject matter any sort of epistemological special treatment.

ABSTRACTS

Chapter Three

Putting God in a Box (or a Book)

Many theists accept Aquinas's categories of special and general revelation yet are reluctant to allow religious experience a place in either category. I argue that genuine religious experience, when it obtains, should be considered divine revelation. I present this argument within the framework familiar to those for whom I intend my argument to apply: an evangelical or conservative protestant (henceforth, CP&E) framework. Against many theists who are skeptical of religious experience, the aforementioned way of thinking about divine revelation must be expanded to include religious experience if we are to preserve a traditional understanding of revelation, according to which divine revelation is generally understood as acts of divine agency disclosing something to a human being(s). Further, I argue that holding the New Testament Gospels as revelation *entails* regarding some religious experiences as divine revelation too, as the Gospels are generally accepted by CP&E to be a historical record of religious events (including religious experiences). Despite the claims of some critics of religious experience, this position does not obligate Christians to believe that religious experiences are infallible; surely, they can go wrong. I show that while we must regard genuine religious experience as constituting divine revelation if we antecedently accept the Gospels as divine revelation, we can do so while still acknowledging the fallibility of religious experience. Ruling out revelation through religious experience also rules out Yahweh speaking to Moses through the burning bush, Saul on the Damascus road, and a great deal more. Devotion to the text may be admirable, but the authority of the text cannot outgrow the authority of its source. Divine

revelation (very often unexpected divine revelation) through religious experience is the bedrock of the text. While the inclination may be understandable, surely CP&E cannot disavow the latter to protect the former. Like it or not, we are very poorly placed to judge when divinity is done speaking.

CHAPTER ONE

An Argument Concerning the Epistemic Status of Religious Experience

Part One: Analyzing Beliefs from Religious Experience

In this paper I examine whether religious experience can rightly play an epistemic role in the formation and justification of beliefs. More specifically, I examine the question whether religious experiences can justify religious beliefs despite arguments to the contrary. In my view, there is a type of appropriately modest belief based on corresponding religious experience that even the skeptic cannot deny. [1]

To give voice to the skeptic, I will proceed in a manner biased against religious experience. I will assume that religious experience is epistemically suspect and that the burden of proof belongs to the advocate of religious experience. I will grant the skeptic most of his claims.[2]

For example, Richard Swinburne's has defended religious experience through his Principle of Credulity. Swinburne defines PC as the position that, "other things being equal, it is probable and so rational to believe that things are as they seem to be," and, "things are probably as they seem to be." [3] [4] This principle provides a very strong validation of perceptual experience, religious or otherwise.[5] But, it is not uncontroversial. Some criticize it as overly permissive or

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[1] From here onward, I will use "skeptic" to refer to those skeptical of the justificatory force of religious experience for religious beliefs.

[2] This is not to say I think the skeptic's claims are good. I grant these criticisms of religious experience to see how far skepticism about religious experience can extend on its own terms. Can it successfully exclude the very possibility of meaningful religious experience? Can it rule out—in principle—the possibility of justifying a belief by religious experience? Or, is there some point at which such skepticism "bottoms out" and cannot defeat the justifying force of religious experience for certain beliefs?

[3] *Providence and the Problem of Evil* 20.

[4] *Epistemic Justification* 141-142.

[5] Swinburne himself states: "A religious experience apparently of God ought to be taken as veridical unless it can be shown on other grounds significantly more probable than not that God does not exist." *The Existence of God* 270.

indulgent. [6] So, I will make no use of it here. In addition, some criticize William Alston's suggestion that religious experience is sometimes analogous to sense perception.[7] Accordingly, I will not avail myself of his argument in this paper.

I will incorporate many of the central criticisms of religious experience into my argument. For example, I grant that religious experiences are not had by everyone and that this creates a prima facie worry. I also acknowledge that religious experiences are often meager and obscure; this is at least superficially troubling for those who want to hold beliefs based on religious experiences. Additionally, I concede there indeed exist plausible naturalistic explanations for supposed religious experiences. Last, I grant the charge that the varying religious experiences of individuals result in diverse and discordant religious beliefs and that this poses a problem for the justifying force of religious experience. My argument will not depend on any premises that might be discredited by these worries.

At this point the reader might be confused. If I am granting the arguments of the skeptic, then she may wonder what remains for me to defend. Indeed, capitulating to my detractors this much leaves me with nothing on the table for which I can advocate. From this position I will argue that there is a particular sort of religious belief justified by religious experience that has not

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[6] For more on Swinburne's principle of credulity, see *The Existence of God*. For noteworthy replies, see William Rowe's "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity," Jonathan Kvanvig's "Credulism," Michael Martin's "The Principle of Credulity and Religious Experience" and "Atheism: A Philosophical Justification," and Quentin Smith's "The Anthropic Coincidences, Evil and The Disconfirmation of Theism."

[7] Alston's "Religious Experience and Religious Belief" and *Perceiving God* provide thorough exploration of religious experience and perceptual experience. For critical evaluation, see J.L. Schellenberg's "Religious Experience and Religious Diversity: A Reply to Alston," Kevin Meeker's "William Alston's Epistemology of Religious Experience" Robert McKim's "Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity," Matthias Steup's "William Alston, *Perceiving God*," Nick Zangwill's "The Myth of Religious Experience," Tim Mawson's "How Can I Know I've Perceived God?" and Joshua Seigal's "God Told Me to Do It: Sceptical Theism and Perceiving God."

yet been described by advocates *or* assailed by detractors. It is this sort of religious experience-based belief that I will champion.

In other words, I am clearing the table of any beliefs reliant on existing arguments dealing with the status of religious experience. I aim to place a new option on the table that can survive such a hostile dialectic. Should I succeed, I will have shown that the epistemic responsibility of religious belief, justified by religious experience, cannot be ruled out *even* within the skeptic's own framework.

In what follows, I endeavor to show that the skeptic, even on her own terms, will never succeed in ruling out all beliefs based on religious experience by claiming they are unjustified. There is a sort of religious belief based on religious experience that, to my knowledge, skeptical thinkers have not yet considered. The expression of this sort of religious belief bears certain resemblances to natural expressions and avowals of self-knowledge as understood in Dorit Bar-On's neo-expressivist account of self-knowledge. If we think expressions of belief based on religious experience of the sort I am going to propose are epistemically suspect, then we will be forced far closer to skepticism about self-knowledge or, at any rate, self-reports of inner states than any of us would like, or so I purport to show. I will argue that some expressions of religious beliefs formed from religious perceptions are relevantly similar to self-expressions of inner states (i.e., self-knowledge).

Before turning to Bar-On, a few clarifying remarks are in order. My purpose is to defend a particular sort of religious belief justified by religious experience. I am not attempting to do this through any special concepts or tools unique to religious experience. That is, I aim to give my conclusion more strength than most arguments for the epistemic usefulness of religious experience by not availing myself of any conceptual devices tailored specifically for discussions

of religious experience. Instead my argument depends only on extant, uncontroversial conceptual frameworks for dealing with notions like experience, belief, and justification. More specifically, I rely on how we use these ideas in discussions about self-knowledge[8].

Part Two: Bar-On, Avowals, and Self-Knowledge

Bar-On's *Speaking My Mind: Expression and Self-Knowledge* has made considerable headway on the subject of a unique and relatively unexplored variety of knowledge. In her book, Bar-On reviews our ordinary treatment of expressions of self-knowledge. Uncontroversially, she points out that we usually attribute high epistemic status to statements a subject makes about his or her own person. For example, when Kyle says he feels tired, we ordinarily accept his claim. We assume Kyle is not in error about whether he is feeling tired. And, in particular, we recognize that Kyle is in a uniquely secure epistemic position to tell whether or not he feels tired.[9] Given that we intuitively take such statements to be incorrigible, Bar-On proposes a possible explanation for their epistemic security.[10] In order to see how this might support claims derived from religious experience, a thorough understanding of her argument is required.

[8] I take Bar-On and Douglas Long's "Avowals and First-Person Privilege," Bar-On and Matthew Chrisman's "Ethical Neo-Expressivism," and Bar-On's *Speaking My Mind: Expression and Self-Knowledge* and "Avowals: Expression, Security, and Knowledge: Reply to Matthew Boyle, David Rosenthal, and Maura Tumulty" to be representative of the state of things in this field of inquiry. Akeel Bilgrami's *Self-knowledge and Resentment*, D.A. Armstrong's *The Nature of Mind and Other Essays*, *The Mind-Body Problem: An Opinionated Introduction*, and *A Materialist Theory of the Mind*, and Richard Moran's *Authority and Estrangement* provide different noteworthy perspectives.

[9] As I mentioned above, this particular observation is uncontested, and a common observation in both epistemology and the philosophy of language.

[10] Bar-On takes the position of one confronted with the unique security of such expressions of self-knowledge, and instead of questioning it, she affirms it, and then proceeds to draw out possible foundations for its security.

Bar-On's theory centers on avowals. Avowals "ascribe states of mind that the speaker happens to be in at a given time".[11] In layman's terms, avowals are present-tense, first-person ascriptions of occurrent mental states. Additionally, avowals are usually treated as quite trustworthy. That is, we rarely question an avowing individual concerning whether or not she is actually in the state she is avowing.[12] For example, when someone avows having a headache, we typically do not doubt or question the individual.[13] Prima facie, it may seem that trustworthiness is not the right characterization of our attitudes toward avowals per se, but instead it may be that avowals are unusually factive. Indeed, avowals seem factive. Strangely though, we do not have a plausible or convincing reason to state that avowals are necessarily factive. Instead, the best way to proceed might be to notice that we treat them as factive, and therefore try to unpack this treatment—which may, ultimately, reveal their facticity to us.

In discussing the feature of avowals described above, Bar-On observes, "Avowals have a unique status… avowals appear to enjoy distinctive security".[14] But why are avowals so secure? Semantically speaking, we see that avowals are continuous with many other statements we make that do not enjoy such special security. Indeed, there are many kinds of self-reports that we question. If I report that I have memorized the entirety of the Gospel of John and can recite it in

[11] *Speaking My Mind*, 1. Avowals do posit the existence of an avower or speaker. The relationship between this supposition and personal identity, though unclear now, will become clear as I proceed.
[12] It is important to note here that avowals do not have to be spoken. Many avowals (in fact, likely most avowals) are simply thoughts. One may notice that one has a headache without verbalizing it. Bar-On interprets this kind of self-observation as an unspoken, mental avowal: "I have a headache."
[13] To be clear, I am not suggesting she cannot be mistaken (perhaps she thinks an itchy head is a headache). Rather, I am pointing out how rare it is for us to question her; prima facie our behavior, or trust, is unmotivated. As such, we should examine why and how we treat avowals this way.
[14] Ibid.

my mind, someone may question this and ask me to prove it by reciting it aloud. Also, avowals state or report matters of fact, and statements of fact are generally vulnerable to error and not especially secure unless some special circumstance exists (such as when a statement of fact is given by an expert in a particular field). Why then do we think of avowals as so secure?

Bar-On ventures an answer to this question: On her neo-expressivist account, avowals are secure due to their expressive nature and, as such, their similarity to natural expressions. In particular, avowals stand in the same relationship to self-awareness in which natural expressions stand. Bar-On describes natural expressions:

> [We] think of natural expressions of sensations as spontaneous reactions that are in some important way characteristic of the subject's relevant states…natural expressions are not limited to sensations. There are natural expressions characteristic of emotions and feelings…what is crucial about natural expressions of all these kinds is that they are in no way thought to…be epistemically grounded in a subject's *judgment* or *belief* about some state of affairs.[15]

According to Bar-on, natural expressions are epistemically secure indicators of an individual's internal states. Avowals are meant to be relevantly similar. In fact, avowals must be sufficiently similar to natural expressions *in order to entail the security found in natural expressions*. One reason natural expressions are so secure is that they seem to simply "give vent" to internal states. Avowals, whether in speech or internal mental dialogue, also seem to "give vent" to internal states, albeit with truth-evaluable content that natural expressions often lack.[16]

[15] 229-230.

[16] Avowals ascribe first-person mental states. Mental states are matters of fact, and first-person ascriptions thereof are either factive or not. When one wins a prize and yells "I'm so excited," she may or may not feel excited; the avowal is vulnerable insofar as she actually is excited or not. Natural expressions, alternatively, usually do not assert any matters of fact, though they may imply or indicate such. For example, someone may gasp loudly when startled. Such a gasp is a natural expression usually indicative of fear or anxiety. It reveals a mental state, but it is not an assertion or report thereof. An avowal, on the other hand, will contain truth-evaluable content (even if we are unable to actually evaluate that content).

For example, we can observe a natural expression when a person sees a frightening villain in a movie and jumps exclaiming, “Ahh!” This person is simply expressing emotions of surprise and fear. It does not make sense to evaluate such an expression in terms of reliability, accuracy, or possibly even conceptual content. The exclamation merely expresses, and hence is not an appropriate object for doubt or mistrust given that it does not make any truth-evaluable claims (though it does indicate that the speaker is experiencing surprise and fear). When a student receives a paper back from a professor with the grade D- and shouts, “Oh no!”, the student is giving natural expression to his emotion of anxiety. Here it also seems out of place to evaluate or judge the expression (so far as epistemological considerations are concerned). That is, it would be very odd to question whether the student is actually experiencing the internal state he is expressing. Indeed, natural expressions do not actually assert one’s emotions, or any other content for that matter, but they do indicate or reveal content. This is important because the content can be trusted in a unique manner. The content is trustworthy and immune to doubt because it is revealed (or expressed) content rather than asserted content. The content is trustworthy not because it is asserted, but rather because it makes itself known. Avowals are expressive in a way similar to this, and similar enough to be analogous to natural expressions in terms of security; the expressive nature they hold in common with natural expressions grounds the security of each.[17]

This is not to say that avowals are a secure means of interpersonal communication. Certainly an observer could misunderstand a facial expression or the like. Rather, what is important is that natural expressions—and avowals—are resistant to doubt about whether an

[17] The relationship between avowals and natural expressions will become clear later while exploring a subset of avowals known as avowals proper.

individual is indeed experiencing the internal state to which she is giving vent. Whether or not I properly interpret her expression is a separate matter from whether or not her expression properly vents her internal state. Avowals are not vulnerable to the same level of scrutiny as are other more elaborate self-reports in terms of what the avowing individual is expressing. What matters here is not the security of communication between the person avowing and some other individual. Rather, Bar-On's emphasis is on the secure connection between the content of the avowal and the inner state of the person avowing. If something goes wrong, it will not be because the avowal or natural expression vents an absent internal state. Rather, it will be because an observer has misunderstood the avowal.

In order to establish the link between natural expressions and avowals, it is helpful to compare natural expressions and avowals proper. Natural expressions and avowals are similar, but natural expressions and avowals proper are even more similar. As explained by Bar-On, an avowal proper is "… a present tense *mental self-ascription* [produced] *spontaneously and unreflectively*".[18] Bar-On offers a few examples of avowals proper, such as when one says, "I feel so hot!" as one is walking into an overheated room, or "I hate this mess!" voiced as one walks into her apartment.[19] These avowals seem distinctly expressive in nature, quite like natural expressions, though they make use of more articulate linguistic means.

Since avowals proper are a subset of avowals, establishing the connection between avowals proper and natural expressions helps to reveal the connection between natural expressions and avowals in general. These avowals *do* ascribe certain mental states to the person avowing. Avowals proper (and other avowals) explicitly state a truth-evaluable claim, such as

[18] 242 emphasis added.
[19] Ibid.

that a person hates her messy room. Natural expressions, on the other hand, only indicate that a person is in a certain state—such as the above example of screaming, "Ahh!", indicating that the speaker is experiencing fear or surprise. So, even though avowals proper contain truth-evaluable content, they are still sufficiently similar to natural expressions to retain the distinctive security of natural expression. And, noting this feature of avowals proper, we can see how avowals (in general) will also possess this quality.

When a student receives paper feedback via email and immediately exclaims, "I'm so disappointed!", the student is not making a simple natural expression, but instead the student is issuing an avowal proper. Nonetheless, the statement seems to be expressing the same angst as the earlier natural expression of "Oh no!" upon receiving the grade D- .[20] Evaluating whether the student is truly disappointed, or whether the student is the one who is disappointed, seems inappropriate. This is largely for the same reasons, since it seems inappropriate to evaluate the natural expression—both are simply giving vent to an internal state of the speaker. The salient difference here between natural expressions and avowals, according to neo-expressivism, is that avowals seem to be truth-evaluable statements; natural expressions, on the other hand, do not have semantic content in this way. Regardless of this difference, they both serve to directly express a person's internal states. The neo-expressivist argument holds that the distinct security

[20] One could object here that these are not as much expressions of the student's internal states as they are speech acts the student performs for some reason (that is influenced by his relationship to audience expectations). For example, the student may feel he needs to express disappointment or hope to change his instructor's mind about the grade. However, these objections only hold if the student's expressions occur within reach of some kind of audience, such as in front of the instructor. My examples *do not* require that. Instead they are unpremeditated expressions of the student's internal state, given in solitude. I intend the student to be alone, simply reading emailed grade reports in my examples. Importantly, he *does not* email the content he avows back to the instructor, it is simply his own response to the feedback and/or grade.

enjoyed by natural expressions is also enjoyed by avowals because avowals share the expressive character of natural expressions.

At this point we have seen, in some detail, how Bar-On's treatment of avowals works. It is important to note that nowhere along the way were natural expressions, avowals, or the self-knowledge they create taken to be suspect. The epistemic security of such expressions is uncontroversially accepted *antecedently* to understanding how the mechanisms of the expressions operate. In fact, it is considered a desideratum of a successful theory of natural expressions, avowals, and self-knowledge that such a theory explain *how* these kinds of expressions are so epistemically secure (not *that* they are so secure). Any theory that explains avowals and natural expressions by eliminating or reducing their special epistemic status would be a failure. When Kyle stubs his toe and gives vent to his internal state of pain by exclaiming, "Ouch!", we simply do not investigate the epistemic legitimacy of his expression[21].

It is uncontroversial that a person stands in a special relationship to his own self that affords him self-knowledge which we take to be epistemically secure. Of course, we do not always treat this self-knowledge as secure, such as our doubting of a schizophrenic's self-reports. But, except in such very rare sorts of extenuating circumstances, we treat nearly all reports of self-knowledge as secure. This is generally due to the privileged position in which an individual stands in regard to his inner states. This privileged epistemic access is the reason for our special

[21] Note that we could investigate this but still do not. We could decide that he may or may not be in pain, and we might conduct some experiments to test whether he is indeed in pain when he exclaims "Ouch!" But, we choose not to. We do not see or recognize a need to epistemically evaluate his expression. Of course, we could do so and might do so—as his statements get more and more specific. That is, if Kyle reports that, on a 1 to 10 scale, he feels pain at an 8.789 level, we might begin to doubt his level of specificity. But we will not usually doubt that he is experiencing pain.

treatment of his self-knowledge. Natural expressions and avowals are examples of ways we categorize and communicate that self-knowledge.

With this detour through Bar-On's neo-expressivist account of self-knowledge complete, we can get to the payoff for proponents of religious experience. Recall the chief aim of my investigation: Earlier I gestured towards a sort of religious belief based in religious experience that a skeptic can forbid only at the cost of requiring skepticism about self-knowledge. It turns out that Bar-On's neo-expressivist theory will help us to recognize how a religious belief can be justified by religious experience in this way.

Let us return to poor Kyle and his toe. In our earlier example, we do not typically dispute whether or not Kyle feels pain. This is because of his privileged access to his own internal states. To see this more clearly, imagine that when Kyle stubs his toe and exclaims, "Ouch!", his officemate responds by telling him, "I can understand why you believe you feel pain, but actually I don't believe you do." Such a response would strike us as bizarre. Our linguistic practice reveals the status we accord natural expressions; we treat them as incorrigible. It is worth noting that even Kyle's misanthropic officemate is not challenging the justification of Kyle's expression that he is experiencing pain. She is merely challenging whether or not Kyle really is experiencing pain. That is, she challenges the facticity of Kyle's belief, but she does not challenge the justification of Kyle's belief. It is important to note that it ultimately does not matter whether Kyle is an English-speaker or even fluent in any language. Differing interpretations of "Ouch!" in the English language do not change the expressive nature of Kyle's behavior. Indeed, even a natural or sub-linguistic expression can easily express pain in this way—for example wincing, recoiling from a painful stimulus, squirming, etc. Any of these will do for my purposes. Even a dog will whimper or yelp when in pain, and inasmuch give vent to,

or express, the experience of pain.[22] In other words, the nature of particular expressions in some language (and interpretations thereof) are insufficient to explain what is happening in these sorts of exchanges.

In order to challenge the justification of Kyle's belief as well, the officemate's statement would need to be something closer to this: "I think you merely believe you feel pain. And really you should not believe that at all; you don't have enough evidence." This statement is even more bizarre than the first. Here the officemate not only doubts Kyle but goes on to rebuke him for his belief. Here she is asserting that one's experience of, and beliefs about, one's own phenomenal states require evidential justification other than direct awareness. She demands that Kyle holds insufficient evidence for his expression of pain. This does not accord with our linguistic practice. Kyle's officemate may challenge Kyle about (a) whether he is really in as much pain as he lets on (perhaps he only scuffed his shoe but did not stub his toe), but she should not challenge Kyle about (b) his sensation (and expression) of pain. Our social practice is such that it would be very odd indeed for an observer to say—earnestly—to Kyle, "Oh hush, you're not in any pain at all. In fact, if anything, you feel an itch." This is because of at least two things. First, the privileged relationship one stands in to his own phenomenal states, and two, because an individual

[22] Some might find my use of the verb "express" bothersome here. How one responds to the idea of a dog "expressing" something may hinge on intuitions about what one thinks "express" means in ordinary language. Indeed, different senses of the term carry different implications for the argument. This can be seen in an exchange between Bar-On (in *Speaking My Mind*, "Avowals: Expression, Security, and Knowledge") and Rosenthal (in "Expressing One's Mind"). Wilfrid Sellars' notions of expression from his *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* are instructive here. If one intuitively thinks of expression in a way continuous with Sellars' idea of expression in the sematic sense, then objecting seems right. But, as Sellars acknowledges, expressing in the sematic sense is not the only way of expressing. There is also expression in the casual sense, the action sense, and the mental sense (see Mitchell Green's *Self-Expression*). A dog's yelp only seems troubling as expressive behavior if we arbitrarily limit expression to expression in the semantic sense. For an interesting discussion of expressive behavior in animals, see Bar-On and Priselac's "Triangulation and the Beasts".

exclaiming “Ouch!” just is giving vent to an internal, phenomenal state. Ruling out cases of theatrics or intentional manipulation, the exclamation of “Ouch!” is simply generated, or derived, from a sense of pain.

Indeed, legitimately challenging Kyle about (a) above more or less amounts to challenging whether Kyle is acting genuinely or not (i.e., whether Kyle is “acting” in some way). But, we must remember that natural expressions and avowals are, by stipulation, genuine and sincere. Ultimately, the officemate’s complaint challenges whether or not Kyle is producing a genuine natural expression. It is not challenging that the natural expression has come apart from the phenomenal state from which it arose, as this would be impossible. Rather, it is challenging whether or not “Ouch!” really is a bona fide natural expression. So long as Kyle’s “Ouch!” really is a natural expression, it merely vents an internal state and as such is not an appropriate object of doubt. Let’s imagine that, after “Ouch!”, Kyle asserts that he is having an experience of pain. We can imagine Kyle defending his belief that he is experiencing pain in this way:

1p: I, Kyle, have privileged epistemic access to my own internal states.

2p: My present tense, first-person expressive ascriptions of occurrent mental states (i.e., avowals) are incorrigible due to 1p.[23]

3p: I produce such an ascription with the content, “I am having an experience of pain.”

4p: Given 2p and 3p, my ascription of experiencing pain is incorrigible.

5p: If my ascription of experiencing pain is incorrigible, then I am justified in believing that I am experiencing pain.

[23] In mainstream epistemology, 1p is widely accepted and 2p, though perhaps less widely accepted, is still relatively uncontroversial (as seen in Bar-On’s work).

6p: I am justified in believing that I am experiencing pain. (4p, 5p modus ponens)

It may seem silly to write out such an argument since we typically take Kyle's justification to be obvious. That said, doing so here will provide a helpful basis as we proceed further.

Part Three: Inner States and Religious Experience

Before applying this discussion of self-knowledge to religious experience, I should set out one parameter. In order to be as productive and definitive as possible, I will limit the sort of religious belief in question (i.e., those that may be justified by religious experience) to the belief that *something divine was experienced*.[24] Any belief content more specific than this, while interesting, is not the object of my investigation. This is because my query is only whether or not the skeptic must cede that some belief—any belief—can justifiably be held in virtue of religious experience. Due to this, I need not consider more elaborate religious beliefs. My argument will be substantiated merely by showing that any one genuinely religious belief (general or otherwise) can be justified based on religious experience. One influential description of the inner state of divine perception is Rudolf Otto's idea of the numinous.[25] He describes numinous experience this way:

> The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its "profane," non-religious mood of everyday experience…. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures.[26]

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[24] Of course, the interesting next step is the belief that if something divine was experienced, then something divine exists. That said, I do not have to endorse this in order to point out an example of a religious belief justified by religious experience. I need only show that the belief "something divine was experienced" can be justified by a religious experience.

[25] Despite writing a habilitation on Immanuel Kant, Otto's use of "numinous" is not intended to relate to the idea of the "noumenon". Otto is working form the Latin *numen* whereas Kant is working from the Greek *nooúmenon*.

[26] *The Idea of the Holy* 12-13.

Otto refers to the numinous as the *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—the fearful and fascinating mystery. The numinous is daunting, awesome, even terrifying (*tremendum*), but it is also uniquely attractive, captivating, and compelling (*fascinans*). Strictly speaking, describing the perception of divinity lies outside the scope of my argument. However, Otto's description is both influential and helpful. As such I will use the terms "numinous experience," "deity experience," or "divine experience" more or less interchangeably.

Natural expressions are secure because they merely "give vent" to internal states. Avowals share this security due to their expressive nature (illustrated most clearly by comparison with avowals proper). Superficially, avowals may seem too dissimilar to offer any insights into the justification of religious beliefs based on religious experience. After all, religious beliefs justified by religious experiences tend to be reasoned to from experiences, and avowals are immediate and often internal. But religious beliefs justified by religious experiences need not be inferred from religious experiences. Instead, religious beliefs can be justified simply in virtue of one's privileged access to her own inner states. Awareness of one's own internal states may include the awareness that one is having an experience of deity. And this awareness of religious experience is not derivative—it is not reasoned from antecedent principles or experiences. Instead, as is the case with awareness of internal states more generally, the awareness is immediate as part of one's first-person perspective much like the awareness that underwrites avowals.

Imagine Kyle tells his officemate that he had an *internal* experience of God's presence. Note that this is not a form of sense perception. No, this is an inner experience of God's presence

similar to other inner experiences and unlike our ordinary sense-based perception.[27] And, the experience itself is known to Kyle through his direct, privileged access to his inner states (not unlike his privileged knowledge of whether or not he is in pain). Perhaps Kyle even forms a natural expression during the experience; he might gasp, fall down, remain in silent awe, or something else. Falling down or gasping seem appropriate particularly as natural expressions of a numinous experience. Nevertheless, it may ultimately remain unclear exactly what counts as a natural expression of perceiving something divine. However, this is quite a different matter than whether or not natural expressions exist for perceiving something divine.[28] A natural expression is not epistemically required, though, as Kyle's avowal of having a religious experience is sufficient for this example to be analogous to the scenario with his officemate.[29]

Would it be appropriate to tell Kyle, "Well, I don't know; I think you merely believe you had a numinous experience"? Denying Kyle's self-knowledge of perceiving divinity might seem more appropriate than denying Kyle's self-knowledge of feeling pain due to how familiar we all are with pain and how unfamiliar we are with perceptions of divinity.[30] On the other hand, it

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[27] One might argue that experiencing divinity cannot be an inner experience. But, as we will discuss later, this trades on the assumption that divinity is always external to one's self, and this is theologically controversial.

[28] While is true that Kyle's natural expression may be required to justify others in believing that he is experiencing connection with God, is Kyle himself reasoning that he is having a religious experience from his own gasp? No. Rather, his expression merely indicates his experience. He is simply experiencing something religious and expressing that experience synchronously.

[29] Bar-On maintains that there is little to no difference in epistemic security between a natural expression and an (honest) avowal. Of course, as we saw before, an exaggeration is not a genuine avowal. Though examples involving natural expressions tend to be more interesting.

[30] My purpose here is to examine (and defend) Kyle's beliefs. But, what about the observer? When is it appropriate for her to deny an expression? Some expressive behavior is familiar to most; some expressive behavior is familiar to few. Should an observer accept an expressive behavior only when it is relevantly similar to her own expressive behaviors? This seems problematic, as whether or not I have experience with some expressive behavior seems irrelevant to whether or not someone exhibiting that expressive behavior is genuinely expressing. Determining when an observer can appropriately deny or reject some expressive behavior is an

might still seem inappropriate to question his experience. Interestingly, either of the above responses is fine for our purposes. Recall that we are not investigating whether or not a religious experience can grant religious *knowledge*. Rather, we are concerned with whether or not a religious experience can *justify* a religious belief. For this, we need to consider the analog of the officemate's second expression about Kyle's stubbed toe. It would be something like this: "Well, I don't know. I think you merely believe you experienced something divine. And really you should not believe that at all; you don't have enough evidence." We found this statement wholly inappropriate and bizarre when Kyle stubbed his toe, and yet the two instances seem importantly similar. If we react differently to Kyle now, we need a sufficient reason.[31]

What might make the disparity in the two reactions appropriate? In both cases the officemate is denying the justificatory force of Kyle's privileged epistemic position with regard to his self-knowledge and experience of his own inner states. The objects of the experiences are different: namely, pain and God. But the epistemic status of self-reports and our privileged access to self-knowledge are not changed by the different kinds of inner experience one can have, whether it be pain, connection with divinity, or even just a tickle. Of course, one need not provide an ontological explanation for the existence of pain in order to be in pain, nor does one need to be able to explain how they know they are feeling pain rather than something else. It seems unreasonable, then, to treat other objects of experience, such as a tickle or divinity, as any different. Kyle is justified in believing he is experiencing deity for the same reason he is justified

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important and difficult question. Ultimately my argument does not hinge on finding a successful answer to this question since it is concerned with the epistemological status of the beliefs of the expressing individual rather than the observer.

[31] If Kyle does more than simply express an experience he is having, such as attribute the experience to the volition and actions of an external deity, then we may react differently to Kyle. But for now, he is merely expressing the internal experience he is having.

in believing he is experiencing pain: his privileged first-person awareness of his own internal states.

Now one might press for differential treatment by arguing that experiencing a tickle is natural to humans while experiencing divinity is not. It may be true that experiencing a tickle seems more natural than experiencing divinity; however, this is difficult to substantiate with argument. The appearance of naturalness and unnaturalness is specious; it confuses frequency with naturalness. Tickle experiences are simply far more common than religious experiences. Very likely everyone who reads this paper will have experienced many tickles firsthand. It is far less likely that everyone who reads this paper will have experienced many religious experiences firsthand. Tickle experiences are mundane; religious experiences are not mundane. Whether something is mundane for humans is not the same as whether it is natural for humans. Some experiences natural to humans are utterly ordinary and common, such as sneezing. Other experiences natural to humans are striking and uncommon, such as having vertigo. This relative frequencies with which these two happen is not what makes them natural to human beings. Here one might assert that nobody needs to be taught what a tickle is, whereas individuals must be taught what a religious experience is. So, tickles are more natural to humans. Here the frequency of experiences has been exchanged for frequencies humans can identify without instruction. It is not clear that tickle experiences are untutored in a way disanalogous to religious experiences. Very likely no one knows the word "divinity" until taught. However, it is equally the case that no one knows the word "tickle" until taught. When a child is tickled, her parent will say, "You feel a tickle." Tickle experiences are natural to humans, but the locutions we use to describe them are not. It seems just as likely that religious experiences might be natural to humans, while the locutions used to describe them are not.

So, we can imagine Kyle defending the justification of his belief that he experienced something numinous in a manner similar to his earlier argument about pain:

1d: I, Kyle, have privileged epistemic access to my own internal states.

2d: My present tense, first-person expressive ascriptions of occurrent mental states (i.e., avowals) are incorrigible due to 1d.

3d: I produce such an ascription with the content, "I am having an experience of the numinous."

4d: Given 2d and 3d, my ascription of experiencing the numinous is incorrigible.

5d: If my ascription of experiencing the numinous is incorrigible, then I am justified in believing that I am experiencing the numinous.

6d: I am justified in believing that I am experiencing the numinous.

If this is true, then it is possible for a religious belief to be appropriately justified by a religious experience. Further, this will be the case without reliance on a principle of credulity or by comparing religious perception to sensory perception. It will also be true regardless of whether religious experiences are had by few or many people, or whether religious experiences are often meager and obscure, or whether possible naturalistic explanations exist, or even whether beliefs based upon religious experience can give rise to diverse religious beliefs. The truth or falsity of the proposition that a religious belief can be appropriately justified by a religious experience will depend solely on the veracity of our account of self-knowledge.

Given the skeptic's stance, this is a remarkable outcome. Remember that the skeptic maintains that religious experience is—in principle—insufficient to justify any religious beliefs. But, if we think carefully about how we normally treat self-awareness and expressions of self-knowledge, we find that religious experiences *can indeed* justify religious beliefs (as seen in

Kyle's belief). And since the skeptic has ruled this out in principle, I need only to find one possible instance of a religious belief justified by religious experience in order to prove her wrong. Whether it is likely or not that a scenario like Kyle's will actually occur is a separate matter; the mere possibility is enough to defeat the skeptic's strong stance. Further, it is an advantage to accomplish this without reliance on any conceptual apparatus custom-built for religious epistemology. Such conceptual tools give the skeptic opportunities to disagree or make charges of ad-hoc premises. My theory meets the skeptic on her own terms.

Part Four: In Defense of Kyle's Religious Experience

My prior example of Kyle and his officemate may strike some as hasty. Allow me to elaborate on what I have shown by comparing two further scenarios in which avowals reveal first-person awareness. First, I will present and analyze a familiar avowal. Following that, I will present and analyze a religious analog.

In the first scenario Jesse walks into a room and thinks to herself, "I feel warm." This expression of an internal state—that of feeling warm—is harmless enough. In fact, it is accompanied by the profound epistemic security that is characteristic of first-person expressions of ongoing inner states. Should Jesse say she feels warm out loud, we would not ask Jesse to substantiate or prove that she feels warm.[32] Her description of her internal state is straightforwardly accepted rather than evaluated (due to her unique epistemic access to her own internal states). As has been recounted multiple times, this is simply how we treat self-knowledge and is analogous to 1d-6d (and 1p-6p earlier) above.

[32] That is, unless we have some strong contravening reason to ask (e.g., Jesse is shivering). But notice, so long as Jesse adamantly maintains that she feels warm, despite shivering, we are still inclined to accept Jesse's description of her inner state. We would likely think she is suffering from dehydration, heat stroke, or some other condition that presents the symptoms of both shivering and warmth.

Now imagine that Jesse follows up her initial statement by asserting, "This room is warm." Her second statement represents a belief she holds, and its justification relies on her self-knowledge. Even so, her second statement, "This room is warm," is epistemically vulnerable in ways her first statement is not. She is no longer just describing states of affairs internal to herself. Now she is describing a state of affairs external to herself, namely the temperature of the room in which she stands. She may have a justified belief about the temperature of the room, but it is vulnerable in ways her first statement was not. Her second statement is not an avowal at all (it does not resemble a present-tense first-person ascription of a mental state). But, importantly, the vulnerability of the second statement does not in any way make her first statement vulnerable. We can represent Jesse's longer argument as follows:

1w: I, Jesse, have privileged epistemic access to my own internal states.

2w: My present tense, first-person expressive ascriptions of occurrent mental states (i.e., avowals) are incorrigible due to 1w.

3w: I produce such an ascription with the content, "I feel warm."

4w: Given 2w and 3w, my ascription of feeling warmth is incorrigible.

5w: If my ascription of feeling warmth is incorrigible, then I am justified in believing that I am feeling warmth.

6w: I am justified in believing that I am feeling warmth.

7w: If I am justified in believing that I am feeling warmth, then I am at least prima facie justified in believing something warm exists.

8w: So, I am at least prima facie justified in believing something warm exists.

The mistake we must not make here is to confuse 6w and 8w. 1w-6w jointly show that Jesse's belief that she feels warmth is justified. If Jesse is feeling energetic, she may include 7w and 8w

to show that she is at least prima facie justified in believing something warm exists as well. But Jesse *need not* do so. 7w and 8w are optional for her.

Let's now imagine that Jesse, like Kyle, has a religious experience. She thinks to herself, "I feel deity." This expression of an internal state—that of experiencing deity—must receive the same treatment we give to other avowals. In other words, this avowal of Jesse's is epistemically privileged in just the same way as her other reports of her internal states. We should not ask Jesse to substantiate or prove that she feels deity any more than we would ask Jesse to substantiate or prove that she is feeling warmth. 1d-6d jointly show that religious experience is sufficient to justify a religious belief; namely the belief that one is experiencing deity. This alone demonstrates my goal of showing that the skeptic cannot succeed in ruling out all religious beliefs based on religious experience as unjustified. The skeptic cannot charge that I have failed to meet her challenge by failing to prove 7d and 8d. Though interesting, the two are in no way required for the success of 6d. Jesse can straightforwardly argue:

1d: I have privileged epistemic access to my own internal states.

2d: My present tense, first-person expressive ascriptions of occurrent mental states (i.e., avowals) are incorrigible due to 1d.

3d: I produce such an ascription with the content, "I am having an experience of deity."

4d: Given 2d and 3d, my ascription of experiencing deity is incorrigible.

5d: If my ascription of experiencing deity is incorrigible, then I am justified in believing that I am experiencing deity.

6d: I am justified in believing that I am experiencing deity.

While Jesse need not say any more than this, we may still imagine that she follows up her avowal with the statement, "So, something numinous exists" (recall that a numinous experience is a common description of a deity experience). Her second statement represents a belief she holds, and her justification is based on her self-knowledge (i.e., the epistemically transparent nature of her inner states to her own self) seen in her antecedent avowal. This is analogous to her earlier statement, "This room is warm." Her assertion "Deity exists" is epistemically vulnerable in ways her avowal is not. She is asserting a state of affairs not entirely internal to herself, and she does not have privileged access to such states of affairs. However, it seems her belief about this state of affairs (God's existence) is at least prima facie justified because it is based on her earlier avowal, and she does have privileged access to states of affairs within herself.[33] Her belief that "God exists" could certainly be wrong; it is not knowledge. But it is prima facie justified in the same way that her belief "this room is warm" is prima facie justified. It is another religious belief based on a religious experience. The religious experience was internal and transparent to her in the same way her other internal states are, but it was a religious experience nonetheless. Jesse can argue this way:

7d: If I am justified in believing that I am experiencing deity, then I am at least prima facie justified in believing something numinous—divine—exists.

8d: So, I am at least prima facie justified in believing something divine exists.

Here 7d and 8d are only required if Kyle or Jesse want to defend theism as prima facie justified by religious experience. While interesting, this is a specific religious belief. My goal is to deny the skeptic's claim that no genuine religious beliefs can be justifiably held on the basis of

[33] This is also the case because we usually take connectedness with something to entail that thing's existence.

religious experience. 1d-6d are enough to rebut the skeptic and show that the belief "I am experiencing deity" is justified for both Kyle and Jesse on the basis of religious experience (3d) when combined with uncontroversial claims about self-knowledge (1d and 2d). I have included 7d-8d only to distinguish them from 1d-6d. Of course, some who are attracted to this argument may also desire to proceed to 7d-8d, so perhaps it is useful to include them. All the same, it is important to note that 7d-8d are not required to show that there is a type of appropriately modest religious belief based on corresponding religious experience that even the skeptic cannot deny.[34]

We should pause here to avoid a misunderstanding. It is easy to misunderstand this argument as justifying too much too easily. To see this, let us consider an ocean swimmer named Sarah. Sarah sees a shark fin in the ocean. However, unbeknownst to Sarah, the shark fin is only a replica worn by a youthful prankster.

Sarah may scream upon seeing the shark fin. This scream is a natural expression giving vent to her internal state of fear directed at her perception of a shark. So, we might say that Sarah perceives something fearful nearby. We also may say that Sarah's inner state of fear is revealed in her natural expression of screaming, "Ahhhh!" So far this may sound a bit like an Alstonian sense perception analogy since Sarah is responding to a visual perception. Here is where it is different: Remember that we are interested in Sarah's awareness of her inner states; her beliefs about what may or may not exist in the water are only an ancillary concern.

Sarah's first-person perspective provides her with direct awareness of her experience of fear resulting from noticing an object she thinks can harm her. It would be inappropriate to say Sarah is unjustified in her awareness of her fearful inner state. It would also be inappropriate to

[34] While 7d-8d are rather interesting, 6d is still nontrivial. It importantly establishes that a religious belief may be appropriately justified by a religious experience.

say Sarah is unjustified in believing she is having a scary experience. Her own privileged access to her internal states alone is enough to justify *her own* belief that she is having a scary experience. In order for *her experience* to be a fearful experience, it need only have been an experience characterized by fear of a threatening object. Her belief that she had a scary experience is justified.

If Sarah goes on to say that she is justified in believing that something scary *exists* in the water around her, it might then be appropriate to ask her, "Now Sarah, is the kind of thing you experienced really the kind of thing you should be afraid of?" For Sarah is only prima facie justified in believing that something scary exists in the water. And, upon being told the shark fin is a replica, she should abandon her belief that something scary (i.e. something that could harm her) is in the water. I am not concerned with whether or not Sarah is justified in believing she saw a shark. Rather, I am concerned with whether or not Sarah is justified in believing her experience was scary. And it seems that by all counts Sarah is justified in believing her experience was of a scary nature due to her privileged epistemic access to her own internal states. *Sarah is justified in believing she had a fearful experience*. And, she may justifiably go on to argue that she is prima facie justified in believing there is something threatening in the water.

But, is a child pretending to be a shark a threatening object? Most of us would say no. Most of us would probably say that Sarah was frightened by something that could not actually harm her. But that does not mean her belief that she had a scary experience is not justified nor that her belief something scary is in the water is not prima facie justified. Beliefs based on experience can go wrong. But what is important here is that they are justified.[35] This is similar to

[35] Epistemic justification is sometimes divided into deontic and nondeontic conceptions. Those who prefer a nondeontic model may resist the ease with which I allow Sarah's belief to be justified. Despite this, fortunately perceptual and experiential events—taken generally—are

our earlier case of Jesse's feeling warm. Jesse has self-awareness that she feels warm, and from this Jesse is justified in her belief that she feels warm and prima facie justified in her belief that the room is warm. This can be the case even if Jesse has a fever and the room is in fact cold.

This scenario can be run again with an actual shark. In this case, Sarah's prima facie justified belief that something scary is in the water is also true. How should one evaluate Sarah's beliefs absent any outside instructions about whether the fin is a shark or a prankster? We should evaluate her beliefs in the manner I have suggested. That is, her belief that she had a scary experience is justified considering 1w-6w (or 1p-6p or 1d-6d), and her belief that something fearful lurks in the water is prima facie justified in light of 7w-8w (or 7d-8d). Considering how one should evaluate Sarah's beliefs without antecedent information about the fin is illustrative for how we should think of Kyle's and Jesse's predicaments.

Part Five: Objections to Kyle, Jesse, and Sarah

Now I will explore three objections to my argument. The first is that my argument inappropriately produces conclusions about external things based on internal things. The second dismisses my argument as making too much of one-offs that we really ought to ignore. The third rejects the idea that persons have privileged access to their own internal states.

The first objection is that my argument inappropriately crosses an internal-external divide by justifying beliefs about external matters from internal observations. This criticism holds that Kyle, Jesse, and Sarah are only learning things about *themselves* and not anything about the

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usually among the least controversial instances of epistemic justification within each framework. While I am most interested in the more widely accepted deontic conception, proponents of a nondeontic model should still find my observations relatively uncontroversial. See Hamid Vahid's "Deontic vs. Nondeontic Conceptions of Epistemic Justification" for an insightful comparison of the two. Alston's *Epistemic Justification* and *A Realist Conception of Truth* are also noteworthy.

external world. It is all well and good for Kyle and Jesse to be justified in believing things about their internal states, but no amount of such justifying should ever lead to justified beliefs about deity. Put another way, surely experiencing divinity cannot be an inner experience. Surely inner experiences cannot justify—prima facie or otherwise—beliefs about deity because deity is an external object. To experience deity is to experience something external. Avowals, avowals proper, natural expressions, and the like all only describe first-person occurrent internal states. Deity, on the other hand, is an external object, outside of Kyle and Jesse. As such, it is inappropriate for either of them to conclude something about deity from an inner experience.

This objection appears rather forceful, but it falters on two counts, the first dealing with epistemic double-standards and the second with ontological assumptions.

One sort of epistemic double-standard takes place when one applies some epistemic standard to a behavior in order to criticize it, while failing to apply that standard to other endorsed behaviors that would, if tested, be likewise criticized.[36] The reason a double-standard obtains in this particular case is that a great many, perhaps virtually all, of our judgments about external reality are based on internal experiences. And these are typically taken as uncontroversial. When such a judgment is controversial, it is usually not in virtue of it being based on internal experience. For example, when you sit in a chair, you make a judgment about an external reality, namely that a chair is supporting you, based on an internal experience, namely the sensation of sitting in the chair. Similarly, when you shiver with cold as you walk outside, you make a judgement about an external reality, that it is cold outside, based on an internal experience, feeling cold. A great deal of the time we uncontroversially form beliefs

[36] In some ways this is similar to Alston's idea of epistemic imperialism, see *Perceiving God* 248-250.

about external reality based on internal sensations. Indeed, it is difficult to see how we could get on without doing so. What this means is that we are already rather comfortable inculpably crossing the internal-external divide. Indeed, one cannot levy this objection against religious experience unless she is willing to similarly charge our ordinary practice of relying on internal experiences to make judgments about external reality. Without this, the objection is merely a version of epistemic imperialism.

Interestingly, I can grant my interlocuter her rule—that inner experiences should not be used to make judgements about external matters—for the sake of argument, and her objection will still fail. So, hypothetically inner experiences cannot justify beliefs about external matters. But even with all this granted, the objection is not decisive. This is the case because the objection trades on the assumption that deity must always be external to one's self. This is a *theological* supposition (rather than philosophical), and a controversial one at that.

Religious perspectives run the gamut on this score. On one pole, there are some religious communities who endorse divinity as wholly external; for these few, the objection is decisive.[37] On the other pole, there are religious communities who in fact hold that divinity is entirely internal to human persons; for these, the objection is a non-starter. In between these positions lie a vast number of theological options associated with various religious traditions; for these, the objection will not be decisive. For example, some communities hold that the boundaries between deity and human persons blur with certain events, such as conversion, baptism, or something else. Others posit that the divine has the volitional power to "spiritually connect" with human persons at will; in this case the separation between deity and human persons could blur at any

[37] Though, of course, the burden rests with them to prove this is the correct and exclusive ontology of deity.

moment.[38] To be sure, deity is an unusual object. Relatively few maintain that it is exclusively internal. But many deny that it is wholly external. And, in any case, for this objection to succeed, it must be taken as a supposition that deity is ontologically wholly external, and this is certainly a controversial claim.

The second objection is that I am making too much of exceptions and edge-cases. This criticism rests on the claim that sometimes individuals report internal states are unusual or perplexingly foreign, and that as such, these states should be disregarded or viewed with extreme skepticism simply because they are so different from more common internal states. In other words, we should ignore those who report internal states that seem very odd to us. Further, it is argued, internal states of experiencing divinity fall into this category.

This objection is unmotivated. Some internal states may indeed be perplexingly foreign, but this is not enough for us to disregard them or treat them with extreme skepticism. The simple fact that I find it difficult to imagine an inner state does not give me sufficient reason to disparage the legitimacy of that inner state (or beliefs founded upon it). In other words, simply because someone else's internal state is highly uncommon or foreign to me does not mean that I should assume that person's self-awareness is defective. Current work in cognitive science is flush with examples of modes of cognition that are different from the mainstream. Furthermore, we can find many examples of people we prize for their unique and novel perspectives on the human condition; this should not happen if we ought to reject uncommon internal states. Put

[38] For example, some understand John Wesley's "Aldersgate experience" as a description of this. For more on Wesley's experience, see William Abraham's *Aldersgate and Athens: John Wesley and the Foundations of Christian Belief.*

more directly, when an individual reports an exotic or perplexingly mysterious internal state, she is still reporting an internal state, and so we should treat it as such.[39]

Last, even though 1p is usually accepted, there are exceptions. My opponent may object by attacking 1p and denying privileged access to one's own mental states. In "Self-Authenticating Religious Experience," Keith Yandell argues that it is ordinary, everyday epistemic behavior to doubt and wonder whether our internal states really are as they show themselves to be. In particular, he objects to the claim that individuals are uniquely positioned to believe whether or not their internal states are pain states. He argues that it is commonplace behavior to wonder whether you really are experiencing pain or not. By embracing Yandell's position, the skeptic can challenge 1p and 2p, but I maintain this is a rather significant concession that should be undesirable to the skeptic of religious experience, as it involves becoming a skeptic about avowals, self-knowledge, and likely sense-perception as well.[40]

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[39] Further, the claim that religious experience is an alien internal state can be challenged. This is seen in Ann Taves's *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* and *Fits, Trances, and Visions: Experiencing Religion and Explaining Experience from Wesley to James*, Tanya Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England* and *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*, Jerome Gellman's *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* and *Mystical Experience of God: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Alston's "Religious Experience and Religious Belief" and *Perceiving God*, and William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

[40] One can also be challenged with cases of individuals whose self-knowledge is defective. This often coincides with mental illness: A schizophrenic individual's avowals must be scrutinized in a way that we do not ordinarily challenge avowals. Resultantly, my interlocutor can deny 1d by maintaining that Kyle suffers from a mental illness. For this objection to succeed, though, the burden of proof falls on my interlocutor. To substantiate that Kyle has a mental illness, she must show that his self-knowledge goes wrong globally. Kyle must usually get his own internal states wrong. So, my interlocutor can only deny 1d if Kyle provides her with sufficient evidence elsewhere in his avowals, and unless he is an individual with mental illness, this is unlikely. It is more likely that his religious avowal is the only avowal my interlocutor will attack, and such a localized attack will not be sufficient for her purposes. Further, my interlocutor will want to discredit not just my avowals about religious experience, but *all* avowals about religious

Here I have shown that religious experience can rightly play an epistemic role in the formation and justification of beliefs. This cannot be denied even on the skeptic's own terms; in other words, religious experience should be allowed this role regardless of frequency, novelty, meagerness or vivacity, similarity or difference to sense perception, or divergence of interpretative content. The skeptic often points these out; but, regardless of all these, religious experience should be afforded an epistemic role in belief formation and justification insofar as internal states with religious content can be expressed in avowals. The nature of self-expression in avowals alone can anchor the epistemic significance of religious experience. We allow these first-person ascriptions of internal states to play a very significant and relatively uncontroversial epistemic role. If we are to discount religious experience when expressed this way, we must find an appropriate reason. But, on my account, there is no such reason. Therefore, we must endorse the epistemic significance of religious experience in avowals or pay the costly price of abandoning the role avowals play in our mainstream accounts of self-knowledge.

experience. In this it is incumbent upon her to show that all who avow religious experiences suffer from mental illnesses in order to succeed in completely denying 1d.

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CHAPTER TWO

Religious Experience and Commonsense Epistemology

It is uncontroversial that William Alston's doxastic practices approach to epistemology is a suitable home for religious experience.[41] Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology is also compatible with religious experience.[42] What has not been shown, however, is whether any other epistemic frameworks (particularly those not antecedently interested in religious epistemology) are compatible with religious experience. At least one is promising in this regard: commonsense epistemology. In this paper I argue that advocates for the epistemic significance of religious experience will find commonsense epistemology just as hospitable a framework for their concerns as Alston's doxastic practices or Plantinga's reformed epistemology. First, I briefly present Alston's and Plantinga's epistemological positions relative to religious experience. Second, I review six major principles of commonsense epistemology and argue they establish a suitable approach for those who wish to take the epistemic weight of religious experience seriously. The upshot for advocates of religious experience is that commonsense epistemology offers a simpler route (in comparison to Alston or Plantinga) for securing the epistemic status of beliefs based on religious experience. I argue that commonsense epistemology offers the advantage of inheriting minimal theoretical baggage in contrast to the aforementioned religious epistemologies, and it does this while also avoiding the appearance of giving religious subject matter any sort of epistemological special treatment.

[41] See Alston's *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*.
[42] See Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*.

Part One: Alston and Plantinga

To get started we need a rough notion of religious experience. For the time being, I will describe religious experience as simply any experience reported by an individual to be of deity. More specifically, for any experience to plausibly be a religious experience, it must be some sort of first-person experience, it must be presentational in nature, and it must be the case that the object of the experience has been taken to be some kind of deity.[43] The experience in question may be an experience of the deity's presence, of observing some activity in which the deity is supposedly engaged, or of some other event in which an agent has presentational first-person experience of something that seems to be deity. Alston notably defended the epistemic significance of religious experience at book-length in *Perceiving God*. Here, though, I am exclusively concerned with the general epistemology through which he does this, in particular, his metaepistemological paradigm for doxastic practices.

Important context for Alston's presentation of doxastic practices is his descriptions of mystical experience and sense perception. According to Alston, mystical perception is similar to sense perception in key ways; indeed, these similarities are his initial basis for attributing the justificatory force of perceptual experience to mystical experience.[44] Interestingly, he goes on to argue that there is no non-circular defense of sense perception in the first place; that is, the practice of sense perception cannot be validated without relying on or invoking the deliverances of sense perception itself. Consequently, the justificatory force for mystical experience that is

[43] Notice that I have not included being perceptual as necessary. Perceptual experience is one sort of experience but not all experience is perceptual. Perceptual religious experience (or, perceiving god) is also one sort of religious experience, but not all religious experience need be perceptual. In keeping with the principle of minimal assumptions, we should allow for perceptual and non-perceptual religious experience unless given an argument otherwise.

[44] He states, "The thesis defended here is… that people sometimes do perceive God and thereby acquire justified beliefs about God" *Perceiving God* 3.

predicated on these similarities with sense perception may not be very forceful, at least according to Alton. He then pushes the circularity complaint beyond sense perception arguing that, indeed, the same is true for memory, introspection, deductive reasoning, and inductive reasoning. More specifically, any defense of these will inevitably "make use of premises derived from the practice under consideration, and so fall into epistemic circularity".[45] Alston concedes that it could be possible for one of these to be non-circularly defended in a way he has not yet imagined, but he argues that even if that is the case, the problem will remain, as many other belief-forming practices we commonly rely upon surely will fall vulnerable to this criticism. He argues that even rational intuition necessarily succumbs to this complaint: It is impossible to validate rational intuition while simultaneously avoiding the use of rational intuition.[46] Given that these paramount cases of epistemic significance can only be justified circularly, Alston argues that we are best situated to solve these problems if we centralize doxastic practices in epistemology.

Alston's theory of doxastic practices is inspired by both Thomas Reid and Ludwig Wittgenstein.[47] He defines doxastic practices in a functional way: "I think of a doxastic practice as the exercise of a system or constellation of belief-forming habits or mechanisms, each realizing a function that yields beliefs with a certain kind of content from inputs of a certain type".[48] For example, a doxastic mechanism associated with sense perception might, upon receiving certain visual inputs, generate the belief that a beagle is sitting next to me. Alston also describes *modus ponens* as a belief-forming, or doxastic, mechanism appropriate to some doxastic practice. Belief-forming mechanisms themselves are not doxastic practices; rather, large

[45] *Perceiving God* 146.
[46] For more on this, see Alston's 1989 "Epistemic Circularity."
[47] Specifically Reid's work on perception and Wittgenstein's language games.
[48] *Perceiving God 155*.

collections of belief-forming mechanisms make up doxastic practices.[49] Importantly, a belief produced by a doxastic practice is prima facie justified.[50] Such a belief can become unqualifiedly justified if it survives whatever system of overriders is appropriate to that doxastic practice.[51] That said, Alston notes that it will be appropriate for some experiential doxastic practices to lack a system of overriders. Such practices could include very primitive sense perception, e.g., very young children or lower animals.[52] Interestingly Alston also states that our normal, well-developed practices of introspection about feelings, sensations, and thoughts also operate in this way if "beliefs about such matters do not normally face any test of compatibility with what we believe otherwise".[53] Lastly, doxastic practices very often operate dependently.[54] Alston goes so far as to say that no doxastic practice can function well without significant dependencies with other practices.[55] However, this does not negate the distinctions between practices since material differences exist between the sorts of inputs handled by practices and the input-output functions they instantiate.

These points ultimately serve as the foundation for Alston's account of Christian Mystical Perceptual Doxastic Practice (CMP). Alston's presentation of mystical perception in the Christian tradition as a doxastic practice is actually rather straightforward; the practice of CMP is "socially established," produces "outputs that are free from massive internal and external contradiction," and exhibits "significant self-support".[56] As such, Alston claims, it is rational to

[49] On Alston's view, different belief-forming mechanisms are grouped into doxastic practices by the similarities across the group's constituent functions.
[50] *Perceiving God* 158.
[51] Ibid 159.
[52] Ibid 160.
[53] Ibid 160
[54] Ibid 159.
[55] Ibid 160.
[56] Ibid 184.

form religious beliefs on the basis of engaging in CMP. In other words, he maintains that it is rational to form beliefs directly on the basis of Christian mystical perception.[57] He sums up CMP this way: "CMP is a functioning, socially established, perceptual doxastic practice with distinctive experiential inputs, distinctive input-output functions, a distinctive conceptual scheme, and a rich, internally justified overrider system."[58]

These are simply the definitional components of a doxastic practice assigned to Christian mystical perception as a doxastic practice. Of course, Alston sets out—at great length—to defend against objections that CMP does not truly meet these criteria; however, my purpose here is not to investigate the worth of his argument that CMP is a doxastic practice, but rather to note the epistemology of doxastic practices as a plausible home for those who would take the epistemic significance of religious experience seriously.

If one is inclined to think the epistemic significance of religious experience will typically only be sought after by those with evidentialist sympathies, it may be surprising that Plantinga's reformed epistemology is another safe home for the epistemic significance of religious experience. But indeed, Plantinga repeatedly endorses religious experience in his reformed epistemology and even centralizes two sorts of religious experience as primary while simply calling them something else: namely, (1) the *sensus divinitatis,* and (2) the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (hereafter IIHS). After briefly explaining each concept, I will explain why each can be interpreted as religious experience.

Plantinga directly endorses religious experience in *Warranted Christian Belief,* leaving no doubt that he is amicable to religious experience.[59] But what of reformed epistemology as a

[57] *Perceiving God* 185.
[58] Ibid 225.
[59] *Warranted Christian Belief* 170, 287-289.

framework for religious experience? Prima facie, nothing it entails seems to cut against taking religious experience seriously. However, on this point Plantinga's treatment of the *sensus divinitatis* and the IIHS are at least curious. He never directly calls either religious experience, but it seems they likely conform to what philosophers classify as religions experience.

Plantinga first describes the *sensus divinitatis* in *Warranted Christian Belief* this way:

> The basic idea, I think, is that there is a kind of faculty or cognitive mechanism, what Calvin calls the *sensus divinitatis* or sense of divinity, which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God. These circumstances, we might say, trigger the disposition to form the beliefs in question; they form the occasion on which those beliefs arise. Under these circumstances, we develop or form theistic beliefs—or, rather, these beliefs are formed in us; in the typical case we don't consciously choose to have those beliefs. Instead, we find ourselves with them, just as we find ourselves with perceptual and memory beliefs.[60]

So, by the *sensus divinitatis*, Plantinga means something like an input-output function. It is something such that, when in particular circumstances, it will either (1) give rise to a person believing in divinity, or (2) actively produce belief in divinity in some person. Plantinga's language above seems to allow for either option. Later Plantinga provides more information, describing the *sensus divinitatis* as, "[s]omething like an awareness of divine disapproval upon having done what is wrong… something like a perception of divine forgiveness upon confession and repentance"[61]. Some sort of awareness, or perception, of divine forgiveness does indeed sound like religious experience. He elaborates: "I don't take my guilt as *evidence* for the existence of God, or for the proposition that he is displeased with me. It is rather that in that circumstance… I simply find myself with the belief that God is disapproving or disappointed."[62] This sounds rather like religious experience. Finally, Plantinga is careful to make clear that the

[60] *Warranted Christian Belief* 172-173.
[61] Ibid 174.
[62] Ibid 175.

sensus divinitatis produces beliefs that are immediate in nature—basic beliefs—and not beliefs we obtain by reason. He reiterates this, insisting, "It is rather that, upon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flower, these beliefs just arise within us. They are *occasioned* by the circumstances; they are not conclusions from them".[63]

The IIHS is closely related to, but not the same as, the *sensus divinitatis*. On Plantinga's model the Holy Spirit is an entity that works within the human person to change her beliefs and feelings about the Christian gospel. And, importantly, the resulting beliefs produced in a human person as a result of the IIHS are basic since they are not based on any other beliefs (but instead the action of deity). Plantinga's explanation of the IIHS is also a primarily functional account. According to Plantinga, the IIHS is that thing by which people typically come to believe in the truth of the main lines of the Christian gospel. He says:

> Christian belief is 'revealed to our minds' by way of the Holy Spirit's inducing, in us, belief in the central message of Scripture… To recount the essential features of the model, the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit … is a cognitive process or belief-producing mechanism that produces in us the beliefs constituting faith, as well as a host of other beliefs.[64]

Clearly Plantinga believes that the action of God—via the Holy Spirit—is the mechanism by which such basic beliefs become available to us. However, to stop only at belief would miss an important outcome of the IIHS: For Plantinga, there is an affective change as well. The IIHS causes an individual to be *moved* in some way by these truths: "…we also need a change of heart. This is provided by the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IIHS); he both turns our affections in the right direction and enables us to see the truth of the great things of the gospel".[65] So, the IIHS results in changed beliefs and changed feelings.

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[63] *Warranted Christian Belief* 175.
[64] Ibid 256, 284.
[65] Ibid 324.

Plantinga's treatment of the IIHS is particularly interesting insofar as he defines it as two things: (1) a cognitive mechanism within a human person, and (2) the activity of deity upon, or within, a human person. On this point, though, it is not clear precisely where the boundaries between deity and the human person fall. God (i.e., the Holy Spirit) is performing an action, but that action is part of a human cognitive process. It would be odd if divinity just was some cognitive mechanism within a human person. Rather it seems divinity is "triggering" a cognitive mechanism—some sort of cognitive process or reaction—in a human person. That said, divinity is also meant to be actually *doing something* that takes place "internally" within the human person. It seems that the IIHS implies whatever boundaries separate the human person and divinity are permeable in some instances.

One might remain unconvinced that the *sensus divinitatis* and IIHS must be understood as instances of religious experience. Recall, however, our working definition of religious experience: A religious experience is some sort of first-person experience, presentational in nature, and an event in which the object of experience must be taken to be some kind of deity.[66] This will include, among other possibilities, an experience of a deity's presence, an experience of observing some activity in which the deity may be engaged, or, finally, some other means of having a presentational first-person experience of something seemingly supernatural. With this in mind, let's see how the *sensus divinitatis* and IIHS fare.

As I just discussed, the *sensus divinitatis* is defined by Plantinga as an input-output function designed (and operated) by deity to bring about certain doxastic states in human

[66] Notice that I have not included being perceptual as necessary. Perceptual experience is one sort of experience but not all experience is perceptual. Perceptual religious experience (or, perceiving god) is also one sort of religious experience, but not all religious experience need be perceptual. In keeping with the principle of minimal assumptions, we should allow for perceptual and non-perceptual religious experience unless given an argument otherwise.

persons. So, when the *sensus divinitatis* functions, a human person undergoes certain doxastic changes as the result of the behavior of deity. Thus far it is unclear whether the activation of this function should be called religious experience; this will depend on whether the activity of deity involved actually is *experienced* by the person. If it is undetectable to the person, then the *sensus divinitatis* will not count as religious experience. However, if it is detectable to the person, then it indeed appears to be an instance of religious experience. Plantinga mentions John Wesley's well-known experience on Aldersgate Street as an example of the *sensus divinitatis.* [67] Here the phenomenon was detectable to Wesley. He reports at least two components: the mysterious affective experience of a heart warmed by divinity and the doxastic experience of suddenly knowing divinity had forgiven his sins. Importantly, he did not reason to the belief that his sins were forgiven, instead he reports he simply *found* himself knowing that they were forgiven. Since Plantinga provides this example as a paradigmatic case of the *sensus divinitatis*, it seems that the *sensus divinitatis* is after all religious experience when the experiencer reports divinity as part of the experience.

Perhaps it is further arguable that those operations of the *sensus divinitatis* that persons are unable to detect can also be called religious experience. If divinity interacts with a person in some way, and that person is unaware, can that still be a religious experience? This does not meet my earlier criteria. But some will suggest a different ontology of experience. If a medical procedure is performed on an unknowing person whilst she is asleep, has she had a medical experience? This is unclear. But, if we are inclined to say yes, then we might also be inclined to call the undetected operations of the *sensus divinitatis* religious experiences.

[67] *Warranted Christian Belief* 288.

One might argue that the operations of the *sensus divinitatis* take place irrespective of any divine action. Perhaps the input-output functions are wholly realized by processes that require no divine activity. If a person is in the right—importantly natural—circumstances, then that person will, entirely of her own accord, form beliefs about god. Perhaps this is what Plantinga means. But if so, it is interesting that he is working so hard to wall god out. Why should it make any difference, within reformed epistemology, whether what activates the *sensus divinitatis* is natural or supernatural? As far as I can tell, Plantinga makes no suggestion one way or the other. But it would indeed be odd if it was especially important in his view to keep the *sensus divinitatis* hermetically sealed off from divine activity.

First, why do so with the *sensus divinitatis* but then so forthrightly endorse divine activity in the IIHS? Should not one's position on divine activity in the world relate to both the *sensus divinitatis* and the IIHS? Second, Plantinga borrows the phrase *sensus divinitatis* from John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, where Calvin used the phrase to describe a capacity for sensing divinity. If the *sensus divinitatis* functions wholly independently of any divine presence or activity, then what exactly is it sensing? Perhaps one might say it is sensing the doxastic status of certain propositions about god or Christianity. But, this cannot be the case; it is the *sensus divinitatis*, not the *sensus propositionatis*.

What of the IIHS? Can it rightly be understood as religious experience? Again, first we must briefly remember what Plantinga intends by the IIHS: It is the direct activity of deity (the Holy Spirit) internally within a person to "testify," "witness," or "invite" her to see and understand that the Christian scriptures are true.[68] This is a first-person experience of divinity

[68] Plantinga reports: "According to the model, this conviction comes by way of the activity of the Holy Spirit. Calvin speaks here of the internal 'testimony' and (more often) 'witness' of the Holy Spirit; Aquinas, of the divine instigation' and 'invitation'. On the model, there is … divine

performing an action (testifying, witnessing, or inviting); therefore, IIHS seems rather straightforwardly to be some sort of religious experience. Perhaps the same worry exists that its status as religious experience will hinge on whether or not the IIHS is noticed by the individual undergoing the IIHS. But this question seems less troubling here since the IIHS is fundamentally the testifying, witnessing, or inviting of deity: Such activities typically involve a party who *receives* the testimony, witness, or invitation. It would be odd to explain the IIHS as a process in which deity testifies, witnesses, or invites while simultaneously insisting that testimony, witness, and invitation *must* go unnoticed. Since surely Plantinga does not invoke the IIHS in order to describe a process by which the testimony, witness, and invitation of deity necessarily go unnoticed, it seems the IIHS is rightly understood, at the very least sometimes, as religious experience. [69]

We have seen that Alston's doxastic practices approach provide a hospitable epistemological context for religious experience. We have also seen, perhaps surprisingly, that Plantinga's reformed epistemology makes for a hospitable context as well.[70] In what remains of

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activity leading to human belief. God himself… I shall therefore use the term 'inward instigation of the Holy Spirit' to denote this activity of the Holy Spirit… It is the instigation of the Holy Spirit, on this model, that gets us to see and believe that the propositions proposed for our beliefs in Scripture really *are* a word from the Lord." *Warranted Christian Belief* 251-252.

[69] Plantinga even refers to the IIHS as an experience: "… the testimony of the Holy Spirit (and in chapter 9 we'll see more of what that *experience* involves)…" (255 emphasis added).

[70] Generally, Plantinga does not call the the *sensus divinitatis* or the IIHS religious experience. Why is he so careful not to? And, given that he does not, does this mean his reformed epistemology is unfriendly to the epistemic significance of religious experience? I would suggest that Plantinga avoids calling the the *sensus divinitatis* or IIHS religious experience not because of any inimicalness to religious experience, but rather because of inimicalness to enlightenment-style evidentialism. Plantinga seems to be doing everything he possibly can to avoid inference playing a role in belief in god. He is very clear that beliefs (or knowledge) coming from these is gained in a basic way. That is, it is not knowledge gained by inference in any manner. He is strict here—no inferences can be involved—any such presence of an inference would ruin the basicality of the beliefs. But, of course, treating religious experience as epistemically significant

this paper, I examine whether or not commonsense epistemology is a theory of the sort that will allow for the epistemic significance of religious experience. I ultimately argue that commonsense epistemology is equally hospitable to religious-experience-based beliefs (henceforth: REBBs).

Part Three: Commonsense Epistemology and Religious Experience

Perhaps surprisingly, a single, unified school of "commonsense epistemology" does not exist.[71] Rather, a handful of philosophers, each with their own perspectives on the subject, have paid special attention to what most of us call commonsense beliefs. [72] Detailed deliberation over precisely which ideas belong in the commonsense epistemology camp is controversial and unnecessary here. Instead, I will constrain my discussion to six principles that give the least controversial and best overall impression of (at least what I mean by) commonsense epistemology. These derive largely from the work of Thomas Reid, G.E. Moore, Roderick Chisholm, Richard Swinburne, and Michael Huemer. I am not concerned with whether or not any of these philosophers have produced a holistic epistemic framework that is any good (this has been done competently elsewhere). Rather, my goal is to determine whether or not one can simultaneously endorse the significance of religious experience and the constellation of ideas entailed in the ensuing six principles.

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does not entail evidentialism. As such, endorsing the epistemic significance of religious experience is entirely open to Plantinga without doing any harm to his reformed epistemology.

[71] For a detailed exploration of this, see Noah Lemos' *Common Sense: A Contemporary Defense*.
[72] However, there may well be a Scottish school of commonsense epistemology beginning with James Beattie (*An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth*) and George Campbell (*Philosophy of Rhetoric*) while leading to Reid. Still, there is no general or broad tradition of commonsense epistemology. The Scottish school was arguably diverse, and beyond it divergence quickly multiplies.

Entire religious epistemologies have been crafted, in part, to make room for perplexing instances of belief formation, including REBBs.[73] Instead of this, can one still take religious experience seriously while only relying on commonsense epistemology?[74] I argue yes; the individual choosing between these three (Alston' approach, Plantinga's approach, or a commonsense approach) does not need not look to these specialized epistemologies to account for REBBs. Commonsense epistemology is just as hospitable to religious experience as these competing epistemological views. I will not argue for the general worthiness of commonsense epistemology itself, just as I did not do so for either Alston or Plantinga. Rather, my aim is simply to show that the commonsense approach (for those who are hospitable to it), is just as effective in making room for REBBs as are Alston and Plantinga. To demonstrate this, I will explain six key principles from commonsense epistemology that are particularly helpful when considering REBBs.[75]

Our first commonsense principle (CSP1) is that perceptual experience reliably produces true beliefs about external objects. Our second principle (CSP2) is similar but deals with conscious awareness. Specifically: Conscious experience reliably produces true beliefs about

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[73] One might question whether it should even be possible for humans to perceive deity. Here I will follow the example of Alston and many others by simply pointing out that: "If God does really exist, there is *in principle* no bar to this" *Perceiving God* 9, italics added. While keeping a primitive, ordinary language conceptual landscape, this is good enough. If a detractor wants to maintain the impossibility of such, at point the burden will be on her to demonstrate this.

[74] One might complain that I am relying on troubling characterization of perception. I have tried to avoid this by keeping to noncontroversial ideas, but, of course, theories of sense perception are nearly always controversial, and any specific theory of will be controversial. This makes relying on noncontroversial concepts difficult. However, as all available options are at least somewhat controversial, this provides the curious result that the action of utilizing a controversial theory of sense perception is itself not controversial (or at least, is a very commonly enacted and accepted action).

[75] These five certainly are not exhaustive, or even uniformly representative, of commonsense epistemology. Rather, they represent the aspects of commonsense epistemology most relevant to the matter at hand—beliefs based on religious experience.

those items of which one is conscious. These two principles are interpretations of principle five and principle one of Reid's first principles of contingent truths. Reid states the first and the fifth: "*First*, then, I hold, as a first principle, the existence of every thing of which I am conscious" and "That those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be".[76] Here I largely follow Nicholas Wolterstorff's interpretation of Reid.[77]

Perceptual experience and conscious experience are both rather ordinary parts of our epistemological practices. Perceptual experience is ubiquitous, constantly informing our understanding of the world. Almost no epistemologists see throwing out the acceptability of sense perception as a desirable feature of an epistemological framework. Rather, the opposite is typically true: It is considered an advantage if an epistemological approach can accommodate the force and legitimacy of sense perception. The same is true of conscious experience. For a subject S to be aware of, or conscious of, some element E is typically taken as sufficient to show that E exists and is as S perceives it to be.

Advocates of the epistemic status of religious experience sometimes place heavy emphasis on sense perception. CSP1 undergirds the everyday trust we place in sense perception. Sense perception can play a significant role in religious experience. Well, since sense perception often plays a significant role in religious experience, and CSP1 supports sense perception, then CSP1 is a tool for the support of religious experience. But can it be that easy? Can CSP1 really uphold sense perception when part of religious experience? Indeed it can. To highlight this, let me change the object of experience: CSP1 undergirds the everyday trust we place in sense perception. As such, it is also of use for the advocate of mechanical engineering. My first

[76] *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* 470, 476.
[77] As seen in Wolterstorff's "Reid on Common Sense."

statement seems suspect. This latter statement does not. The variable that has changed between the two is merely the object of sense experience. If, and this is important, the credibility I am establishing comes from sense perception, then it simply does not matter what the object of that perception is. If sense perception is generally credible, then sense perception is generally credible. We cannot say: if sense perception is generally credible, then sense perception is credible only in certain domains. If someone takes herself to see something in front of her, and the epistemic benefits normally pursuant of sense perception apply to that belief, then those same benefits should attend her other beliefs based on sense perception as well.

In addition to sense perception, those who advocate for the epistemic status of REBBs also uphold the epistemic status of non-sensory perception.[78] Conscious experience is an example of non-sensory perception. We sometimes perceive things mentally—outside of the direct use of sense perception. Another way to put this is to say we can sometimes be conscious of non-sensorial things. For example, I can perceive—or be conscious of—my own anxiety. Typically, when doing this, I make no use of sensory perception. Rather, I am simply aware or conscious of my anxiety. That does not mean we cannot become of things, like anxiety, via sensory perception too. I may notice my own anxiety during a suspenseful film when I catch myself anxiously tapping my foot. In such a scenario, sense perception is used. But, sense perception need not always be involved when we become aware or conscious of things. In other words, that which occupies our conscious mind does not always simultaneously occupy, or even derive from, our sense perception. CSP2, that conscious experience reliably produces true beliefs about those items of which one is conscious, captures the significance of non-sensory experiences.

[78] For more on non-sensory perception, see Alston's *Perceiving God* 20, 23, 36, 55, 121.

Religious experience sometimes involves non-sensory content. Insofar as this is the case, CSP2 is a useful epistemic tool for the advocate of REBBs. Of course, the same question that was asked of CSP1 can also be asked of CSP2. That is, should not non-sensory religious experiences be excluded from the set of non-sensory experiences CSP2 justifies? How can we know that religious experiences belong in this group of upheld non-sensory experiences? The answer to this question is not that dissimilar to the answer above. If someone desires to exclude religious experience from the group of non-sensory perceptions that CSP2 upholds, the burden is on that individual. My interlocutor's question only has force insofar as there is bias against religious experience. In other words, CSP2 is a general principle. It does not specify any non-sensory experiences that are excluded or any that are included. Rather it applies to non-sensory experience in general. If we are to modify CSP2 to uphold only particular sets of non-sensory experience, we must have some reason for doing so. No such reason is immediately obvious. In any case, the forerunners of CSP2, Reid and Wolterstorff, include no such reason.

Such a principle undergirds the emphasis placed on perception by advocates of the epistemic status of religious experience. We should remember here that Reid's idea of a distinct perception is not problematic for the advocate of REBBs since purported religious experiences will, necessarily, exhibit a presentational givenness.[79] So, Reid's observation allows us to endorse REBBs insofar as the beliefs deal with the existence and identity of the religious object perceived in the religious experience.[80]

[79] For example, Alston describes the presentational givenness this way: "In calling them 'experiences' [experiences of God] I am thinking of them as involving a *presentation, givenness,* or *appearance* of something to the subject, identified by the subject as God" *Perceiving God* 5.
[80] I suppose someone could single out religious perception by complaining that surely one cannot distinctly perceive something religious, but this complaint is ad-hoc unless the interlocutor accepts a burden of proof and provides some argument.

Our third principle of common sense, CSP3, is Moore's observation that objects of perception are sometimes more certain than each of the premises of any argument that calls the object into doubt. Perceptions of the sort captured by this principle are often called "Moorean facts."[81] The category of Moorean facts has accorded with intuition so extensively that it is now woven into the vocabulary of our field. The widespread and continuing use of the term indicates that we indeed tend to think there *are* certain things of which we are more confident than we are of each of the premises of any argument that calls such things into doubt.

Typically, individuals who take themselves to have genuinely perceived something will be more confident in their experience than arguments to the contrary. For example, much of this morning I saw a dog, namely my beagle Eustace. Someone may give an argument to the contrary, or even report to me that Eustace has actually been away on a hike all morning. These arguments will likely fail to convince me, as my experience of perceiving Eustace firsthand throughout the morning will be more certain to me than any of the premises in the argument to the contrary I have been presented with, and it is assuredly more certain to me than the idea that Eustace has actually been on a hike all morning.

Religious experience is typically described as a presentational, first-person experience in many ways similar to other perceptions (whether sensory or non-sensory). As such, the individual who has a religious experience will hold to the authenticity of that experience even in the face of arguments to the contrary. Indeed, treating perceptual experience as a Moorean fact is reasonable epistemic behavior. There is no reason why some perceptual experiences should be singled out and barred from this treatment, at least not without some clear argument or reason

[81] David Lewis was the first to use this phrase in his "Elusive Knowledge" in 1996. He defines Moorean facts as: "those things that we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary." 549

why. The individual who upholds perceptual experience as a Moorean fact is acting sensibly, regardless of whether the experience is religious.

Now, it should be said that sometimes—though rarely—one will reject her own perceptual experience. It is true that beliefs based on the experience of first-hand perception can be overcome and dismissed, but it is often very difficult to mount a sufficient case against them unless some overriding concerns can be made *very* clear. Under normal circumstances (i.e. when without any strong reasons to doubt perception, such as drug ingestion, fever, etc.) in the rare cases when perceptual experiences are given up, these particular experiences tend to be meagre, unsure, poorly attended-to, or insubstantial. We are typically more resistant to revising clear, direct, and profound perceptual experiences.

For example, let's imagine that while you are carpooling to work with a coworker, you pass by, and very briefly notice what looks to be an ice cream truck at a stoplight. Later, once at work, you bring this up with your coworker, as you were surprised to see it. Your coworker might say he did not see it, and that you are wrong. He might mention that there has not been an active ice cream truck in the neighborhood for years. You could maintain your belief, but you also might decide that you were wrong.

Now let's change the example with a more vivid perception. Let's say that while driving towards the stoplight, you could hear the ice cream truck's musical loudspeaker even though you could not yet see it. Once you arrived at the stoplight, you clearly see the truck. In fact, you are curious; you read the menu painted on the side of the truck to see if the prices and flavors are the same that you remember from when you were a child. You are disappointed the prices are much higher now, but you are happily surprised at the number of new flavors. The light turns green, and you proceed driving onwards to work. Once there, again, you bring this up with your

coworker to see if it was nostalgic for him as well. You coworker says he did not see the ice cream truck, and that there has not been an active truck in the neighborhood for years. It is very unlikely that you will be as open to giving up your perceptual belief as you were in the prior example. You may tell your coworker that you heard the music, that you read the prices, that you are excited about the new flavors, etc. Almost certainly you will continue to believe that you saw an ice cream truck.

While religious experience can be insubstantial or poorly attended to, this is unusual. Religious experience is usually reported to be vivid, distinct, and well attended-to, sometimes even overwhelming. That is to say, religious experience is typically more similar to the latter ice cream truck example and dissimilar to the first example. Religious experiences just are the sorts of perceptual experiences that an individual is—justifiably—unlikely to give up. As such, a religious experience will very often, even more often than a humdrum experience, be appropriately treated as a Moorean fact. Therefore, an individual who reports to have *actually perceived God* will be understandably very unlikely to give up this belief in the face of arguments to the contrary. The recognition that upholding Moorean facts is a form of responsible epistemic behavior supports the advocate of REBBs since religious experience is typically identified as a perceptual experience.

Our fourth principle, CSP4, comes from Chisholm. While his epistemology is useful here—in particular, his broad commonsenseism (i.e, that we know, by and large, the things we think we know)—I will focus on his treatment of perception. Rather than review all of it, I will reiterate two of his statements about perception.

The first statement is this: "The fact that we are *appeared to* in certain ways *tends* to make it evident that there *is* an external thing that is appearing to us in those ways".[82] So, the fact that someone is appeared to in some way, tends to make it evident that there in fact is some thing that is appearing to her in that way. This is valuable to the advocate of REBBs as it endorses the following: If someone is appeared to in a religious manner, then that tends to make it evident that there in fact is an external thing that is appearing to her in that (religious) way. Or, even more directly: If someone is appeared to *divinely*, then that tends to make it evident that there in fact is an external thing that is appearing to her *divinely*. This suggests that Chisholm's view of perception is likely amicable to common sense and perhaps religious experience, but it is not sufficient to show it. The best ally for the advocate of REBBs lies in Chisholm's second statement.

The second statement is Chisholm's MP5 principle (sometimes thought of as a refinement of his above insight). The MP5 principle is his most direct and most developed principle on perception, it will serve as our fourth principle of common sense (CSP4). Chisholm's MP5 principle is the proposal that if one perceives some object G—and it is epistemically in the clear for her that there is a G that she takes to be G—then it is beyond reasonable doubt for her that she is perceiving something to be G. We should remember the qualifier "epistemically in the clear" is not destructive here. For Chisholm, a proposition is: "Epistemically in the clear for a subject S provided only that S is *not* more justified in withholding that proposition than in believing it".[83]

[82] *Theory of Knowledge* 48.
[83] Ibid 16.

Chisholm's ultimate position on perception, and our CSP4, can be stated this way: If a subject S takes there to be a G, and S is not more justified in withholding belief in her perception of G than she is in endorsing her perception of G (i.e. S's does not have strong contravening evidence that her perception G is false), then it is beyond reasonable doubt for S that she is indeed perceiving something to be G.

A subject who takes herself to have experienced God will usually meet these criteria. That is, an individual who reports to have perceived God typically does take herself to have perceived God and typically usually does not have strong contravening evidence that her perception of God is false. Of course, sometimes a subject will have strong contravening evidence that her perception of God is false (e.g., if she realizes a new medication she began taking has hallucinogenic side effects, or if she is sleep-deprived, etc.). And, sometimes a subject who may have perceived God will not take herself to have perceived God. In the Christian tradition, some of the Roman judiciary authorities and Hebrew religious authorities contemporaneous with, and critical of, Jesus might fall into this category. But, the advocate of REBBs I am describing is someone who more simply instantiates the idea of religious experience defined earlier. Namely, a first-person experience of a presentational nature for which the object of the experience is taken to be divinity. If someone has had such an experience, and she is not more justified in withholding belief in her perception of divinity that she is in endorsing her perception of divinity, then it is beyond reasonable doubt for her that she is indeed perceiving something to be divinity. As such, Chisholm's MP5 (restated as CSP4) aids the advocate of REBBs.

Our next principle, CSP5, is the idea that it is generally rational to believe that things are however they seem to be. More specifically, this is Swinburne's Principle of Credulity (PoC).

Swinburne contends: "That other things being equal, it is probable and so rational to believe that things are as they seem to be."[84] Elsewhere Swinburne states PoC this way: "It is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that x is present, then probably x is present; what one seems to perceive is probably so."[85] The advocate of REBBs' fundamental goal is to show that beliefs based of religious experiences are prima facie justified. PoC addresses all seemings; it cannot be interpreted to exclude those involved in religious experience. So, it can be applied to religious experiences to demonstrate the rationality of endorsing REBBs.

In fact, Alston's principal goal in *Perceiving God* appears to be achieved by PoC. Alston states his aim is: "[to argue] that people do genuinely perceive God … to argue for the epistemological position that beliefs formed on the basis of such (putative) perceptions are (prima facie) justified."[86] If someone has had a religious experience, and it is rational for her to believe that things are as they seem to be (other things being equal), then it seems that indeed her REBBs are prima facie justified.

PoC is broad. It applies to any epistemic seeming, including sensory perception and non-sensory perception, in any domain, regardless of the presence of religious content. But, this is an advantage. As previously noted, religious experiences can be mediated via sensory perception or non-sensory perception. Further, since PoC is general and intended to function in any domain, surely one is warranted in applying it in religious domains.

[84] *Providence and the Problem of Evil* 20.
[85] *The Existence of God* 254.
[86] *Perceiving God* 10.

Swinburne restates: "Put more aphoristically, the Principle says: things are probably as they seem to be."[87] If one can help herself to Swinburne's PoC, perhaps Alston's goal will be realized. Indeed, if one endorses PoC, it is difficult to see how he could not simultaneously realize Alston's stated purpose. Swinburne suggests PoC should be applied to religious experience (in addition to other forms of experience) while commenting on his detractors: "Such writers do not seem to me to be aware of the skeptical bog in which failure to accept the Principle of Credulity will land them. If it is all right to use it for other experiences, they need a good argument to show that it is not all right to use it for religious experience."[88] He later says: "A religious experience apparently of God ought to be taken as veridical unless it can be shown on other grounds significantly more probable than not that God does not exist".[89]

However, Swinburne's PoC is controversial, even aside from religious experience. Huemer in "Phenomenal Conservatism Uber Alles," McGrath in "Phenomenal Conservatism and Cognitive Penetration," Foley in "Epistemic Conservatism," Gutting in *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism,* and Rowe in "Religious Experience and the Principle of Credulity" all criticize PoC. Huemer faults PoC as resembling circular reasoning closely enough to be pernicious. McGrath finds fault with PoC, protesting that a belief should not count as evidence for its own content. Foley criticizes PoC insofar as if epistemic voluntarism is true, then PoC will increase justification in a way that is entirely ad-hoc. Last, Gutting criticizes PoC as a norm insofar as he maintains that seemings require some sort of additional, supporting evidence to be epistemically useful. Some endorse PoC with revisions. Gutting is concerned by Swinburne's

[87] *Epistemic Justification* 141-142.
[88] *The Existence of God* 254.
[89] Ibid 270.

claim that: "[belief] by itself is decisive unless there is some overriding consideration."[90] To solve this, Gutting suggests that some sort of additional experience or evidence is required for the former belief or experience to be decisive: "the solitary of-X experience requires supplementation by additional corroborating experiences".[91] Here Gutting is endorsing an attenuated PoC. He upholds an attenuated PoC, arguing that the justifying force it provides should not be *decisive* outside of additional corroborating experiences. Rowe maintains that something like PoC should be endorsed, but that it is not Swinburne's PoC. More specifically, he thinks that we must add a proviso to Swinburne's definition. Swinburne's PoC states that when an individual has an experience she takes to be of X, it is rational to conclude that she really does experience X absent some sort of reason to think the experience is defective. Rowe suggests that this only makes sense if we know what sort of features would serve as indicators that an experience is defective. So, PoC should be changed to something like this: When an individual has an experience she takes to be of X, it is rational to conclude that she really does experience X absent some sort of reason to think the experience is defective assuming we are already familiar with what sorts of things should serve as reasons to think the experience is defective (in other words, we are already familiar with the markers of delusory X-experiences). If we are not in a position to know what attributes should make us suspicious of a specific kind of experience, then we cannot apply PoC to that experience because should there be any existing positive reasons to think the experience delusory, we will be unaware of them. Rowe argues that many sorts of experience domains may fit this description, and that religious experience is among them. Of course, Rowe's proposed addition to Swinburne's PoC is controversial. There are many rather

[90] *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* 148.
[91] *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* 149.

inconvenient domains in which, on his view, it should apply. For example, it is difficult to exempt ordinary physical perceptual experience, as we should not know what it would be like to be living in a false reality. In addition, any sort of new, novel experience will also be in question. Upon exploring a new domain of experience, we are not in a position to know what are the indicators of false experience in that domain. This is the case simply because the domain in novel. If we were aware of the relevant indicators of delusory experience in the domain, it would not be a novel domain. It is impossible to know about that which we do not yet know about. As such, any genuinely novel experience must be scrutinized with this new proviso as well. It is controversial whether this is an acceptable result.

A second interpretation of PoC issues another criticism. Aaron Burns argues that, when considering the totality of his work, Swinburne must be understood as advocating a proportional PoC. Burns describes it this way: "[PoC] simply said that the mere fact that S believes that P or was inclined to believe that P was as such justification for believing that P. This version tells us that the degree to which P is rendered probable is proportional to the strength in which S believes that P or is inclined to believe that P".[92] This interpretation opens the door for a good deal of debate about what it is to have varying levels of strength of inclination to believe one has had a religious experience. This is sometimes reduced to debate about what it is to have varying levels of strength of religious experience. This sort of interpretation can weaken much of the justificatory force Swinburne's PoC provides to experiences. However, it is controversial as well. First, it is not clear what the "strength of an experience" actually is. Perhaps this is the vivacity of an experience? How closely the subject attended to the experience while it was occurring? It is unclear whether these have any necessary relationship to the veracity of the

[92] "A Phenomenal Conservative Perspective on Religious Experience" 249.

experience. Further, it is not clear that someone who has had an experience should be held accountable to adjust the strength of her belief in that experience in a manner synchronized with the strength of that experience. This requires specific and controversial assessments of the psychology of belief. Most important for present purposes, however, is that I am not invoking this sort of interpretation of PoC in the present work. So, unless the case can decidedly be made that any interpretation of PoC must ultimately reduce to this second interpretation, my work here will escape any such criticisms.

These criticisms are controversial; many still endorse PoC. For example, Kwan in "Can Religious Experience Provide Justification for the Belief in God," Davis in *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, Gellman in *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research: Selected Essays*, and Yandell *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* all defend Swinburne's arguments for PoC. However, in the end my goal here does not hinge on the feasibility of PoC. I will be content if I have shown that, when advocating for REBBs, commonsense epistemology is just as *viable* as reformed epistemology or a perceptual analogy and doxastic practices approach. Arguing this is not the same as arguing that commonsense epistemology is the best approach. If my interlocutor is unwilling to entertain commonsense principles in the first place, then my project will simply be uninteresting to him. My goal is not to convince those who disdain commonsense epistemology. Rather, my goal is to show that when choosing from an array of epistemological frameworks that includes commonsense epistemology, reformed epistemology, and a perceptual analogy approach, the commonsense approach is just as appropriate, perhaps even more so, than the other two when defending the reasonability of REBBs. As such, someone who rejects commonsense epistemology out of hand may find my remarks on PoC unmotivated, but my project is not intended to engage such a person. I am starting from the working

perspective that commonsense epistemology, reformed epistemology, and a perceptual analogy and doxastic practices are all viable epistemic frameworks. It is from this position that my argument proceeds.

Last, the sixth commonsense principle (CSP6) is that if it seems to someone as if *P*, then she thereby has at least prima facie justification for believing that *P*. Versions of this idea have been put forth by C.D. Broad in *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research: Selected Essays*, Chisholm in "A Version of Foundationalism," Lycan in "Phenomenal Conservatism and the Principle of Credulity" and *Judgment and Justification*, and Huemer in *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* and "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism." Broad directs us: "The practical postulate which we go upon […] is to treat cognitive claims as veridical unless there be some positive reason to think them delusive. This, after all, is our only guarantee for believing that ordinary sense-perception is veridical".[93] Chisholm suggests: "Anything we find ourselves believing may be said to have some presumption in its favor–provided it is not explicitly contradicted by the set of other things we believe".[94] Lycan argues: "If *S* believes a proposition that seems (to *S*) to be true, *S*'s belief is to some degree justified."[95] Huemer contributes: "If it seems to *S* as if *P*, then *S* thereby has at least prima facie justification for believing that *P*".[96] [97]

All of these seem similar to PoC. The operative distinction is found in how "seems" is explained. Swinburne defines the seeming relationship as belief or the inclination to believe.

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[93] *Religion, Philosophy, and Psychical Research: Selected Essays* 197.
[94] *Theory of Knowledge* 551-552.
[95] "Phenomenal Conservatism and the Principle of Credulity" 293.
[96] *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* 99.
[97] Perhaps one will find it disconcerting that different, competing versions of a similar intuition have been expressed in the literature. One could argue this indicates a specious or misleading intuition. I think this is the wrong approach. It seems to me that these multiple renditions of PoC and PC indicate the existence of an important, shared intuition that is simply difficult to articulate. In other words, these philosophers are on to something.

That is, if it seems to *S* that *P*, then *S* believes or is inclined to believe *P*. If this is the case, adopting a belief can increase the justification of that same belief (on some interpretations of PoC). McGrath, Foley, and Huemer find this problematic. Huemer positions PC as an alternative. For Huemer, a seeming relationship is most typically an appearing relationship. That is, if it seems to *S* that *P*, then it appears to *S* that *P*. On this account, appearances are *not* beliefs or inclinations to believe. As such, Huemer's account is importantly different than Swinburne's. Exactly whether Broad, Chisholm, and Lycan belong alongside PoC or PC is controversial. Broad does not give much indication whether he intends "cognitive claims" as beliefs or appearances. Chisholm frequently uses locutions like "appears to" or "appearance that"; as such, it seems he is closer to Huemer's PC than Swinburne's PoC. Nonetheless his location between the two is still controversial. Lycan, interestingly, refers to his view as "a Principle of Credulity" despite his own lengthy comparison to Huemer and entire lack of reference to Swinburne. He is difficult to categorize, but for present purposes I will identify him with PC rather than PoC as this seems nearest to the self-description he provides while reviewing Huemer.[98]

Given these variations, for practicality I will identify PC with one of Huemer's formulations of phenomenal conservatism: "According to phenomenal conservatism, the epistemological default position is to accept things as they appear. The appearances are presumed true, until proven false."[99] Accordingly, I will define CSP6 in this way: Epistemic agents are at least prima facie justified in accepting the way things appear to them as true. One might complain that "absent any defeaters" should be addended to CSP6. However, such a notion is implicit in prima facie justification, and as such, in CSP6 it is an unnecessary locution.

[98] As per his self-description in "Phenomenal Conservatism and the Principle of Credulity."
[99] *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* 100.

Indeed, having a clear idea of prima facie justification is significant enough here that I will discuss it later below.

We are now in a better position to apply CSP6 to religious experience. To review, CSP6 states the following: Epistemic agents are at least prima facie justified in accepting the way things appear to them as true. Can this criterion apply to religious experience? In order for it to get any purchase on religious experience, a religious experience will need to be the sort of thing that can be described as appearing to a subject. CSP6 endorses—at least to the level of prima facie justification—a subject accepting as true the way things appear to her. So, is a religious experience accurately described as "a way things appear to someone"?

Reviewing our earlier definition, a religious experience is simply any experience reported by an individual to be of a deity. Specifically, it must be some sort of first-person experience, it must be presentational in nature, and it must be the case that the object of the experience has been taken to be some kind of deity. So, the essential question is whether or not a first-person, presentational experience of something that seems to be divinity can be described as "a way things appeared to someone". It seems to me the answer must be yes. A religious experience, whether perceptual or not, is presentational in nature. Someone who has a religious experience perceives something. In other words, there is a way a thing appears to that person. In general, to perceive something is to have that thing appear to you in a certain way or manner. For example, when someone reports having had a religious experience of divine forgiveness (for some wrong he has committed), that individual will report that it appeared to him that deity has forgiven him. Or, when a mystic reports that deity has told her something, that is the way things appear to her; it appears to her that deity has told her something. So, if CSP6 tells us that epistemic agents are at least prima facie justified in accepting the way things appear to them as true, then the subject

of a religious experience will typically be prima facie justified in accepting the way that experience appears to her as true.

CSP6 is not limited to sensory appearances just as PC is not limited to sensory experiences. However, some religious experiences will be sensory experiences that involve sensory appearances (e.g., St. Paul on the Damascus Road). In these cases the application of CSP6 is particularly clear. Such cases will constitute the most obvious cases for initial discussion. When an individual reports having heard or seen deity, it is transparently the case that things appear to them in that way. Sensory appearances play a similar role in PC. While PC includes non-sensory ways things can appear to someone (such as memory or intuition), the force of sense perception experiences receives special attention by Huemer.[100] According to CSP6, when an individual describing a religious experience reports that it appears to her deity is benevolent, she is at least prima facie justified in believing that deity is benevolent.

The idea of prima facie justification plays a substantial role both in CSP6 and elsewhere; it is worth pausing to explain. Justification is generally taken to come in two categories: prima facie justification and ultima facie justification.[101] This distinction is an important means of categorizing epistemic defeasibility. Generally speaking, a belief is prima facie justified when it is reasonable to hold the belief under present circumstances, but that reasonability can be overridden if incongruous information—defeaters—come to light.[102] The Latin origin is helpful

[100] *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* 77-79.
[101] Some will argue that there are still more categories of justification. This may or may not be the case. But it will make no difference to my goal here either way. My argument will hold just so long as justification can be appropriately divided into, at least, the categories of prima facie and ultima facie.
[102] It is commonly understood that defeaters come in two varieties: rebutting defeaters and undercutting. Rebutting defeaters are those that provide reason to think *P* is false. Undercutting defeaters provide reason to doubt the veracity of one's grounds for believing *P*. For a helpful explanation of and a helpful application of these defeater categories, see John Pollock's

here; a literal translation is “at first face” or “at first appearance” (from the feminine ablatives of *primus* and *facies*). A belief is ultima facie justified, on the other hand, when it is all-things-considered justified. An ultima facie justified belief is justified *full stop*. Here the Latin is helpful again; a literal translation is “at last face” or “at last appearance” (from the feminine ablatives of *ultima* and *facies*). In colloquial conversational English one might say “one the face of it” or “at first glance” when meaning something like prima facie; whereas one might say “all in all” or “on the final evaluation” or “for all intents and purposes” when intending something similar to ultima facie.[103]

To review, the following six principles will guide commonsense epistemologists in evaluating beliefs based on religious experience:

CSP1: Perceptual experience reliably produces true beliefs about external objects.

CSP2: Conscious experience reliably produces true beliefs about those items of which one is conscious.

CSP3: Objects of perception are sometimes more certain than each of the premises of any argument that calls such an object into doubt.

Contemporary Theories of Knowledge and Jonathan Rutledge’s “Commonsense, Skeptical Theism, and Different Sorts of Closure of Inquiry Defeat” respectively.

[103] Someone might complain that prima facie is really used in two ways, rather than just one. Some use prima facie justification to mean simply initially justified and requiring further reflection. While others will use prima facie to mean justified unless defeaters can be marshalled to show otherwise. In either case, the relevant belief is justified at time T_1 absent any defeaters. The two usages will produce divergence results at times at T_2. For example, on the first usage: after further study, at time T_2, the belief may remain prima facie justified. Or, on the second usage, after further study, at time T_2, it may become justified simpliciter if no defeaters can be found. For my purposes, either interpretation will make little difference. My argument is only intended to show that REBBs are prima facie justified at T_1. I will be content with the results of either usage at T_2.

CSP4: If a subject *S* takes there to be a *G*, and *S* is not more justified in withholding belief in her perception of *G* than she is in endorsing her perception of *G* (i.e. *S*'s does not have strong contravening evidence that her perception *G* is false), then it is beyond reasonable doubt for *S* that she is indeed perceiving something to be *G*.

CSP5: It is generally rational to believe that things are however they seem to be.

CSP6: Epistemic agents are at least prima facie justified in accepting the way things appear to them as true.

If these principles and the discussed applications are a fair representation of commonsense epistemology, then certainly it seems hospitable to beliefs based upon religious experience. That said, some might find this syncretism indulgent. Perhaps some will argue that amalgaming these six together is too easy. I think this is mistaken. Nonetheless it does provoke it does provoke a final insight about commonsense epistemology; namely, that it rejects something called the Metaevidential Principle.

The Metaevidential Principle is the idea that unless we have good reason to think our perceptual appearances are veridical, we are not justified in our perceptual beliefs. Frequently it appears in skeptical arguments like this one: All we have access to are perceptual appearances. But, it seems these can go awry, so we should not accept any particular perceptual appearance until we have some good reason to think it has not gone awry (the Metaevidential Principle). But, the only things available through which we might verify a perceptual appearance are just more perceptual appearances. Unfortunately, we will need to know whether these are awry, too. And we have no means to verify them other than relying on more possibly awry perceptual

appearances. As such, it seems we can never have good reason to think a perceptual appearance has not gone wrong. It seems we can never be justified in our perceptual beliefs.[104]

By and large, no variety of commonsense epistemology finds Metaevidential Principle persuasive. This might be perplexing, as the Metaevidential Principle itself seems rather intuitive: Of course we should want to know that we have good reason to think our perceptual beliefs are veridical! And, naturally, we should want to avoid accepting any of them without such a reason. Some might even argue that it seems like common sense that if something could easily be wrong, that we should verify it before accepting it.

Interestingly, commonsense epistemology includes no such imperative. While a commonsense epistemologist will appreciate the sentiment of the Metaevidential Principle, she will nevertheless reject it for the following reason: Indeed, we are very unlikely to show that our perceptual beliefs are trustworthy while avoiding any use of perceptual beliefs as evidence; however, we are equally unlikely to show that our perceptual beliefs are *untrustworthy* while avoiding any use of perceptual beliefs as evidence. Both prospects are equally dubious.[105] Given this standoff, the commonsense epistemologist simply denies that we need to refrain from accepting our perceptual appearances until we have some good reason to think them veridical. The standoff is judged in favor of our perceptual beliefs. We only lose justification when we

[104] I follow Jack Lyons' use of these terms in "Epistemological Problems of Perception."
[105] Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, provides an early example of this move when countering Descartes; he simply asks why we should bother at all with the skeptical hypothesis, given this equal standing. Surely we need not bother with it until we have some good reason to do so—and the burden of proof lies with the skeptic. In other words, in the absence of a good reason to think perceptual appearances are not veridical, we are justified in our perceptual beliefs.

actually have some positive reason to think they are not veridical; we do not lose justification when we simply *lack* some reason to think they are veridical.[106]

We can call this basic feature of commonsense epistemology something like the Reverse Metaevidential Principle. According to commonsense epistemology, we are (at least prima facie) justified in our perceptual beliefs even if we do not possess a good argument for the veridicality of perceptual appearances. Indeed, each of our six principles above seem to either directly recommend this sentiment—or recommend it as part of a broader principle.[107]

So, according to commonsense epistemology, we need not hold perceptual beliefs at arm's length until we have a worked out non-circular answer why perception is veridical. This is perhaps the most salient attribute of commonsense epistemology: an endorsement of the epistemic value of first-person perceptual experience regardless of having any good reasons for or against the facticity of perception. And critically, this endorsement of perception is enough for those who wish to take REBBs seriously; at least, it is enough to protect REBBs from any out-of-hand dismissal. And, when joined with the above six principles, the advocate of REBBs should be pleased with commonsense epistemology as a framework that takes religious experience seriously.

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[106] The Metaevidential Principle seems to hinge on the notion that any unquantifiable or unreducible risk of falseness must take away justification, or at very least prevent the closure of inquiry. Commonsense epistemology simply denies this when dealing with perception. Some versions of commonsense epistemology endorse this sentiment even dealing with matters beyond perception. The scope of application is controversial. But, importantly, commonsense epistemology is homogenous insofar as that such a stance should not be applied to perceptual experiences and perceptual beliefs.

[107] The Metaevidential Principle trades on an evaluative intuition about whether the possibility of error robs a belief of justification—namely that it does. The Reverse Metaevidential Principle trades on the reverse intuition, that the possibility of error does not rob a belief of justification. It is not pretheoretically obvious or uncontroversial what the relationship of justification to falseness risk should be. As such, the Metaevidential Principle is certainly plausible, but so is the Reverse Metaevidential Principle. Commonsense epistemology endorses the latter.

Commonsense epistemology allows for the justification of beliefs based on perceptual experience despite lacking an antecedent and independent substantiation of perception. Those who esteem REBBs based on perceptual religious experience will thereby find an ally in commonsense epistemology.[108] The approaches of Alton and Plantinga both allow responsible epistemic behavior to include REBBs. However, each does so at the cost of requiring rather complex, novel epistemic paradigms. If REBBs can be allowed to play a meaningful role while incurring fewer theoretical encumbrances and liabilities, this is an advantage. Commonsense epistemology can provide this benefit; it allows us to endorse the epistemic significance of beliefs based on religious experience without simultaneously requiring us to endorse larger theoretical systems such as reformed epistemology or the doxastic practices approach to epistemology.[109]

[108] Some may object that religious experience cannot be perceptual. This claim is unmotivated for the following reason: Uncontroversially, experience includes the categories of perceptual and non-perceptual. We should then, of course, assume religious experience will also include these categories, unless presented with some compelling argument otherwise. Many religious traditions invoke perceptual religious experience, such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In any case, we need only remember our earlier three definitive features of religious experience: it must be some sort of first-person experience, it must be presentational in nature, and the object of the experience must have been taken to be some kind of deity. If these are somehow incompatible with perceptual experience, that remains to be demonstrated.

[109] This is especially the case for those who are already hospitable to commonsense epistemology, as perhaps many are who subscribe to Alston's or Plantinga's defenses of religious experience.

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CHAPTER THREE

Putting God in a Box (or a Book)

Many theists accept Aquinas's categories of special and general revelation yet are reluctant to allow religious experience a place in either category. General revelation is most often taken to be composed solely of the evidences of God we perceive in creation, while special revelation is taken to be composed entirely of sacred texts or the conjunction of sacred texts and tradition. Frequently these categories are thought to be jointly exhaustive of the most interesting and meaningful sorts of divine revelation. I argue that genuine religious experience, when it obtains, should be considered divine revelation. I present this argument within the framework familiar to those for whom I intend my argument to apply: an evangelical or conservative protestant (henceforth, CP&E) framework.[110] Against many theists who are skeptical of religious experience, the aforementioned way of thinking about divine revelation must be expanded to include religious experience if we are to preserve a traditional understanding of revelation, according to which divine revelation is generally understood as acts of divine agency disclosing something to a human being(s).[111] Further, I argue that holding the New Testament Gospels as revelation *entails* regarding some religious experiences as divine revelation too, as the Gospels are generally accepted by CP&E to be a historical record of religious events (including religious experiences).[112] Despite the claims of some critics of religious experience, this position does not obligate Christians to believe that religious experiences are infallible; surely, they can go wrong.

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[110] This becomes relevant primarily in terms of how one defines the concept of divine revelation and applies (or does not apply) it to purported historical events and texts describing such events.
[111] Here my view of revelation is in many ways similar to that expressed by George Mavrodes' *Revelation and Religious Belief* and Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*.
[112] My criticism is specific to CP&E. Non-CP&E perspectives on revelation (e.g., Emil Brunner, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Rudolph Bultmann, Karl Rahner, etc.) may be able to escape my criticism.

I show that while we must regard genuine religious experience as constituting divine revelation if we antecedently accept the Gospels as divine revelation, we can do so while still acknowledging the fallibility of religious experience. To investigate this, we must have some understanding of what is meant by "revelation" and "religious experience". So, next I will explore and define revelation and subsequently religious experience. However, to allow for simplicity of argumentation and a wide scope of application, I will try to keep these as uncontroversial as possible.

Part One: Revelation

By revelation, I mean simply the act of revealing something.[113] This is very similar to the act of communicating something. Perhaps the only difference is that some definitions suggest that by revealing something one must disclose something previously unknown, whereas communication may be of things previously known or unknown. However, even this is controversial. It does not seem that revealing entails that the datum or object being revealed has never previously been revealed. For example, one can say, "He revealed his love for her again and again." Or, one can say, "Your actions reveal your true motivations." In the first case, "reveal" means something like disclosing something protected, important, or not always available to be seen, but it does not mean the disclosure of something never previously disclosed. In the second case, "reveal" means something like show. It need not be the case that such motivations have not previously been shown. One's unselfishness may be revealed again and again by one's behavior. Or, one's selfishness may be revealed again and again by anything that

[113] What exactly "revelation" refers to the subject of continued debate. In short, sometimes it is used as a verb, referring to the act of revealing something, while other times it is used as a noun, referring to the thing revealed. Here I am exploring revelation as a verb. For more on this debate see Paul Helm's *The Divine Revelation: The Basic Issues* and Mavrodes' *Revelation*.

perfects their happiness, including one's behavior. So, it seems a maximally general definition of reveal will be something like "disclose." Hence a revelation is the revealing or disclosure of something; sometimes this will be something previously unknown and sometimes not.

Revelations, or disclosures, are multifarious: They come in different kinds, can be made by various agents, and may be relayed in a variety of conditions. Divine revelation obtains when the revealing, or disclosing, is performed by something(s) divine. In typical usage, divine revelation is intended to reference a revelation, or disclosure, performed by God. So, divine revelation takes place when God discloses something to someone. Such events play greater roles in some religious traditions (e.g., Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Mormonism) and lesser roles in other religious traditions (e.g., Taoism, Confucianism).[114]

A considerable number of distinctions can be made within this definition. [115] I will sidestep most of these given my aims of simplicity and scope as mentioned above. That said, it is worth noting here the notions of general revelation, special revelation, and individual revelation.

The currency of the familiar distinction between general and special revelation ultimately owes to the work of Thomas Aquinas.[116] However, doing justice to his work on revelation (and distinctions therein) goes vastly beyond what I can do here. In the interest of brevity, I will simply present the categories as understood by CP&E theologians. Theologian Roger Olson describes them as follows:

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[114] Some would prefer Mormonism be categorized as a form of Christianity. Whether this is the case is not my concern here. For more on this see J.G. Turner's *The Mormon Jesus: A Biography* and R. Mouw's "Mormons Approaching Orthodoxy."

[115] Some oft-used distinctions include primitive revelation, patriarchal revelation, Mosaic revelation, natural revelation, public (or collective or indirect) revelation, special revelation, personal (or individual or direct or private) revelation, revelation in tradition, continuous revelation, existential revelation, verbal revelation, non-verbal revelation, etc…

[116] Though Thomas scholars might prefer the terms "natural" and "revealed" knowledge of God.

> Normally Christian theologians, including Evangelicals, distinguish between two types of divine revelation—general and special… General revelation is God's disclosure of himself or something about himself (e.g., his existence) through the natural world, including humans themselves (e.g., conscience)… Evangelicals… emphasize special revelation, which is God's particular, historical disclosure of himself and possibly information about himself through prophets, apostles, inspired Scripture, and so forth.[117]

On the above account, general revelation is a sort of divine revelation through which individuals can learn things about divinity by noticing certain things that are already available—usually diachronically available—to them to observe. Special revelation obtains when divinity communicates some sort of specific content actively and directly to a receiver, usually synchronically. While a message of special revelation may have continuing relevance and import across time, the communication itself is typically synchronic. Paul Enns describes the two: "Revelation thus is both 'general'—God revealing Himself in history and nature, and 'special'—God revealing Himself in the Scriptures and in His Son".[118] Enns' definition of special revelation is particularly interesting because he does not merely define a general category or class as we might expect; rather, he directly presents the members of the set he calls revelation instead of describing the attributes necessary to be a member of the set. For Enns, it seems the particulars of Scripture and Jesus have priority in defining revelation over and above the characteristics of the category.

This leaves individual revelation, also sometimes called "personal" revelation. Individual revelation describes the event in which God discloses something to a particular individual, in contrast to God disclosing himself to groups of individuals. Reflecting on non-divine communication is instructive here: I may speak to an individual sitting next to me. This is individual communication. Similarly, I might reply to an individual who has emailed me; this is

[117] *The SCM Press A-Z of Evangelical Theology* 256.
[118] *The Moody Handbook of Theology* 158.

also individual communication. Alternatively, I may speak to a crowd of individuals through a microphone or amplifier, or I might reply-all to a group of individuals; these are not examples of individual, or personal, communication. Individual communication occurs when someone communicates directly with a single individual. Individual revelation, then, occurs when *God* communicates with a single individual.

It is important not to confuse defining revelation with understanding whatever the content of revelation might be. A communication will be or will not be revelation regardless of its content. We can define the concept of revelation without defining any particular message of revelation. Put more directly, the necessary and sufficient conditions for some bit of communication to be revelation will not include or stipulate anything about the contents of the communication. Here non-divine communication is again instructive: If I engage in personal communication with an individual, that does not constrain what message(s) I might communicate. I may talk about things pertinent only to that individual, or I may talk about things pertinent to many individuals, or I may talk about things pertinent to all individuals. The content of my communication is a separate matter than the mode of that communication. Individual divine revelation is treated likewise.[119] Put bluntly, theologians cannot exclude from revelation events in which God may choose to communicate (i.e., disclose something) only to a single

[119] However, it would be a mistake to think that personal divine revelation can *only* include messages with content unique to that individual. If we are to incorporate such qualifiers to divine individual revelation we must be prepared to give some reason why they are required here and not with human individual communication. No such reason(s) seem obvious. So, divine revelation is an event, playing greater or lesser roles in various religious traditions, in which God(s) disclose something to a person or persons. One more qualifier to avoid a strawman misunderstanding: Of course, the messages themselves are unique to that individual as the messages are more than just their content. That is, the messages (or acts of communication) are a combination of their mode and content. Since I am communicating directly with an individual, then I am communicating in a way that is specific to that individual. So, surely, the messages are unique to that individual, but their content still may or may not be unique to that individual.

individual with content only meant for that individual. Despite the individual nature of such an event, it is still divine revelation (as it is still God disclosing something to a human).

Admittedly I have described revelation in largely philosophical terms; despite this, my account is not far removed from mainstream theology (particularly CP&E theology).[120] Theologian Daniel L. Migliore defines revelation this way: "Revelation is God's free and gracious self-disclosure through particular events that are attested and interpreted by people of faith."[121] On this view, revelation is constituted by God choosing to self-disclose to person(s) through specific events. This comports well with our prior definition. That said, Migliore does go further and stipulate three conditions on divine revelation: that it is free, gracious, and interpreted by people of faith. These conditions will be of obvious theological importance for Migliore's broader religious commitments. However, they are not necessary for my (more general) definition. I have no argument against God acting freely, but my argument will have no stake in divine freedom. Also, to identify revelation as gracious and to be interpreted by people of faith are perfectly plausible criteria, but again my argument will not rely on either their truth or falsity. What is important is that my definition of revelation is compatible with and inclusive of Migliore's, even if his is more specific than mine.

Basil Mitchell, whose theological influence over the last century is hard to overestimate, argued: "The basic analogy involved in all talk of revelation is that of communication between persons."[122] Mitchell suggests that revelation is another form of interpersonal communication;

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[120] It is important to avoid alienating theological discourse while creating a philosophical definition of revelation. Generality (in definitions) will aid my philosophical aims, but it will be orthogonal to many theological aims. As such, it is important here is to ensure my more general definition does not inadvertently rule out major views of revelation operative in theological conversation (particularly those present in CP&E conversations).

[121] *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* 27.

[122] *Does Christianity Need a Revelation* 105.

namely, revelation takes place when a divine person communicates with a human person.[123] This is precisely how I proceed—using the lens of interpersonal communication to understand revelation. Theologian David Pailin also advocates borrowing from what we know of interpersonal communication to understand revelation: "Traditionally revelation has been understood in terms of verbal or quasi-verbal communications by God to recipients who then pass on what they have heard."[124] In his survey of evangelical theology, Olson defines revelation in a manner consonant with this: "Evangelical theologians have always been fascinated by the issue of divine revelation. Here *revelation* refers … to *God's* communication to humans. In its broadest sense, revelation includes all the ways in which God discloses something to creatures."[125] Olson's definition falls in with what we've seen so far; revelation, ultimately, refers to God communicating something to human(s). Enns defines revelation in his survey of conservative protestant and evangelical theology, maintaining that theology would be impossible without it:

> Revelation signifies God unveiling Himself to mankind. The fact that revelation has occurred renders theology possible; had God not revealed Himself there could be no accurate or propositional statements about God… God has unveiled Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. That is the epitome of God's revelation.[126]

Even more, Enns asserts that revelation has been wrought in complete fullness through Jesus Christ. While this may be more than what we have seen so far, it is nonetheless rather uncontroversial (at least within CP&E). Pailin provides a general account of revelation that

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[123] This is an interesting notion as it seems to imply that those studying revelation might do well to also study contemporary interpersonal communication. For example, Mitchell might encourage one to apply the insights of Kathleen Galvin's seminal *Making Connections: Readings in Relational Communications* to theological work on revelation.
[124] "Revelation" in A. Richardson and J. Bowden's *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* 505.
[125] *The SCM Press* 256 emphasis original.
[126] *The Moody Handbook* 157.

aligns with what we have established thus far: "By 'revelation' is generally meant the disclosure of what was previously unknown or only uncertainly apprehended. In theology such disclosure is normally regarded as caused by the agency of God."[127] Last, major protestant theologian William Abraham provides a helpfully succinct and general definition: "Revelation… refers to any act of divine self-disclosure in time and space."[128] While not identical, these theological definitions of revelation certainly overlap enough to provide a reasonable assurance that my prior philosophical treatment of revelation is not orthogonal to conservative Protestant and Evangelical treatments of revelation.

Before moving on, one more observation about revelation should be made. The traditional view of revelation is not that revelation is a particular, but rather that it is a category or set. As such, it will have members that make up that set. Whether or not some item should be classed as a member of a set depends on the criteria for that set. More specifically, it will depend on the necessary and sufficient conditions for membership in the set. The necessary and sufficient conditions for the set of things that are divine revelation can be determined from the definition of revelation. Alternatively, if one uses the term divine revelation as shorthand for a specific closed set of particulars, one is making a mistake. It may or may not be the case that the particulars that belong to the category divine revelation are settled and closed. The mere notion of divine revelation does not entail whether the set will be closed or not. The set may be closed, or it may not. Such is a separate matter than defining revelation. If one demands that the category of revelation itself entails that the set is closed, or that revelation does not refer to a category but *only to* a collection of particulars, then that individual actually means something different by

[127] "Revelation" 503.
[128] "Revelation" in Ian McFarland's *The Cambridge Diction of Christian Theology* 445.

revelation than what follows from the traditional definition. As such, the individual using the term in such a way must bear the burden of demonstrating in precisely what new way she is using the term and why the community of users should now begin using the term in this way also.

Part Two: Religious Experience

Religious experience is notoriously difficult to define, and most accounts are heterogeneous. For my purposes, religious experience will mean some kind of experience of divinity or divinities. Often this will be thought of as some kind of interaction with God. This notion is both simple and permissive of a broad range of interpretations. Within this range, I will limit my discussion to relatively primitive, noncontroversial concepts. William Alston's account of religious experience will serve as the foundation for the discussion that follows. While Alston's account of religious experience (and beliefs based upon such) is remarkably simple, I will nonetheless try to restrict myself to an even further barren conceptual landscape to prevent concept multiplication and avoid complexity unnecessary to our current discussion.

After reviewing a number of purported religious experiences, Alston draws out three conditions for defining a religious experience: "Let's note some salient features … (A) They report an *experiential* awareness of God. (B) The awareness is *direct*. (C) The awareness is reported to be *of God.*"[129] Putting these together we should say a religious experience is an experience reported by the experiencer to be both direct and of God. Of course, this is a very wide net. But, this seems just what we ought to do; for surely it would be foolhardy to say more at this point (that is, we are not yet justified in adding any more necessary conditions).

[129] *Perceiving God* 14.

Experiences tend to have objects, and they can be direct or indirect. For an experience to be religious, its object must be God, and it must be direct.

Here one might object that we have unnecessarily constrained religious experiences to just deity-experiences. Perhaps experiences of things that are not God, yet still religious, should count as religious experiences. For example, the angel Gabriel speaking to Mary certainly seems like a religious experience of some kind. Perhaps finding yourself moved by a compelling sermon should be considered religious experience. Maybe this is right. Regardless, the ontology of religious experience is not my aim here. Instead, my aim is to interact with contemporary practice and thought in CP&E. As such, for my current purposes, a religious experience will be defined more narrowly in Alston's manner: I am not setting out a study of religious experiences but rather a study of perceptions of God. At hand the question of interest is not what makes any experience an experience of religion,[130] but rather what makes any experience an experience of God—despite any terminological infelicities this might involve.[131]

This manner of characterizing religious experience is in keeping with how we often characterize non-religious experiences. For example, let's say I have a charmingly, but sometimes embarrassingly, clownish beagle named Eustace. While out walking Eustace, he occasionally gets himself into delightfully entertaining yet ridiculous scenarios. My wife and I call these "Eustace experiences." They are enjoyable, direct experiences of Eustace getting up to all kinds of mischief. When friends look after Eustace on my behalf, I frequently ask them if they

[130] If we were doing such, then merely *attending* a Religion 101 lecture would count as experiencing something describable as "related to religion", and as such a religious experience itself (something we likely do not want).

[131] Selecting a more inclusive definition of religious experiences as the starting point for my investigation here would force unnecessary and divisive debate.

enjoyed any particularly funny "Eustace experiences" while he was in their care. Such events are experiential, direct (it is not quite the same to just repeat the story afterwards), and of Eustace.

Consider a simple example: I might ask someone reading this paper what it is—in very general terms—to have an experience of reading, or even just perceiving, this particular paper. Such an event would have to include these three: First, it would be experiential, second, it would be direct, and third, it would need to have been an experience *of this paper*. So, if we are to give a maximally general account of any first-person religious experience, such an event must be experiential, direct, and of God.

Certainly more could be said about what experiences actually are, what directness and indirectness might be, and what it is for an experience to actually be of something. But these same questions exist for any sort of perceptual experience, whether of Eustace, a paper, or God. We often speak of dogs and papers quite satisfyingly without further elucidation of the nature and ontology of experience. It would certainly be a misstep to demand complete answers to these questions simply because of domain change (to divinity). That is, here I mean no more by "a direct experience of something" than we do when we use this language without further explanation in ordinary discourse, as we do just about everywhere other than philosophy of perception. Of course, my conclusions will be correspondingly tempered so as to not help myself to more than I have set out to show. More needs to be said if we are to truly understand the phenomenon of religious experience in the world. Fortunately, that is not my task. Instead, I am explaining religious experience only just enough for the concept to be functional in our discussion.

To summarize, a religious experience is an *experience* in the same way experiencing my dog's clumsy antics is an experience or the same way reading a paper is an experience. A

religious experience is *of something* (namely God), in the same way experiencing my clumsy dog is an experience of him or the way reading a paper is an experience of that paper. And a religious experience should be a direct experience the same way seeing my clumsy dog firsthand is a direct experience or that reading this paper is a direct experience.[132]

Of course, one might question whether it should even be possible for humans to experience deity. Here I will follow Alston's example by simply pointing out that, "If God does really exist, there is *in principle* no bar to this."[133] In my commitment to a (relatively) primitive conceptual landscape, this is good enough.[134]

Further, one might complain that I am relying on a troubling characterization of perception. I have tried to avoid this by keeping to noncontroversial ideas, but, of course, theories of sense perception are nearly always controversial. This makes relying on noncontroversial concepts difficult.[135] However, as all available options (i.e., theories of perception) are at least somewhat controversial, this provides the curious result that utilizing a controversial theory of sense perception is itself not a controversial choice (or at least, is a very commonly enacted and accepted action). While not presenting an account of perception in this

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[132] Of course, someone might complain whether any of these experiences are really are *of those things* anyways. What is important here, however, does not hinge on determining whether our experiences are mediated or unmediated or similar worries. Regardless of which option one chooses, the notion of an experience to be of or about something remains; only this modest notion is necessary for my argument. While debate about the likelihood of all experience being mediated (i.e., whether subjects are hermetically sealed in some kind of global mediation) is important, the possible outcomes of such debate will not fatally undercut the way I am describing experiences as "direct" here.

[133] *Perceiving God* 9 emphasis added.

[134] If a detractor wants to maintain the impossibility of such, at this point the burden will be on her to demonstrate this.

[135] For example, Alston prefers the Theory of Appearing. Nonetheless, he does state: "The experiential awareness of God could be construed as a mode of perception on other theories," *Perceiving God* 165. For more on his interpretation of the theory of appearing, see his "Back to the Theory of Appearing."

paper, I will nonetheless only interact with perception in ways broadly compatible with mainstream theories of perception.

Many theologians also discuss religious experience. Though I primarily rely on Alston's philosophical conception, before moving on it is worth noting some theological explications of religious experience that are amenable to my ideas. R.K. Johnston reports that, "Experience can be a source of knowledge deriving from direct perception or apprehension of reality… Encounters with the transcendent can be labelled religious experience."[136] So far, this general notion of experience does not depart much from Alston's notion except that for philosophers, including Alston, experience can be a source of justification for beliefs that might or might not amount to knowledge, rather than a source of knowledge itself. Johnston goes on to state the core of what we call religious experience events: "Encounters with the transcendent can be labelled religious experience."[137] This definition largely comports with our earlier philosophical definition, i.e., that religious experiences are those experiences in which one interacts (in some way) with the divine. [138]

Alan Richardson describes religious experience as an "experience which in some sense can be described as religious, ranging from an awareness of the numinous (q.v.) to ecstasy (q.v.) or beyond that to fully developed mysticism (q.v.)." [139] Given his conceptual generality and inclusion of phenomenal presentedness, Richardson's definition is particularly amicable to the

[136] "Experience" in W.A. Elwell and D.J. Treier's *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* 300.
[137] Ibid.
[138] It is worth noting that Johnston's definition is broader than Alston's. For Alston, religious experience is an experience of deity. For Johnston, religious experience is an experience of the transcendent. Fortunately, Johnston's particular notion of transcendent includes the divine. In other words, Johnston's definition entails the definition I am working with—though it does include more. This is enough for my purposes.
[139] *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* 126.

sort of investigation I suggest here. Olson describes the evangelical response to religious experience as split between those accepting and those skeptical: "Such experientialism embarrasses some Evangelicals who label it fanaticism or subjectivism; others… view with suspicion mainstream Evangelicals who eschew such *supernatural* and expressive experiences."[140] Olson does point out, however, that evangelical theologians, as a whole, tend to downplay religious experience: "Evangelical theologians have been reticent with regard to… religious experiences."[141] This is especially interesting given the key role religious experience often plays in these groups; Olson notes: "Some kind of conversion experience became the distinguishing feature of early Protestant Evangelicalism, and it has remained so ever since… And yet there is no evangelical doctrine of experience as such."[142]

Part Three: Identifying a Communicator

Humans constantly notice, interpret, and respond to acts of communication. Miscommunication is common, but functionally successful communication is nearly everywhere. So, humans receive communication easily enough. But, if we receive—and judge to be divine revelation—some kind of communication, we must do more than only receive communication: We must also reasonably determine the communication to be from someone (or something) divine, that is, something supernatural. Obviously, this presents a significant problem.

In order to judge whether some act of communication is from God, we will need some sort of criteria. One obvious criterion is that of supernatural acts. If a message is thought to come from a divine being, that is, a supernatural being, then supernatural acts accompanying the message might serve to authenticate that the message indeed comes from a supernatural being.

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[140] *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* 182, emphasis added.
[141] *The SCM Press* 181.
[142] Ibid 180-181.

For example, if I receive a communication or message from someone thought to be a very fast sprinter, it will help to authenticate that the message is indeed from someone very fast if the sprinter runs quickly while he communicates, e.g., if he yells something as he runs by. If I was communicated with in this way, it would be entirely appropriate for me to conclude the communicator is someone who is a very fast sprinter. Likewise, if someone receives communication from something that acts supernaturally, then such a person may reasonably conclude that the communication comes from a supernatural or divine entity. In fact, some Christian traditions take it that this is exactly what transpired in their original reception of revelation. Even more, CP&E biblical texts are shot through with this sort of reasoning. While there are many examples in the text, I will sort through just a few examples from the New Testament gospels.[143]

First, I will consider the events detailed toward the end of Luke's fifth chapter. Luke describes a scenario in which the Pharisees accuse Jesus of blasphemy, as Jesus had just told a lame individual that his sins were forgiven. The Pharisees were troubled by Jesus' statement due to its implication; as they say: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (v.21 NRSV). To validate his divinity and thereby exonerate himself of blasphemy, Jesus responds with a statement and an action. First, he asks the Pharisees which is easier, to say to someone that his sins are forgiven, or to give a paralyzed individual the ability to walk. Importantly, here Jesus moves his claim to divine power from the realm of the non-observable to the observable. The Pharisees had no means to test or verify whether the man's sins were indeed forgiven; but, they certainly can see whether the man becomes able to walk. Jesus made his epistemic goal here clear; Luke records

[143] There are in fact many more examples of this sort of description in the biblical texts than those I recount here or even have room to consider.

that Jesus said next: "'But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he said to the one who was paralyzed – 'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.'" (v.24). Jesus set the stage very carefully. Whilst being rebuked for making unverifiable statements tantamount to claiming his own divinity, he responded by interpreting the rebuke as a challenge to his divinity. He implicitly endorsed the epistemic behavior that is recognizing a divine message as indeed divine if its source acts supernaturally. Then, Jesus healed the lame man. As per Luke, the man got up and walked away, all the while 'glorifying God' (v.25). Here we have Jesus, the chief moral exemplar in CP&E ethics and theology, endorsing the behavior of judging a message to be divine revelation if the message comes from a source that is "acting divinely," i.e., acting supernaturally.

Two chapters later, Luke describes another case of Jesus endorsing this sort of epistemic reasoning. Some of those who were following John the Baptist came to Jesus and asked him—on behalf of John—whether or not Jesus was "the one who is to come" (v.20). Jesus replies to them simply by pointing out the miraculous things he has done: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news brought to them" (v.22). This moment happens fast enough that it is easy to miss the epistemic significance. We should note that Jesus has been asked by a religiously-informed audience whether or not he is divine[144] (and ergo whether or not his message is divine revelation). Jesus' response is to draw their attention to what they already know: what he is doing. He does not provide them with new information. He simply reminds them that they have seen and heard him perform miraculous feats. Jesus seems to imply this

[144] While some scholars think "the one who is to come" does not refer to divinity, many CP&E scholars do interpret it as implying divinity.

should be enough to answer John's question: Since you have seen my actions you know this yourself already.

In Luke's seventeenth chapter we find still another instance of Jesus endorsing this sort of behavior. More specifically, Luke recounts a series of events whereby Jesus enables ten lepers to be healed. After this all but one of the lepers depart, presumptively to tell others they have been healed. The leper who returned to Jesus did so to praise him as divine and thank him. Jesus' response is significant; he says to the leper: "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" (v.17-18). We should pause to observe the details here: Ten individuals interact with Jesus, and Jesus demonstrates his supernatural power to them. One of these responds by declaring Jesus divine and praising him. Jesus, reflecting on the behavior of the ten, affirms the behavior of the one and implicitly states that the other nine should have done likewise. While this certainly does not exhaust the content of these verses, it is nonetheless clear that Jesus is endorsing, even recommending or instructing, the behavior of attributing divinity to that which acts divinely.

At the end of Luke's gospel Jesus again advocates this sort of epistemic behavior. In chapter twenty-four, Luke recounts the arisen Christ appearing to some of his disciples. Upon seeing him, they were both in doubt and afraid, thinking Jesus was some kind of ghost, having themselves previously seen him die. Jesus notices this and asks them why they are afraid. Jesus then tells them to notice his hands and his feet, telling him that ghosts do not have "flesh and bones." He also asks them for something to eat, which they provide, and he subsequently eats in front of them. It seems that Jesus does all this to make clear to them that despite having seen him die, they are now truly seeing a Jesus alive again.

Turning to John's gospel, we find in chapter two, verses thirteen through twenty-two, an exchange between Jesus and religious leaders that is a rather straightforward example of: First, attributing divinity to that which acts divinely, and second, treating the statements of that which acts divinely as divine revelation. Just before the exchange I will highlight, Jesus had rebuked the religious leaders in strong manner only appropriate if Jesus is a major prophet or divinity. And, during his rebuke, he referred to the temple as *his Father's* house, implying that he is divine (i.e., that he is the Son of God). Subsequently, his interlocutors asked him to validate on what authority he makes these claims: "The Jews then said to him, 'What sign can you show us for doing this?'" (v.18). So, thus far: Jesus has claimed to be divine, and his audience has demanded a supernatural sign. Jesus answers their request by claiming that he will raise up the temple in a mere three days once they have destroyed it. Of course, "temple" was ambiguous; most listeners likely thought he was referring to the physical temple in which they stood. Jesus, however, was referring to the temple of his body. That is, he was stating that once dead, he would return to life three days later. John then mentions that, in fact, after Jesus rose from the dead, some remembered this exchange and believed in his deity accordingly. So, here Jesus acts as though he is divine; he is challenged to substantiate his prerogative to act so with a divine sign; he tells his challengers about a sign he will perform; he performs said sign; and thereupon some believe. Here we can observe that Jesus actively participated in, enabled, and supported the epistemological practice of attributing divinity to that which acts divinely.

We can see this again towards the end of John's fifth chapter. He narrates Jesus's comparison of himself and John the Baptist as messengers. Jesus says: "But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me" (v.36). Here Jesus describes his own

message as greater than that of John's. This claim, of course, is interesting in and of itself. But what is most significant (for my purposes) is that Jesus goes on to describe both the way in which his message is greater and *the means by which we should notice this*. Jesus states that the "very works" he is doing testify that the Father has sent Him. That is, Jesus points to the supernatural acts he had been doing and says that *these acts* substantiate his divine origin. Here Jesus is asserting that his testimony is greater as he is of divine origin, and that John's followers should have noticed and understood this because of the supernatural acts he was performing.

Five chapters later we find a particularly intriguing case of supernatural acts licensing claims to divinity. Some began to arm themselves with intent to kill (stone) Jesus. Jesus says to the crowd: "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these are you going to stone me?" (v.32). In essence, he asks the crowd to tell him which of his supernatural, divinely-enabled acts they find so displeasing. They counter that surely they must stone him because he has claimed to be divinity, as this constitutes the capital crime of blasphemy (of course, this is blasphemy on the assumption he is not divine). Jesus' question, and the crowd's response, betrays their epistemological misstep: The people in the crowd are not open to considering as divinity that which acts divinely. Jesus replies by reproving them, specifically for this error. He says: "If am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, so that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (v.37-38). The crowd, seemingly enraged by this, immediately tries to stone Jesus (though he escapes). This portion of John's tenth chapter is perhaps the most telling of these biblical examples because here we find Jesus, not simply providing an example of this sort of epistemological move, not simply implying an

endorsement of it, but rather, we find him directly and explicitly charging people to adopt this behavior—that of attributing divinity to that which acts divinely.

In chapter eleven of John's gospel we find another example of Jesus endorsing the commonsensical practice of concluding that a message is from God when the person/entity communicating the message is acting supernaturally. This chapter recounts the events leading up to Jesus' resurrection of Lazarus. One of Jesus' followers—Mary—had just suffered the loss of her brother Lazarus. After arriving and seeing Mary, Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. Several cues are important to note in this series of events. First, while traveling to see Mary and Lazarus, Jesus tells his disciples that, for their sakes, he is glad he was not there when Lazarus died, so that they may believe. The implication here is that if Jesus had been there when Lazarus died, Jesus would have intervened (preventing the death or raising Lazarus from the dead then). Instead of this, Jesus is glad that Lazarus had been dead for a few days, as seeing Jesus raise him from the dead will allow his disciples to believe in, or accept, Jesus' divinity. Second, it is important to note what Jesus says while praying before raising Lazarus. Jesus prays: "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me" (v.41-42). Saying this just before raising Lazarus reveals that Jesus intended and desired for those watching him to see his supernatural behavior and conclude that his message was of supernatural origin.

Last, Jesus and Thomas, in John's penultimate chapter, instantiate this epistemic norm. Jesus, having previously arisen from the dead, appears to his disciples and speaks with them while Thomas happens to be away. Later when the disciples tell Thomas about this, he does not believe them. Rather, he demands evidence (beyond testimony) upon which to base his beliefs: "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and

my hand in his side, I will not believe" (v.25). Later Jesus appears, this time while Thomas is present. He tells Thomas to see and touch his wounds, and then to believe: "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (v.27). Here we find Jesus doing two things: presenting evidence of supernatural action and charging the observant to believe (that is, to attribute divine status) accordingly.

One might object here that depicting Jesus as advocating some new theological-epistemological behavior misconstrues his purposes in these events. She might argue that Jesus is hardly endorsing a new epistemological behavior as theologically imperative, but rather teaching religious lessons that merely sometimes rely on normal human nature as part of the lesson's context. It's simply human nature that people tend to believe what they see, that people tend to accept what they experience firsthand. That is, the aforementioned narratives are just "business-as-usual" for human behavior. In fact, she may argue, this is what makes Jesus' behavior pedagogically exemplary; he is communicating in a way so elementary that his audience cannot help but come on board. He uses these norms in his lessons because he aims to reach everyone by working through basic human rationality; he is not intending to establish or sanction the legitimacy of some new belief forming practice.

In fact, this might be the case. However, whether or not Jesus is actually giving a new theological-epistemological imperative is insignificant for my aims. Rather, for my purposes, it only matters *that* his behavior entails an endorsement of such a belief forming practice, whether or not it is new. These passages establish the acceptability of attributing a communication to deity when the communicator of the message acts divinely, regardless of whether because Jesus endorsed this or because it is just prima facie rational behavior.

What is most important to notice across these examples is that justifying religious beliefs based on religious experience must be a real and open option; otherwise, Jesus' audience may very well not have believed in those moments. And of course, conservative Protestants and Evangelicals praise their belief.[145] More specifically, if we are to take the prior biblical narrative seriously, justifying the belief that something is divine based upon the event of experiencing it acting divinely must be a real and open option. Indeed, evangelical and most conservative protestant denominations take the historicity of these biblical events to be central and generative of their normative power. In fact, regarding the biblical texts, CP&E typically endorse the historicity of more than the New Testament Gospels, so it should not be controversial to point out that CP&E—at the very least—hold the events recorded in the New Testament gospels as historical events. As such, the incarnation amounts to divine presence and action on Earth among humankind, and as such, it also constitutes divine revelation. The firsthand accounts of supernatural events substantiate and authenticate Jesus' divinity for later audiences. [146] Thereby, the things Jesus said are divine revelation.[147] So here we have it that Jesus' communication is properly deemed divine revelation because of its divine origin in the person of Jesus who demonstrated his power and authority via divine behavior.

Further, if those events are recorded and preserved, those records will contain divine revelation. So we can deduce that the New Testament Gospels or at least some parts therein are

[145] While it is possible that their belief might be saved for new, other reasons, we would still be forced to condemn their motivations for belief as (most straightforwardly) shown in the text.
[146] Perhaps fulfilled prophecies contribute to this substantiation. But, CP&E do not treat these supernatural acts as substantiating beliefs only for those *who are also aware that prophecies are being fulfilled*. That is, CP&E do not chastise the person who accepts the divinity of Jesus on the basis of these acts while not yet being aware that he also fulfilled prophecies in addition to (and sometimes through) his supernatural acts.
[147] Note, I have not said exhaustive of divine revelation.

properly deemed divine revelation because they record and preserve the divine revelation of Jesus. Perhaps they include more data than Jesus' own acts, and perhaps these bits are divine revelation as well—say, according to some kind of doctrine of inspiration—but that is separate and secondary to the matter of first determining that *Jesus' own speech* is divine revelation. [148] In other words, of course there might be *more* divine revelation in the gospels than Jesus' own speech, but I will hold to a meagre view here simply to get the notion and possibility of divine revelation off the ground.

Also, it will turn out that the more I call revelation, the more I have to substantiate with theories. It may be the case that the whole of the New Testament is divine revelation (again, due to a doctrine of inspiration), but I do not need to sort that out here, and it is very important to note the reason why. The reason is that such is parasitic on understanding Jesus' own speech being divine revelation *in the first place*. In other words, very few theories of inspiration hold that the New Testament is divine revelation while denying Jesus' speech as divine revelation.[149] That is, preserved records of historical divine revelation may be authorized not only in virtue of the original authority of the supernatural acts and person they tell of, but also by some other means (i.e., inspiration), but they cannot be such in any way that would contradict the original authority of Jesus' supernatural speech and behavior. Some may come to regard the canon holistically as divine revelation, as do nearly all of CP&E, but the basis for this is parasitic on an antecedent understanding of Jesus' speech and behavior as divine revelation.

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[148] Conservative protestant and evangelical authority Charles Ryrie addresses this in *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*: "In reference to the Bible, *revelation* relates to its content or material, and *inspiration* to the method of recording that material" 47-48 emphasis original.

[149] Abraham explains: "Revelation differs from inspiration, in that the former refers to any act of divine self-disclosure in time and space, while the latter has to do more specifically with the claim that particular communicative events (e.g., the production of the biblical texts) are a matter of divine rather than human will" "Revelation" 445.

Now readied with relatively straightforward notions of religious experience and divine revelation, we are prepared to see a difficulty in how CP&E treat the epistemology of religious experience. But, before dealing with that directly, I suggest that the way CP&E treat religious experience derives from the way they prioritize Scripture. So, to provide context for an examination of CP&E dealings with religious experience, we must first understand how they see the biblical texts.

Part Four: Conservative Protestant and Evangelical Views of Scripture

It is generally uncontroversial to note that CP&E affords the Bible a very high role. Indeed, within most of CP&E, nothing is given higher authority in religious practice. Enns stakes out such a position in his foreword; more specifically, he suggests that studying the Bible is the most important activity that exists. [150] He states,

> There is no higher activity in which the mind may be engaged than the pursuit of a knowledge of God… he [man] is depending upon the revelation of Himself [God]…God has revealed Himself at various times… and has caused that revelation to be accurately recorded… in an inerrant Scripture… If mortals really want to know God, they must give themselves to a study of the written Word of God.[151]

Such a view gives enormous weight to the Bible: The single most important activity in which one can engage is the study of the Bible, as therein one finds God's sole and sufficient self-disclosure to humankind (and thereby the human is enabled to pursue the knowledge of God fully through the study of the Biblical texts). Enns' view is a useful heuristic for the beliefs of practitioners in conservative protestant and evangelical communities. [152] However, there may be

[150] Of course, God himself is an exception.
[151] *The Moody Handbook* 11.
[152] The acclaim Enns' text received from conservative Protestant and Evangelical communities, along with its role as the flagship theology text of Moody Bible Institute and the influential role Moody plays in such communities, suggest the handbook is a useful heuristic for what conservative Protestants and Evangelicals might endorse.

a more general principle linking conservative protestant and evangelical communities on Scripture: the doctrine of *sola scriptura*.

Sola scriptura is a well-known historical doctrine, and the correct interpretation of *sola scriptura* is disputed. Getting at the core of the historical doctrine is only indirectly informative of what *contemporary* adherents (including laity) to CP&E mean when they use the term. So, instead of historical deconstruction, I will provide a brief working definition that, if needed, I can later adjust as we survey the treatment of Scripture by various religious authorities representative of CP&E communities.[153] [154] Among translations *of sola scriptura, the* English "by Scripture alone" seems to be least controversial with conservative Protestants and Evangelicals. The Latin ablative translated with the English "by" raises the question of what is being done "by Scripture alone." How one answers that question can be controversial. The least controversial response for conservative Protestants and Evangelicals usually is that we come to know—both knowledge about and knowledge of—God (i.e., theology) "by Scripture alone."[155]

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[153] Some might be disappointed by a lack of historical analysis here, e.g., perhaps a survey of Martin Luther and John Calvin's influence on CP&E. While their role in the formation of this doctrine is obviously essential, I am not concerned with whether conservative Protestants and Evangelicals are in fact staying true to what these two intended. For my purposes it will make little difference how near or far today's conservative Protestants and Evangelicals are from Luther or Calvin. This is the case because I am tracing out the internal relations between the ideas held by *today's* conservative protestants and evangelicals. I am concerned with whether *these ideas* cohere. One might suggest then I should just abandon use of the phrase *sola scriptura*. Still, I avoid this as the phrase is the most useful way (whether for better or worse) to address and investigate contemporary conservative Protestant and Evangelical views of the Biblical texts.

[154] Such an approach is affirmed by Kevin Vanhoozer, a major figure in CP&E theology, in *Faith Speaking Understanding: Performing the Drama of Doctrine*: "And as we know from Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word or a phrase is largely a function of how it is used. Correctly to understand *sola scriptura*, then, we must clarify what it means in practice" 231-232.

[155] It is easy to imagine the discovery of a new (and hence extra-biblical) text containing first-hand conversations with Jesus. Assuming it is accurate, how should the text be categorized? On the CP&E understanding of *sola scriptura*, the question is not whether it is divine revelation, but rather whether it should be Scripture. On their view, a text may be divine revelation but still not

Evangelical scholars William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, Jr. explain that *sola scriptura* expresses a need to rely on Scripture (presumptively because it is divine revelation) to avoid human reasoning when doing theology: "The Bible is the definitive source for theology… *theology must be centered in what God has revealed in Scripture*, not what people, however enlightened, devise in their own thinking. This is the Reformation rallying cry: *sola scriptura.*"[156] *Sola scriptura* is more than this, though. Mark D. Thompson points out that *sola scriptura* encapsulates the "conviction" that Scripture (it is noteworthy that he does not say divine revelation) is the ultimate determining grounds of truth about God: "*Sola Scriptura*, [is] the conviction that Scripture stands alone as the final authority by which every other claim to Christian truth is tested."[157] Last, Graeme Goldsworthy states that s*ola scriptura* requires any and all knowledge of God come exclusively from Scripture: "When the Reformers enunciated the principle of *Scripture alone* they asserted that there is no other source of truth available to us by which we can know Christ and, through him, God."[158] While rough, this brief survey is close to what most conservative Protestants and Evangelicals have in mind. There is no greater authority than Scripture (and perhaps no other authorized source at all), and there is no greater activity than the study of it.

The high position of Scripture fits well with the high origin of Scripture in CP&E. Generally, these groups appeal to a divine origin for Scripture. This can happen in more than one

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be Scripture. That is, divine revelation is not a sufficient condition for Scripture. On my view, a doctrine something like *solo revelatio* is preferable to *sola scriptura*. But, such a doctrine is not compatible with *sola scriptura*.

[156] *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 464.

[157] "Sola Scriptura" in M. Barrett's *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary* 185.

[158] *Gospel-centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* 48. This is likely the strongest version of *sola scriptura*, for it does not merely give Scripture the highest and final authority; instead it gives Scripture the *only* authority. There can be no other way to come to know or understand God.

way. Most commonly invoked are both appeals to supernatural events in which God is said to have directly interacted with humanity (e.g., the life of Jesus) and some kind of doctrine of inspiration undergirding the texts. For simplicity, I will limit myself to the first of these, i.e., supernatural events. While determining how such events are recorded and handed down through time is certainly an important matter, dealing with various theories of inspiration and divine preservation of texts seems parasitic on determining whether the original events were divine in the first place.

So, Scripture holds a high position at least because it preserves things God has told us. That is, we know some things are divine revelation simply because God showed up and told them to us. Through Scripture we can learn about these. This idea of Scripture is underwritten by something like the following argument—I will call this the Scripture from divinity (SFD) argument:

1. If and when God appears to—or interacts with—a person(s), this event falls within the category of events we call religious or supernatural experiences.
2. Some believe specific, historical religious experience[159] events took place in which God appeared to some person(s) and communicated some message(s). (E.g., Moses at the burning bush, Saul on the Damascus road, the ministry of Jesus, etc.)
3. Such people call these message(s) divine revelation in virtue of their being communicated by divinity.

[159] Some might complain about calling these events religious experiences, but surely they are given our earlier definition. Refusing to call them such indicates a tendency to think religious experiences must be purely non-sensory or subjective. Perhaps this is the case, but it is hardly necessary or entailed in the notion of religious experience *as I have presented it*. If we are to accept such a narrowing of the idea of religious experience, we will need a compelling motivation.

4. Regarding the New Testament gospels, some people consider part or all of them to constitute a record of divine revelation because they form a record of truths communicated by the divine individual Jesus in specific, historical religious events experienced by person(s). (Some other portions of the New Testament may also constitute divine revelation for other reasons, but they would likely not do so if Jesus' own words were not, antecedently, deemed divine revelation.)

Michael Sudduth perceptively notes that, given the view of Scripture found in conservative protestant and evangelical dogmatic theology, religious experience must be afforded a unique role:

> Historically, religious experiences have made dogmatic theology *possible*. Dogmatic theology involves a systematic reflection on the data of Scripture, *but Scripture is in large part a record of religious experiences ostensibly involving the communication of divine truths.* In this way, much of the content of dogmatic theology originates ultimately from the religious experiences of central figures in biblical history. What would dogmatic theology be without the voice of God calling to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees, God speaking to Moses from the burning bush, or Saul of Tarsus's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus? Not only would we be missing testimony to particular interactions between the human and divine but we would be missing the distinctive doctrines that have emerged historically from such interactions.[160]

Ultimately this account is not very complicated. Let's return to our earlier example of a fast runner hollering something at me as he runs by. Perhaps I jot his insights down in a notebook each time he runs by with something to say. After this has happened a number of times, I end up with a small notebook full of sprinter insights. I name it *Speedy's Sayings* as a record of his messages. It is authenticated as a record of things said by someone who is fast insofar as those sayings it contains were hollered at me by a fast runner whilst he was running by. While one may

[160] "The Contribution of Religious Experience to Dogmatic Theology" in Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea's *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* 229 emphasis added.

be tempted complicate matters further given the presence of a divine agent in revelation accounts, the mechanics of our models for interpersonal communication can be simple, regardless of who is doing the communicating: It would be ad hoc to vary the plumbing of such models due to the identities of communicators without explicit reasons for doing so.

Indeed, this account is consonant with many accounts in contemporary CP&E. Pailin points out that this sort of strategy accurately describes CP&E: "A crucial problem for claims to revelation is their justification…this has generally been attempted by such means as alleging that the persons bringing the revelation have shown themselves to be divinely authorized by their power to perform miracles… [or] to foretell the future."[161] Francis Watson also emphasizes the significance of noting Scripture's divine origin (i.e., deliverances from God) to understand its identity as divine revelation: "It is not just its pragmatic function but also its transcendent origin that constitutes the holiness of 'the Holy Scriptures'. Indeed, the pragmatic function is itself grounded in the transcendent origin."[162]

In his influential article "The Idea of Systematic Theology" theologian B.B. Warfield similarly attests to Scripture's origin in supernatural events as he describes it: "A copious revelation in a written Word, delivered with an authenticating accompaniment of signs and miracles, proved by recorded prophesies with their recorded fulfilments."[163] Likewise, Grudem points out that receiving divine revelation is authenticated by the supernatural source of the message: "In these and several other instances where God spoke words of personal address to

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[161] "Revelation" 506.
[162] "Scripture" in Ian McFarland's *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology* 465. It is interesting to note that deity certainly could communicate with someone without accompanying miraculous signs (e.g., one can imagine Jesus speaking to someone without any accompanying miracle). Insofar as deity is communicating with someone, divine revelation is taking place. Remarkably, this shows that one could receive divine revelation *without even knowing it*.
[163] "The Idea of Systematic Theology" 251.

individual people it was clear to the hearers that these were the actual words of God: they were hearing God's very voice, and they were therefore hearing words that had absolute divine authority and that were absolutely trustworthy."[164] Pailin also highlights the significance of religious experience in grounding revelation: "This unveiling [revelation]… may be… through some means of communicating information on these topics… in the form of what is taken to be a self-manifesting encounter with God."[165]

Lastly, Richardson also endorses a view similar to what I've described: "Knowledge of God… can be learnt only from revelation, i.e., from the Scriptures as received by faith and supported by reason (e.g., the arguments from miracle and prophecy)."[166] Within Richardson's statement is the claim that the Scriptures are known to be revelation through the support of miracles and prophecy. Or more directly, there is an implied argument about revelation and supernatural behavior similar to my above three-premise argument. And so, we have a simple example of what it is like to have a record of communications from an entity whose identity (or salient attribute) is substantiated by his behavior whilst communicating.

Of course, divine communication will be enormously different from sprinter speech. For example, we might or might not care what sprinters have to say, but we will likely be very interested in what divinity has to say. In fact, the paramount importance of analyzing and reflecting on what divinity *has* said may, perilously, end up distracting us from the importance of keeping an ear open for anything *else* divinity might want to say. Of course, in the ongoing discourse of sprinter yelling, perhaps there is no risk in ignoring new statements. We can always ask the sprinter to repeat himself once we have finished figuring out his original comments.

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[164] *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* 48.
[165] "Revelation" 503.
[166] *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* 294.

But divine discourse is rather different; it is a serious matter deserving ongoing attention. We ought to be available to listen *whenever* divinity might want to speak. But the paramount importance of hearing and thinking on what divinity has *already* said might overshadow the importance of keeping an ear to the ground in case divinity wants to say more. We do not want to focus on some extant divine revelation to the exclusion of noticing ongoing divine revelation. In fact, conservative Protestants and Evangelicals are rather aware of this error, frequently attributing an error in this vicinity (whether fairly or unfairly) to the Jewish religious authorities contemporary to Jesus: They were simply too entrenched in their focus on prior divine revelation to be willing to consider any ongoing divine communication on many CP&E interpretations. But, how do CP&E groups fare in this regard? That is, do they treat religious experience in the way we should expect of a group who accepts the prior three premise argument? It turns out they do not seem to do so.

Part Five: Conservative Protestant and Evangelical Views of Religious Experience

Interestingly, contemporary Protestants and Evangelicals seem to espouse views approximating the mistake they attribute to first century Hebrew authorities. The desire to prize Scripture, and thereby to defend it against any seemingly alternative religious authority, has driven a puzzling antagonism to religious experience in conservative Protestantism and Evangelicalism. Generally speaking, the literature and orthopraxy of the two are not especially hospitable to religious experience.

We can notice this in Richardson's survey of Christian theology. He states that contemporary Evangelicals disavow the practice of relying on religious experience as a justifier for religious beliefs. He states: "In the evangelical theology of … this century the notion of such

an apologetic argument (like the appeal to mysticism) is sternly rejected."[167] Richardson next describes the climate of evangelical theology writ large (as a neutral commentator), and last goes on to claim that there is little room for such a practice *within the Bible*. He states: "Finally it is to be noted that the Bible itself places little emphasis upon subjective experiences (though prophetic visions… are regarded as a frequent means of the reception of divine revelation)."[168] This is especially interesting insofar as Richardson is going beyond merely summarizing what Evangelicals might think about a particular issue and instead making a direct claim about what one can find in Scripture related to that issue. In other words, it seems this particular issue is so important that he cannot abide continuing to simply describe contemporary theology as per his usual standard, instead he must weigh in himself on this particular issue's biblical basis to cement his disapprobation. [169]

Warfield shares this perspective. While seeming to allow for revelation through mediums other than Scripture, he nonetheless argues these are utterly inferior to Scripture: "The revelation of God in His written Word… is easily shown… to be incomparably superior to all other manifestations of Him."[170] He goes further, claiming that the only genuine divine revelation is Scripture: "His written Word—in which are included the only authentic records of the revelation of Him."[171] Finally, Warfield goes on to address practical piety, arguing that those who consider revelation outside of Scripture possible to be foolish:

> And nothing can be a clearer indication of a decadent theology or of a decaying faith, than a tendency to neglect the Word in favour of some one or all of the lesser sources of

[167] Ibid 126.
[168] Ibid 172.
[169] For more on this, see Harriet Harris' insightful and probing sociological work, *Fundamentalism and Evangelicals*. Particularly interesting is her fifth chapter, "Fundamentalist Apologetics and Evangelical Experience."
[170] "The Idea of Systematic Theology" 252.
[171] Ibid.

> theological truth [i.e., any potential revelation that is not Scripture], as fountains from which to draw our knowledge of divine things. This were to prefer the flickering rays of a taper to the blazing light of the sun; to elect to draw our water from a muddy run rather than to dip it from the broad bosom of the pure fountain itself.[172]

P.F. Jensen describes the normative evangelical view of religious experience: "Scripture… is sufficient for all good purposes… There may be private experiences of revelation, but these cannot surpass, add to, or replace Scripture."[173] Jensen's view is noteworthy as it seems to include, or at least imply, two key points. First, the existence of bona fide private religious experiences is questioned. Jensen is open to their existence, but his representation of the evangelical position thereof is one of skepticism. Second, Jensen emphasizes the seemingly unnecessary or theologically trivial status of such experiences. They are, at best, superfluous, that is so long as they coincide with biblical revelation (otherwise they are worse than superfluous). On the evangelical view, according to Jensen, once a person has access to Scripture, she can safely ignore religious experience.

Evangelical authority Grudem also defines religious experience by examining the sufficiency of Scripture. Grudem is a touch more complex than Jensen, realizing that asserting the closure of revelation is tantamount to putting boundaries on what God can and cannot do:

> The doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does not imply that *God* cannot add any more words to those he has already spoken to his people. It rather implies that *man* cannot add on his own initiative any words to those that God has already spoken. Furthermore, it implies that in fact *God has not spoken* to mankind any more words… other than those which we have now in the Bible.[174]

Grudem's position appears to be unlike the others insofar as he is not calling for a fence to be constructed around God's possible communicative actions; Grudem explicitly states that God

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[172] Ibid.
[173] "Revelation" 748.
[174] *Systematic Theology* 129-130.

could have more to say to a human(s) than what is contained in the Bible. Nevertheless, Grudem's answer is functionally like the others. His answer dodges any genuine possibility of God still communicating with a human person(s). In summary, he argues as follows:

1. God could still communicate with a human person(s), in addition to the Bible, if he so desired.
2. If it seems to you that God has not done so, then you should affirm that there is no revelation other than the Bible.
3. If it seems to you that God has in fact done so, then you must be mistaken, and there is no revelation other than the Bible.
4. 2 and 3 jointly exhaust the logical possibilities of whether it seems to you that God has communicated with a human person(s) in addition to the Bible.
5. So, there is no revelation other than the Bible.

In other words, while Grudem claims his definition does not imply God cannot add any more words to extant revelation, it is still the case that for any scenario in which someone claims God has indeed added some words, Grudem will simply reply that God has not done so. It seems that if someone (namely a representative of CP&E) maintains that God might still speak while simultaneously always countering that God hasn't done so in all and every potential case, perhaps he in fact holds that God cannot still communicate with humans. Certainly, one can rule out the possibility of God still speaking in two ways, either by directly barring it in theory, or by allowing it in theory while simultaneously being sure to always deny any potential revelation from God. Either strategy will result in the important goal, namely no new messages from God.

We should also remember Olson's depiction of two, contrasting camps that color Evangelicalism's response to religious experience: one group who champion religious

experience as the "full gospel" and another group who is *embarrassed*—not only by those in the first group—but by any kind of affirmation of religious experience in conservative Protestantism.[175] Olson also points out the strange dual relationship evangelical theologians hold with religious experience:

> Evangelical theologians often criticize the tendency towards anti-intellectualism and neglect of doctrinal confession in… popular evangelical religion generally. And yet most evangelical theologians write at least one book on the subject of religious experience.[176]

Olson later suggests evangelical theologians avoid taking religious experience seriously for fear of encouraging subjectivism and possible confusions therein:

> Most evangelical theologians, focused attention on past revelation… While they and most evangelicals acknowledge that revelation was progressive, they are reluctant to widen the category of revelation to include postcanonical developments… Conservative evangelical theologians often greatly fear subjectivism and therefore close off revelation with the completion of the biblical canon, in order to avoid doctrinal confusion and chaos.[177]

Sudduth appears to agree with Olson. He gestures at the same sort of phenomenon:

> The more conservative streams of Protestant theology have tended to look at religious experience with a high degree of suspicion for fear of dogmatic theology degenerating into subjectivism or a psychology of religion in which the metaphysical claims of Christianity are lost or substantially trimmed down.[178]

I broadly agree with Sudduth; his observation is piercing and serious. That said, I would adjust his reflection in one way, at least so far as it is meant to describe CP&E.

It seems to me these groups deflate the importance of religious experience *in order to maintain the significance of Scripture*. That is, for conservative Protestants and Evangelicals, the

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[175] Olson describes two divergent responses to religious experience within evangelicalism: "Such experientialism embarrasses some evangelicals, who label it fanaticism or subjectivism; others call it the 'full gospel' and view with suspicion mainstream evangelicals who eschew such ***supernatural*** and expressive experiences," *The SCM Press* 182 emphasis original.

[176] Ibid 181.
[177] Ibid 258.
[178] "The Contribution of Religious Experience to Dogmatic Theology" 232.

divinely appointed role of the living Word of God, manifested in the Old and New Testaments, must be upheld against any and all possible alternatives. As such, the norm of behavior for the faithful believer is to deflate or shutdown anything that might compete with it—and for the zealous believer—even things that simply *appear* to endanger its authority. As such, the possibility of contemporary religious experience is threatening for these believers. They respond by deflating the possibility, interestingly motivated by their religious fidelity and commitment to protecting God's revelation. Ironically, on my account, they are resisting the possibility of contemporary divine revelation out of reverence for historical divine revelation in a manner that undercuts the basis for their acceptance of the historical divine revelation—that they are working so hard to protect in the first place.

It is worth pausing and unpacking my last claim. These believers, on my account, are fighting back against the possibility of any new religious experiences, not because they are against religious experience per se, but rather because they hold the biblical texts in such a high regard that they view any new religious experiences as a threat to it. They adopt a defensive posture, demanding that religious experience be set aside, or at least not taken very seriously, *as they already have everything they need*. Joseph Lienhard seems also to anticipate this: "Maintaining strict verbal inspiration… is typical of many evangelical Protestants… For many proponents of strict verbal inspiration, *the defense of Scripture can become more important than Scripture itself*."[179]

This is rather peculiar as some of the key texts they are working to defend have their original authority founded on the historical religious experiences of individuals (namely, Jesus'

[179] *The Bible, the Church, and Authority: The Canon of the Christian Bible in History and Theology* 14 emphasis added.

contemporaries). Some of these contemporaries were even labelled as heretical by the religious authorities of their own time, sometimes even on the basis of texts these authorities held as divine revelation (e.g., the Pharisees condemnation of Jesus' disciples). Of course, it is not clear that these individuals actually took themselves to be disputing the authority of extant sacred texts; rather, it is entirely possible that they saw themselves as reporting continuing revelation in a manner consonant with these texts. But, whichever interpretation of their actions one prefers ultimately does not matter here. What *is* important is that conservative Protestants and Evangelicals praise the actions of these individuals, and they do so despite that some of those individuals' contemporaries thought they were guilty of disloyalty to the Hebrew Bible.

This antagonism to religious experience is surprising, given that reports of particular religious experiences are foundational in classifying the Gospel texts as revelation. We can update the SFD argument from section four with a fourth step to reflect this new behavior.

1. If and when God appears to—or interacts with—a person(s) this event falls within the category of events we call religious or supernatural experiences.
2. Some believe specific, historical religious experience events took place in which God appeared to some person(s) and communicated some message(s). (E.g., Moses at the burning bush, Saul on the Damascus road, the ministry of Jesus, etc.)
3. Such people call these message(s) divine revelation in virtue of their being communicated by divinity.
4. Over time, these people have also come to reject, or at least significantly belittle, the possibility of receiving divine revelation through religious experience. That is, they posit divine revelation cannot truly come through religious experience.

5. So, such individuals consider it a book of divine revelation as it is a record of these historical divine revelations (at least in regard to the New Testament gospels).

This new argument faces a problem. The conclusion appears unwarranted, as the argument contains incompatible premises. That is, how can one simultaneously endorse information gained through religious experience as divine revelation while also endorsing the position that divine revelation is so grand an event that it always outstrips the meagre idea of religious experience? Surely endorsing the second notion undermines the first. But, this is *exactly* the position I argue many of today's conservative Protestants and Evangelicals hold. If my description is correct, then they are in real trouble of losing a *major* tenet of their beliefs, namely their high view of Scripture. And, moreover, they are eroding the high position of Scripture by their very attempts to exalt it. Conservative Protestants and Evangelicals risk destroying the very thing they seek to protect with the intensity of their defense. What is CP&E to do?

It seems conservative Protestants and Evangelicals need to abandon step 2 or step 4. In other words, one can solve this problem by either: stopping to treat certain historical events (and certain portions of the Gospels) as divine revelation, or accepting the possibility of revelation through religious experience. If CP&E try to affirm both at the same time, they do so in danger of a kind of self-referential incoherence. For example, Jensen states: "Scripture… is sufficient for all good purposes… There may be private experiences of revelation, but these cannot surpass, add to, or replace Scripture."[180] Initially this may seem innocuous, but it is nontrivially problematic. Jensen is forcefully sterilizing the possibility of new revelation by arguing that such can only *repeat* those communicative acts performed in the extant revelation Scripture contains.

[180] "Revelation" 748.

On Jensen's view (which is fairly representative of CP&E) one is safe to ignore any new revelation. But why is this self-referentially incoherent? It is for the following reasons: The sacred text Christians—and CP&E adherents—call Scripture did not come to exist only *after* the life of Jesus. Rather, some of these texts preceded Jesus.[181] It is uncontroversial that the Hebrew Scriptures were authoritative prior to Jesus. And more to the point, they were authoritative for Jesus and his followers, as both frequently cited them.[182] Despite this, CP&E maintain that Jesus' contemporaries should have recognized his deity and his words (and actions) as divine revelation. That is, CP&E Christians differentiate their belief systems and those of Judaism in large part through Judaism's failure to recognize a new revelation (the revelation of Jesus Christ). In fact, regarding the contemporaries of Jesus who did not recognize his words (and actions) as revelation, CP&E often criticize them as culpable of a major moral and religious blunder: failing to recognize, and properly respond to, divine revelation when it was before them. Strangely, it seems that the conservative protestant and evangelical stance, of which Jensen's position is illustrative, forces this sort of mistake. In other words, CP&E theologians and religious communities who embrace this sort of position are fortunate to be living in the Common Era!

Indeed, Vanhoozer's and David Lotz's thoughts on *sola scriptura* reinforce that revelation is indeed parasitic on Jesus' actions. Vanhoozer argues: "In the final analysis, the supreme

[181] Of course, I do not mean to content they precede Jesus insofar as Jesus is taken to have always existed. In such a sense nothing precedes Jesus. On the other hand, Mary precedes Jesus. This second sense—the duration of Jesus' earthly incarnation—is what I am referencing here.
[182] Lienhard observes a straightforward example of this is the exchange on divorce in Mark 10:2-12. Here the Pharisees rested their argument on Deuteronomy 24, and Jesus responds by interpreting Deuteronomy through Genesis 1 and 5. Despite their disagreement, Jesus and his contemporary disputants both rely on the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures.

theological warrant for *sola scriptura* can only be *sola Christus.*"[183] Lotz describes how *sola scriptura* was never intended to stand on authority outside of that imbued to Scripture as a description of Jesus' behavior and teachings:

> Luther's approach to Scripture is completely Christ-centered and gospel-centered… Scripture exists for the sake of Christ and his gospel… Scripture always remains their servant… By urging Scripture alone Luther was in fact urging Christ alone. *Solus Christus* is the presupposition and ground for *sola scriptura*.[184]

Perhaps this CP&E tension is most clear in Richardson: "The Bible was the only source of our knowledge of revealed truth, and its supernatural authority was guaranteed by miracle and prophecy."[185] This statement affirms (at least) the following two propositions: One, we only know the Bible is divine revelation because of supernatural feats (miracles and prophecies), and two, there can be no sources of divine revelation other than the Bible. It seems enormously difficult to hold both of these simultaneously. If we are only able to judge revelation to be revelation because of miraculous events (i.e. religious experiences), how can we then categorically say no to the possibility of other revelation if also accompanied by miraculous events (i.e., religious experiences)? One will have to face either denying God the possibility of continuing to act or contradicting the means by which she accepts Bible as actual revelation.

Part Six: Objections

Here I will state and reply to five challenges: (1) We know that religious experience can go awry, so it should not always be treated as divine revelation; (2) even if it sometimes goes right, it is too hard to tell when this is the case; (3) it is unclear how to bring an emphasis on religious experience into church practice; (4) elevating religious experience in the way I suggest

[183] *Faith Speaking Understanding* 197.
[184] "Sola Scriptura: Luther on Biblical Authority" 266, 273.
[185] *A Dictionary of Christian Theology* 294.

(as potentially revelatory) will destabilize the church; and (5) I have failed to understand the doctrine of cessationism and how it solves the problem of religious experience and revelation.

The plain and pressing worry is that surely religious experience can go wrong. As such, won't we be in rather hot water if we start treating religious experience as revelation? Religious experience isn't always genuine, and as such, we'll be endorsing false doctrine. Moreover, how can we possibly tell if and when religious experience is bona fide? Surely, we are better off minimizing (or even ignoring) it. The first three objections are embedded in this worry.

Regarding the first objection, certainly religious experiences can go wrong; they are not at all infallible. So, indeed, if one treats all purported religious experiences as genuine (and perhaps also as revelation), she will certainly be in trouble. However, this is not what I have suggested. What I have argued is simply that bona fide religious experiences do sometimes include divine revelation (e.g., Saul on the road to Damascus). I have not argued that all religious experiences are bona fide nor that they *always* include revelation. There is no obvious need for all religious experiences to include revelation. A particular religious experience may, or may not, include revelation. As such, my view obligates no special risk of endorsing false revelation. Rather, it simply takes away the risk of rejecting genuine revelation (e.g., again, Saul on the road to Damascus).

The second objection is connected to the first. Evaluating the veracity of religious experience events is difficult. Any particular religious experience event might be genuine or not. How can we tell the difference? Ultimately this objection is a red herring for two reasons. First, difficulty in assessment does not entail illegitimacy. Second, CP&E theology is unalterably committed to our ability to affirm certain religious experience events; so, this objection is not

available to my imagined interlocutor. Next I will explain in more detail why these two reasons show the worry is a red herring.

On the first, obviously it is not the case that *because* religious experience events are difficult to evaluate they are counterfeit. Truth can outstrip verifiability. Many things are difficult to evaluate yet genuine. Of course, that does not mean there is nothing to say about how to evaluate purported religious experience events. Indeed, a chief figure within and hallmark of CP&E theology—Jonathan Edwards—dealt with this question extensively in *The Religious Affections*. So, in addition to the category confusion between veracity and verifiability, a bulwark of CP&E's theological heritage is inconsonant with this objection.

Another possible approach is to think religious experience events that reinforce extant revelation are less likely to be counterfeit. For example, if one has a religious experience of receiving, what seems to her, a divine encouragement to hold on to hope while reflecting on biblical accounts of divine love, perhaps this is less threatening than if one has a religious experience that the Mets will win the World Series. Or, if one has a religious experience of God's existence, say like John Wesley's "strange warming" of the heart, perhaps this is less threatening as its propositional content is sparse (despite its profundity). While such an approach only provides a modicum of direction, it still seems a useful starting point. Regardless, the question of *what to do* about some event is ultimately a different question than whether or not that event is possible. Certainly we should not let our questions (or fears) about practice determine our ontology.

So, any particular religious experience could be genuine or counterfeit, and if genuine, could include divine revelation or not. My view does not require one to endorse all religious

experience events as genuine, nor does it require one to endorse all seemingly genuine religious experience events as containing revelation.

The second reason the objection about the difficulty of evaluating religious experience events is a red herring is that the success of the objection would destroy *fundamental* CP&E doctrine. As such, this objection is unavailable to conservative Protestants and Evangelicals. If they indeed lodge this complaint, conservative Protestants and Evangelicals will also have to give up their endorsement of the religious experience events they affirm in Scripture.[186] This is an unacceptable consequence in CP&E theology, since the historicity of these events is a hallmark of CP&E theology—that is, embracing the historicity of these events is *precisely* the sort of doctrine that frequently separates CP&E from more liberal or non-evangelical protestant theology. Conservative Protestants and Evangelicals *must* maintain the facticity (and historical reality) of the Biblical witness, including the religious experience events therein. So, surely someone could lodge this objection against my account if I were addressing the relationship between religious experience and revelation *writ large*. However, I am not doing anything so ambitious; I am addressing the relationship between the two *in CP&E theology*.

Last, it is important to remember my account is not a practical account of how to evaluate purported religious experience events. My account is an explanation of how and why conservative Protestants and Evangelicals are committed to the logical possibility of religious experience including divine revelation.

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[186] Conservative Protestants and Evangelicals, in any case, endorse the positive and certain evaluation of some religious experience. Namely, those experienced by those who interacted with Jesus. So, despite the difficulties inherent in selecting a practical account for evaluating religious experience, CP&E adherents are already committed to some such account. So, denying the viability of all practical accounts of religious experience is not an option for the conservative Protestant or Evangelical.

The third objection is about religious practice. Are not we better off just skipping over purported religious experience events and focusing on more concrete religious objects (e.g., doctrine, scripture, etc.)? This worry is like the prior as it confuses practice with theory. Determining which behaviors are most useful for conservative protestant and evangelical practice is a different matter than determining the theoretical commitments of doctrine. As such, my account is not meant to propose a new program of collective action; rather, it is meant to show a particular problem in doctrinal continuity. Moreover, in any given situation, what course of collective action a particular religious group is better off engaging in is unlikely to be reduced to doctrinal-theoretic questions. Of course these concerns are relevant, but other concerns will also play considerable roles (e.g., what sorts of people make up the group, what are their primary goals, what are their social and economic contexts, etc.). One ought not confuse practice with theory. If pressed, I would suggest increased openness to religious experience events in some CP&E communities, on account of how necessary such openness was for the religious development of Jesus' contemporaries. But, suggesting the right course of action for a group as large and diverse as conservative Protestantism and Evangelicalism is not the project I am engaging in nor one answerable by philosophy alone.

These three objections lead to a larger fourth concern that may ultimately underwrite all three, namely that elevating religious experience in the way I suggest—as potentially revelatory—might destabilize the church. Perhaps many people will take themselves to have religious experiences that are both genuine and revelatory. Disagreement will erupt about how to interpret and respond to these and whether they are genuine. Believers will struggle determining how to integrate these new ideas with extant doctrine, and this is likely to result in confusion and factionalization.

This concern results from confusing revelation with both church practice (ecclesiology) and doctrine. Revelation is not church practice. Revelation is not doctrine. One of the advantages of my account is to remedy the strength and prevalence of these misidentifications. Revelation is revelation. It may be generative of church practice or doctrine, but *it is not identical to either of these things*. When we rely on revelation as though it was (in and of itself) identical to church practice or doctrine, we force it into an artificial role that robs it of much of its possibility and power. That said, if a revelation appears to be both genuine and important, the church may seem compelled to respond. And, that response could indeed be divisive. But, is this not exactly what Jesus' disciples did? It seems that CP&E cannot take potential disruptiveness as a sufficient condition to rule out revelation. In any case, regardless of how closely linked they might be, certainly one is worse off if she confuses revelation with doctrine or church practice. Confusing the three unnecessarily exaggerates the worry.

We will only succeed in our construction of church practice and development of doctrine if we first let revelation just be revelation. If we expect it to behave as something it is not, we blind ourselves and put limits on what God might or might not aim to do through revelation. For example, when Jesus addressed the woman at the well and recounted her sexual history, did he do this to build doctrine?[187] Did he do this to establish certain church practices? He did not. No,

[187] John 4:7-26.

he spoke with an individual. He did this *for her,* for he is a relational God (on the CP&E account). Chiefly, he was interacting with someone he loved.[188] [189] [190]

God might communicate with human being(s) for purposes that surprise us. God is not a politician whose messages are always carefully curated for a public audience. He is not constrained to conditioning all his communications for public consumption and interpretation, even though it might be more convenient to treat him as such. Rather, he is intensely personal, at least on conservative Protestant and Evangelical views. Treating revelation as church practice or doctrine unnecessarily constrains revelation; if we avoid this we might then see and grasp things divinity intends, in its communication, we will otherwise miss. That is not to say divinity could not communicate something with wide-sweeping implications (i.e., something politically or theologically loaded). Rather, it is simply to say divinity need not always communicate things of this sort; such is not a necessary condition for divine revelation.

A fifth objection is that I have failed to understand the doctrine of cessationism and how it solves the problem of religious experience and revelation. This disputant will grant that God has revealed himself through particular events of religious experience in history. However, she will also maintain that we know God does not do this *any longer*. Such activities have "ceased".

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[188] And, importantly, we have no reason to say that he will not still do this. That is, we are not in the right position to say with certainty that God will *not* engage with his children in certain ways (namely through religious experiences).

[189] In case unclear, this constitutes divine revelation; divinity communicated with a human being. Divine-human communication (revelation) took place. In fact, God did this in a way natural to most humans; he did so verbally and with propositional content (again reflecting continuity with interpersonal communications).

[190] According to Gellman's *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief*, this is not uncommon: "Judging from the history of purported experiences of God, they are typically of God's very presence or of God's acting towards the subject of the experience in some way or other, or of God's revealing His will [i.e., revelation] as that pertains solely to the particular person undergoing the experience" 4.

Grudem defines cessationism: “Cessationist refers to someone who thinks that certain miraculous spiritual gifts ceased long ago, when the apostles died and Scripture was complete.”[191] Olson also defines cessationism: “Many other evangelicals adopt a perspective known as cessationism, in which miracles ceased with the demise of the apostolic age.”[192] Jon Ruthven also defines cessationism: “Cessationism, the doctrine that ‘miraculous’ spiritual gifts died with the apostles, remains a hot topic among Evangelicals.”[193]

What is important to note across these definitions is that cessationism is a position on whether certain spiritual gifts exist today. In other words, it concerns whether or not humans are divinely empowered, or authorized, to do particular miraculous things today (e.g., to heal ill or injured individuals or make predictions about the future). Specifically, cessationism is the doctrine that God does not empower humans (via gifts of the Holy Spirit) to perform miracles today. While cessationists debate exactly when such empowering stopped, they all agree it has ceased.[194] Continuationism is the view that humans are still empowered by God to perform miracles today.

Have I failed to understand cessationism or how it solves the problem of religious experience and revelation? No; interestingly, my account is wholly unaffected by the success or failure of cessationism or continuationism. That is, one can either accept or reject cessationism with no change to how she interacts with my account. This is the case because, yet again, the objection rests on a confusion. My account centers on a particular divine action (communication

[191] *Systematic Theology* 1031.
[192] *The SCM Press* 234.
[193] “Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views” 531.
[194] In “Tongues” G.R. Osborne describes the two primary positions: "Some [cessationists] believe that the supernatural gifts ceased at the end of the apostolic age, others that they gradually diminished and ended in the fourth century” 888.

with human beings). The doctrine of cessationism does not stipulate or include a position on divine communication with human beings writ large; it is not about whether or not God can do certain miraculous things.[195] Rather, it is about human behaviour; it is about whether or not human beings can do certain miraculous things. If one rejects cessationism, one is endorsing the ongoing practice of certain spiritual gifts by human beings. If one endorses cessationism, one is rejecting the ongoing practice of certain spiritual gifts by human beings. Importantly, neither of these holds counterfactual implications for whether or not God can communicate with human being(s) through religious experience.[196]

Cessationism is not a plausible objection to the status of religious experience as divine revelation. As we have seen, neither are the observations that religious experience can go awry, that determining the legitimacy of religious experience is difficult, that it seems prudent to simply keep an emphasis on religious experience out of our ecclesiology, or that elevating religious experience could pose a risk to the church.

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[195] Now, of course revelation may sometimes obtain through a supernatural or miraculous act performed by a human (through God empowering her to do so). That is, divinity may well choose to communicate something to human(s) *by means of* some sort of supernatural act performed by a human. What must not be forgotten is that this possible vehicle of divine communication, however, is just *one* possible means--it is not the *only* means. If God stops enabling human beings to perform such acts, this does not entail or require that God must stop communicating with humans entirely, of course, because it is only one way by which God might do so.

[196] A nearby yet different objection is that my definitions *of theological terms* are just too different from those conservative Protestants and Evangelicals would use—my descriptions are simply *not theological enough*. This objection, while perhaps common in interdisciplinary work (that is, that discipline x has disastrously failed to engage with or appreciate some aspect of discipline y), fails. My investigation of theological concepts is drawn from definitions and explanations *given by* theologians. One might object to *which* theologians I have relied on, or object to *how* I have used them, but this is different than complaining that I have relied on untheological definitions.

If CP&E accept much of Scripture (at least the Gospels) as divine revelation for the reasons presented here, then they must also be willing to accept the possibility of divine revelation through religious experience. Ruling out revelation through religious experience also rules out Yahweh speaking to Moses through the burning bush, Saul on the Damascus road, and a great deal more. For much of CP&E, it seems that overgrown fidelity is undercutting reasoned coherence. Devotion to the text may be admirable, but the authority of the text cannot outgrow the authority of its source. Divine revelation (very often unexpected divine revelation) through religious experience is the bedrock of the text. While the inclination may be understandable, surely CP&E cannot disavow the latter to protect the former. Like it or not, we are very poorly placed to judge when divinity is done speaking.

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