

## Religious Experience (Theism) Are You Experienced?

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You're reading this book. Do you know that it exists? The skeptic says you *don't*. You *might* be hallucinating. I assume you're not so radical a skeptic. You *do* believe that this book exists; that you picked it up without *hallucinating*.

We know this much: it's impossible to have a *genuine* experience of a book if that book doesn't exist – you can *think* you're seeing one, you can have an *apparent* experience, but you can't *really* see a book; not if there's nothing really there to see. *Genuine* experiences have to have objects.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, you probably endorse this argument:

1. If a person has a genuine experience of this book, then this book exists.
2. Some people (in this instance, you) *do* have a genuine experience of this book, therefore:
3. This book exists.

Even the skeptic accepts premise 1. You *can't* have a *genuine* experience of a non-existent book. The second premise is more controversial, but if you're not a radical skeptic, it won't trouble you. The two premises combine to entail the conclusion. This book exists.

A number of theists take themselves to have similarly good reason to believe in the existence of *God*:

1. If a person has a genuine experience of God, then God exists.
2. Some people have a genuine experience of God, therefore:
3. God exists.

Again, the first premise is uncontroversial. The second carries all the weight. Even if you're not a skeptic about genuine *book*-experiences, you might be skeptical about *God*-experiences. Are they *genuine*, or more like hallucinations?

If someone tells you that they read a book, you believe them. So why not believe them when they tell you that they had a God-experience? What makes book-experiences so much more reliable? You can probably think of numerous differences. We'll try to enumerate and investigate them, as we move on.

But note: if you *can't* think of a difference that stands up to scrutiny, then you'll be forced to believe in the existence of God. If you can't stomach that option, your skepticism about theism will have to grow into a skepticism about everything you ever experience; including this book; and everything you believe

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<sup>1</sup> If you have an experience of this book, then this book is the *object* of that experience. Experiences are experiences *of* something. Even your emotional experiences, mere *feelings*, which don't seem to be experiences *of* anything outside of you, still have objects. For example: your experience of happiness has an object, namely: the fact that you are happy, or your happiness itself.

based on testimony concerning other people's experiences, such as your belief that Neil Armstrong landed on the moon.

We could try to define 'religious experience'. That would require a definition of 'religion'. Some religions are theistic. Some are not. Some religious experiences are theistic. Some are not. We'll discuss non-theistic mysticism in passing, but we shouldn't get distracted. The experiences that interest us here, regardless of how we might want to define religiosity, are the experiences that could power an argument for the existence of God. What are *these* experiences? How do they compare to our other experiences? Are they reliable, and *if* not, *why* not?

Each of the following sections begins with a suggestion as to how one might distinguish book-experiences from God-experiences.

### Availability

**Suggestion 1:** When you look in the direction of this book, with open eyes, adequate light, and no obstacles, you'll *see* it. God-experiences, by contrast, are hard to come by. They're fleeting. Moreover, one cannot reliably predict when, where, or to whom they will occur.

The Hebrew Bible states, in God's name, that, 'You cannot see my face, for no person shall see me and live ... you will see my back, but my face shall not be seen' (Exodus 33: 20-23). If finite human beings are going to catch a glimpse of an infinite and transcendent reality, it shouldn't surprise us that the glimpses will be fleeting.

More damaging is the claim that religious experiences aren't equally open to everyone. They tend to happen only to religious people, and even then, not at the same time as one another. In the right environment, book-experiences will invade your eyes whatever you believe about books. God-experiences, by contrast, are generally the preserve of religious believers. Doesn't that render them suspect?

No. Perhaps God-experiences are genuine but require a certain expertise. Not everybody is equally sighted. Perhaps not everybody is equally sensitive to God. Training might help to make people susceptible to religious experience. Attendance at Ashrams, or mediation retreats, purportedly provide training for religious experience.

Should we trust the experiences of someone, trained to feel the presence of God? Perhaps they're simply the deluded victims of self-hypnosis. Wine-tasting provides an analogy. Barry C. Smith notes that the sense of taste is able to sense objective features in a wine. It can do so reliably, even for the novice. For example (Smith, 2007, pp. 47-8)<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Smith's chapter perhaps unwittingly borrows the language of epiphany to describe the sudden awakening of a wine-taster's sensibilities. For more on this comparison see Lurhmann (2012, pp. 60-2)

My tasting experience can tell me: whether a wine has too much alcohol because of the slight burning sensation at the back of my throat...

But experts taste more. Utilising retro-nasal breathing – allowing tasters to smell what’s in their mouth – and with heightened skills of selective attention, experts have a more fine-grained experience (Smith, 2007, pp. 50-1):

Not everything about the taste of a wine is surrendered at first, or is accessible without a skillful search. A great bottle will ... reveal more if we take our time and let our experience develop like a photograph... Are these further judgments and assessments open to the novice? Yes, but not without training.

Expert wine-tasters can disagree. Smith (2007, p. 76) cites a famous dispute between experts about a particular wine. There was a disparity in the verdicts of these two experts. But that disparity ‘tended to obscure the level of agreement there was between them about the actual characteristics of the wine.’ The *very* qualities singled out by one for praise were criticized by the other. Another example: the novice listener hears a melody against a pleasant background. The expert is able to identify all of the individual lines of orchestration.

Religious experiences are fleeting and not open to everyone. This doesn’t entail that they’re not genuine.

Suggestion 1 presents another problem for theists. We’ve conceded that religious experiences are often the province of experts. Some think that God-experiences, and more generally, *belief* in God, wouldn’t *be* this hard to come by, if God really existed. John Schellenberg (2015, p. 103) presents the argument:

1. If a perfectly-loving God exists, then he would always be open to a personal relationship with all people.
2. If there were such a God, no person would suffer a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists, unless they actively resisted.
3. Therefore: If a perfectly-loving God exists, no person, non-resistantly, fails to believe that God exists (from 1 and 2).
4. Some persons have non-resistantly failed to believe that God exists.
5. Therefore: No perfectly-loving God exists (from 3 and 4).
6. If no perfectly-loving God exists, then God does not exist.
7. Therefore: God does not exist (from 5 and 6).

This argument makes some assumptions. The first appears at line 1. In Schellenberg’s words (Ibid., pp. 41-2):

[I]magine... your friend... describing his parents: “Wow, are they ever great... Granted, they don’t want anything to do with me. They’ve never been around. Sometimes I find myself looking for them — once, I have to admit, I even called out for them when I was sick — but to no avail... But it’s so good that they love me as much and as beautifully as they do!” ... [[Y]ou’d think he was seriously confused. And you’d be right ... They could have set their son up in the best house in

town, with money and things galore. But their attitude toward him... doesn't amount to the most admirable love...

But perhaps God wants to ensure that our non-resistance to belief is motivated by the right considerations, rather than fear of punishment, or social pressures (see Howard-Snyder (1996; 2016)). Perhaps we'll have a richer relationship if we first of all have to take the plunge. Accordingly, God-experiences *shouldn't* be too easy to come by; they *should* be earned through the hard work of self-refinement.

Moreover: perfect-love doesn't necessarily translate into wanting a *relationship*. Is God's perfect-love like that of a parent for her child, as Schellenberg assumes, or more like the love displayed by a great philanthropist, or like the care that a good surgeon would have for her patients (Rea, 2016)? Wanting a relationship might even be a selfish and *human* way to love. I wouldn't deign to say what God's love for us must be like. Line 1 isn't obviously true.

Line 2 is also an assumption. Some argue that a relationship with God is possible *without* believing that God exists. We could have a relationship with him without realizing as much. Or, we could have a rich, explicit, conscious, and reciprocal relationship with him on the basis of hope or faith or some sort of partial belief that he exists (Poston & Dougherty, 2007; Cullison, 2010). Schellenberg (2015, p. 58) replies that these are insufficient grounds for a real relationship. Perhaps line 2 survive scrutiny. But it's shaky.

Line 4 is the least controversial assumption. Some argue that everyone believes in God, sometimes unwittingly, and sometimes under another name (Wainwright, 2002). But if there's even a single case, in all of human history, of non-resistant non-belief – such as a tribal Amazonian who never heard of monotheism and failed to be a monotheist, without any sort of resistance – then line 4 stands.

At line 6, Schellenberg stipulates that perfect-love is part of the definition of God. That's because God is a person, and a perfect person would be perfectly-loving. Maimonides didn't conceive of God as a person. That would have completely undermined his negative theology (his view that God defies discursive description). Does that mean that Maimonides was an *atheist*? In Schellenberg's idiolect, that's exactly what follows. But that's not how the intellectual tradition of Abrahamic monotheism has evolved. The theistic camp clearly includes negative theologians. They simply won't accept line 6, or the definition of 'God' upon which it's based.

On the other hand, negative theology cannot be *true*. Even the description that God defies description is a *description* of a God who defies description. Accordingly, I relate to such figures of speech as important and illuminating, but literally *false* – just as metaphors can be important and illuminating, but literally false (Lebens, 2014). I wouldn't want to deny that God is a perfect person who loves us.

Elsewhere, I present *my* preferred response to Schellenberg's problem (Lebens, Forthcoming). But we've already established that Schellenberg's argument stands upon a number of assumptions, some of which are somewhat shaky to say the least.

## Crosschecking

**Suggestion 2:** You see the book. You *touch* it. You knock it, hearing the sound. You ask another person to take a look. Book-experiences are open to cross-checking. God-experiences are not.

Crosschecking assures us that we're not mistaken about the underlying causes of our experiences (Fales, 2004, pp. 152-3). Henry-Samuel Levinson and Jonathan Malino (1999, p. 305) suggest: a perceptual experience *only* provides you with a small amount of evidence, insufficient for forming a justified belief, unless that experience can be augmented by confirmatory intersubjective tests (i.e., by other people *taking a look*), or by the justified assumption that such tests *would* be passed if attempted. To the extent that crosschecking isn't available for God-experiences, we should conclude that God-experiences cannot deliver justified belief in God's existence.

God-experiences *do* need to be augmented with cross-checks, and with background networks of confirming beliefs. But it doesn't follow that the *same* procedures used to cross-check experiences of physical objects should be adopted to cross-check experiences of *non*-physical objects. Tanya Luhrmann, in her study of Vineyard Christians, suggests that various practices help to restructure the minds of these Evangelicals (Luhrmann, 2012, pp. 40-1), in such a way as to lead them to have experiences that suggest to *them* that God is real. You have a God-experience. Was it real? Invite another person to train as you have. Do they have it too? This would be a form of crosschecking.

Objection: spiritual cross-checks represent courses in self-delusion. Response: don't beg the question! If, we're brains in vats, then all of your crosschecking about *books* merely serve to feed your delusion. If God doesn't exist, then all God-experiences and crosschecks are deluded too. Is there a difference?

Objection: if we *assume* that books exist, crosschecking will be useful because it gives us some way of distinguishing genuine book-experiences from merely apparent book-experiences. But even if God *exists*, crosschecking doesn't tell our genuine God-experiences apart from our apparent ones. Response: we'll come back to this issue, in response to suggestion 7.

Objection: sensory crosschecking is more immediate and convincing than spiritual crosschecking. Response: Jerome Gellman (2001, p. 27) notes that, 'ordinary physical-object beliefs are... overjustified... We have extremely luxurious constellations of confirming networks there.' Perhaps our book-experiences provide our book-beliefs with *more* justification than our God-experiences can provide for our God-beliefs. But our book-beliefs are *over*-justified to begin with. Hence, it doesn't follow that our God-beliefs are *under*-justified.

## Intersubjective Agreement

**Suggestion 3:** Other people who see the book agree with your descriptions of it. God-experiences don't generate this sort of wide-spread, intersubjective agreement.

Most God-experiences, in present times, are of a monotheistic God. This is true even in Hindu contexts. In fact, *monotheistic* belief is particularly well-adapted to our cognitive architecture, and thus, once

arrived at, monotheism tends to survive and thrive in many social environments (Barrett, 2004, pp. 75-107). So, we can first point out that God-experiences tend towards a monotheistic consensus, rather than extreme disagreement.

Moreover, Keith Yandell (2002, p. 85) talks of a generic God concept that can be abstracted from the overlap between otherwise conflicting monotheisms. According to this generic concept, God is: necessarily ontologically independent (i.e., it is logically impossible that God's existence depends upon anything); God is a self-conscious person; God is transcendent; and God is the most valuable being (see also Gellman, 2001, pp. 8-10).<sup>3</sup>

Imagine that everybody agreed that they could see a bright object in the sky. Some said that it was square, some circular; some that it was red, some orange. Nevertheless, everyone agreed to its location, time of appearance, and to the fact that it was a bright object in the sky. If *you* saw it as red, you might be minded to suspend judgement. Other people claim that it was orange. But you'd still have good grounds to think that it *exists*.

Similarly, there are a wide variety of God-experiences. Nevertheless, they're *all* (at least *apparently*) experiences of a necessarily existent, self-conscious, transcendent, and supremely valuable person, despite disagreement about whether this God was incarnate in Jesus, or in Krishna, or in neither of them. These God-experiences, taken collectively, still give us reason to believe that the God described by the *generic* God concept exists.

Not all religious experiences are *God*-experiences. Should we be worried that non-theistic mystical experiences undermine the deliverances of *God*-experiences? Non-theistic mystical experiences sometimes *conflict* with God-experiences. Sometimes, they suggest that a *non*-personal being is supreme, or that *all* of being is supreme. Non-theistic mystical experiences, when they *do* conflict with the generic God concept, tend to suggest that *all things are one*.<sup>4</sup> According to this mystical conception of the world: there is no God, nor is there a world *apart* from God. There is just one great *Being*. To the extent that mystical experiences suggest that *all things are one* (rather than the claim that all things *depend* upon the one *God*), I tend to be skeptical that they could *possibly* be genuine/veridical. The claim that everything is one tends to collapse into paradox and absurdity (see Lebens, 2017). *Other* non-theistic mystical experiences, such as the meditative experience of profound aspects of one's own self, needn't conflict with the claims of theism.

### Vividness

**Suggestion 4:** Book-experiences are vivid, and well defined. God-experiences are inchoate, and ineffable.

We shouldn't *expect* the content of God-experiences to be as neatly packaged as the content of our book-experiences. For one thing, books have spatial boundaries. Moreover, suggestion 4 ignores the *variety*

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<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding, Yandell is acutely aware of the vast variety among religious experiences. See (Yandell, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Stace, 1961, and his conception of an extrovertive mystical experience

among religious experiences. Some religious experiences are visual, embodied, and vivid. People literally hear God speak to them; and see visions.

Vividness aside, William James noted that religious experiences have a 'noetic quality' (James, 1908). An experience has a noetic quality when its content seems more real than anything else. Even when religious experiences lack sensory *vividness*, they compensate with this noetic quality.

When Richard Swinburne comes to delineate varieties of religious experiences, he includes everything from the pyrotechnic visions of a Sinai-like experience, through the super-sensory transcendent experiences of the mystic, all the way to a general sort of *seeming*. It just *seems* to some people that God exists (Swinburne, 2004, p. 300).

Even these most unremarkable experiences *can* play a role in justifying belief in God. You're looking at this book, but your visual data alone doesn't seem sufficient to prove that your experience is genuine. You *know* that you could be dreaming. You know that you could be under the spell of an evil demon. Nevertheless, it simply *seems* to you that you're seeing a book. It *seems* to you that you're having a genuine-book experience. If a general seeming is sufficient for you to believe that you're genuinely seeing a book, then why can't a general seeming suffice for belief that God exists?

Objection: Just because you *feel* that something is true, it doesn't mean that it *is* true. To think otherwise would be to fall into Stephen Colbert's parody of 'truthiness'. Something is *truthy* if it *feels* true. In Colbert's words:

If you think about it, maybe there are a few missing pieces to the rationale for war [with Iraq], but doesn't taking Saddam out *feel* like the right thing, right here, right here in the *gut*? Because that's where the truth comes from, ladies and gentleman, from the gut. Do you know that you have more nerve endings in your stomach than in your head? Look it up.<sup>5</sup>

If you *do* look it up, you'll find that it's not true. But that's only because your trusting the *books*, rather than Colbert's gut. As we should! Brains are more reliable than stomachs.

Response: thankfully, the suggestion isn't that what feels right must be right. Rather it's the view that something seeming to be true is, all things being equal, *evidence*. Something seeming to be the case doesn't obviate the duty to scrutinize it, and look for counter-evidence.

If it seems to you that God exists, and if that seeming stands up in the face of scrutiny, even in the face of formidable riddles, such as the problem of evil, then the fact that it *seems* to you that God exists may well justify your believing that he does.<sup>6</sup>

George Berkeley believed that the world was mental through and through. Even this 'physical' book, Berkeley would treat as a bundle of ideas in the mind of God. Bertrand Russell couldn't find independent reason to deny this view (Russell, 1912, p. 4). To Russell, it simply *seemed* that the world contained material objects. In virtue of this 'instinctive belief', Russell took himself to have some sort of evidence

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<sup>5</sup> Transcribed from <http://www.cc.com/video-clips/63ite2/the-colbert-report-the-word---truthiness>

<sup>6</sup> For more on what seemings might be, see (Moretti, 2015). For a recent discussion of these issues as they relate to theism, see (Tucker, 2011).

(Ibid., p. 12). Maybe he did. But things seemed different to *Berkeley*. Mere *seemings* only tend to have evidential weight (if they have any evidential weight at all) for the people who experience them directly.

When I seem to see an X, I have some evidence that an X exists. When I tell you that I saw an X, you have some evidence that X exists too, even though you didn't see it. You trust my testimony. When it *seems* to me that P, I have some evidence that P. But when I tell you that it seems to me that P, and if it doesn't seem that way to you too, then my seeming doesn't give you any new evidence that P. Seemings, unlike sightings, tend to generate evidence that cannot be passed on by testimony.

Suggestion 4 ignores God-experiences that are vivid and well-defined. Moreover, we should be open-minded as to the sorts of experiences that *can* carry evidential weight. At least for the people that have them, even a *seeming* seems to do some work.

### Naturalism

**Suggestion 5:** We have naturalistic explanations of book-experiences. Light bounces off books and hits our retina, causing signals that stimulate visual systems in our brains. Books cause book-experiences. We also have naturalistic explanations of God-experiences. They do not include God in their analysis.

Worse still, some have suggested that God-experiences are the product of naturally occurring *pathologies*. Jerome Gellman (2017) reports that religious experiences have been explained in terms of 'hypersuggestibility, severe deprivation, severe sexual frustration, intense fear of death, infantile regression, pronounced maladjustment, and mental illness...'

Bertrand Russell remarked that 'We can make no distinction between the man who eats little and sees heaven and the man who drinks much and sees snakes. Each is in an abnormal physical condition' (Russell, 1935, p. 188). If mystical experiences are *pathological*, we should conclude that they offer no justification to the beliefs that they generate. C. D. Broad responds: 'One might need to be slightly 'cracked' in order to have some peep-holes into the super-sensible world' (Broad, 1939, p. 164). Perhaps we should *expect* veridical mystical experiences to be somehow pathological.

It's also far from clear that all, or even most, religious experiences stem from pathologies. Tanya Lurhmann (2012) examines the claim that her subjects, who report hearing God speak to them, are mentally ill. She found that they were, on the whole, very well adjusted, highly functioning, socially adept, and cogent adults. There were no independent markers here of mental illness.

But even if not pathological, God-experiences can be *explained* without recourse to God. Contemporary neurological theory, for example, associates experiences of a transcendent unity with 'variations in deafferentiation in various structures of the nervous system, and lesser religious experiences with mild to moderate stimulation of circuits in the lateral hypothalamus' (Gellman, 2017). God-experiences are entirely in the head.

But that's unfair. We shouldn't be surprised that naturalistic accounts of God-experiences don't refer to God. God is supernatural. Scientists, be they theist or atheist, tend to adopt a methodological naturalism.



Methodological naturalism claims that science should act *as if* God and other supernatural entities don't exist. One reason for adopting this policy stems from an appreciation of how theistic and supernatural explanations have a long history of being science-stopping. You needn't investigate what thunder and lightning is, and why it happens when it happens, if you simply put it all down to warring Gods throwing bolts of fire around. Only when you take supernatural posits out of the picture, is science forced to provide better explanations.

On the adoption of methodological naturalism, however, we shouldn't be surprised that neurologists find no sign of God as the cause of God-experiences. Methodological naturalism is question-begging in this investigation. If the question under discussion is the nature of religious experience, and if you want to discover whether or not such experiences are genuine, then it would be dishonest to *assume* from the outset that supernatural causes have no role to play in the phenomenon under discussion. Of course, under the *assumption* of methodological naturalism, you'll discover no evidence of Divine intervention. You'll discover nothing more than certain neuro-psychological phenomena, none of which involve God in any direct way; but that's because you're ignoring from the outset the very possibility that God is involved.

The failure of naturalistic accounts of God-experiences to involve God in their analysis should be singularly unsurprising. It provides no grounds for skepticism. Many neurologists will readily agree. Neurologists simply aren't looking for God. They're doing something else.<sup>7</sup>

At the other extreme to those who think of mystical experience as pathological, there are researchers in the cognitive science of religion who think that susceptibility to religious belief is hardwired into our cognitive architecture (Barrett, 2004). These cognitive processes are primed to interpret experience as God-experiences with very little prompting. On the basis of this research, you could conclude either: (1) God-experiences are nothing more than an idiosyncratic feature of our evolved cognitive architecture; or (2), the God who loves us and wants us to come to know him, ensured that humans would evolve a cognitive architecture receptive to theism. Can you find a non-question begging reason to opt for one of these options over the other?

### Sense Organs

**Suggestion 6:** Our sensory experiences are facilitated by specific sense-organs with a specific and reliable function. God-experiences, by contrast, are not mediated by specially calibrated sense-organs for detecting the presence of God.

Jerome Gellman (2017) writes:

[T]here may not be out-of-brain "God-receptors" in the body, analogous to those for sensory perception, which might reinforce a suspicion that it's all in the head. However, out-of-brain receptors are neither to be expected nor required with non-physical stimuli... God... does not exist at a physical distance from the brain.

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example (Newberg, 2018)

We shouldn't expect out-of-brain 'God-receptors', but if our God-experiences don't have their own neurological *circuitry*, so to speak, then we might worry that they are mere byproducts of other functions. Justin Barret can argue all he likes that our cognitive architecture is particularly hospitable to religious belief, but if that's just a byproduct of the evolution of other, more biologically *important* modules in our brain, then religious belief can, perhaps, be explained away. If, on the other hand, there exists an independent 'God module', then this module might play a role in blocking any such debunking argument.

Brain scientists are increasingly suggesting that mystical experiences activate unique neural pathways.<sup>8</sup> Gellman concludes (2001, p. 33): 'that brain physiologists are beginning to discover unique brain activities or formations associated with mystical episodes must count in favour of their validity' (Ibid.). Research points towards something like a set of specifically dedicated God functions. The force of suggestion 6 seems undermined.

### The Mark of the Genuine

**Suggestion 7:** After ingesting certain sorts of mushrooms, we know not to trust all that we seem to see. Knowing that we sometimes have reason to discount our sense experiences can help us to distinguish between apparent and genuine book-experiences (this is what makes crosschecking so useful). By contrast, we have no way to tell genuine religious experiences apart from apparent ones.

Suggestion 7 isn't true. It assumes that we have no way of ascertaining when a religious experience is fake. But we do. For example, investigative journalism was able to ascertain that the apparent religious experiences of American 'faith healer', Peter Popoff were feigned and fraudulent (Randi, 1989, pp. 139-82). So much for other people. What about our *own* God-experiences?

Jonathan Kvanvig once put it to me: if God came to him and told him to sacrifice his son, he'd know that it was either a test or a hallucination. Why? Because we've already learnt, from the Bible, that God doesn't want child sacrifice. We have canons of metaphysical, theological, and ethical *reason*, against which we can assess the likely veracity of our putative religious experiences. We have to arrive at a balance between the vividness of a given experience, and the relative strength of our background convictions.

More generally, William Wainwright (1981, pp. 86-8) presents a number of tests. One test has it that the 'consequences of the experience must be good' for the subject (Ibid., p. 86). Gellman (2001, p. 32) explains: 'A person's coming out of God-experiences propelled toward an evil, egocentric life, would count strongly against the authenticity of the experience'. A second test, suggested by Wainwright (1981), is that a person's God-experiences should prove 'fruitful and edifying' for *others*. A third test demands that the experience give rise to profundity. Gellman (2001, pp. 32-3) explains: 'The insignificance or inanity of what the mystic says counts against authenticity.' As Gellman rightly points out, all three of Wainwright's tests have been clearly passed by some mystics, and clearly failed by others.

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<sup>8</sup> For citation of scientific research pointing in this direction, see (Gellman, 2001, p. 33)

### A General Analogy

Classical foundationalism states that a belief can only be justified if it is entailed by other justified beliefs, or if it has a special status; a status that allows it to be a *foundation* in our system of beliefs; a status such as infallibility, incorrigibility, or indubitability. Alvin Plantinga (2000) notes: classical foundationalism *cannot* license our ordinary beliefs about the external world. For example: our book-beliefs are derived from our book-experiences, but our book-experiences are not infallible, incorrigible, nor indubitable, nor are our book-beliefs derived from any other firm foundation. Instead, we tend to *reject* classical foundationalism. We *allow* that our sensory beliefs are properly basic; generally, in need of no further justification.

*Analogously*, Plantinga suggests that we have a faculty – which John Calvin called the '*sensus divinitatis*'; a faculty for sensing God. Our sense-experiences are mediated by sense-organs according to a design plan that tends to be reliable. For example: the human eye tends to get things right, providing it finds itself in an hospitable environment. It runs according to a reliable design plan. It gives rise to properly basic beliefs. If God exists, then we have every reason to believe that our *sensus divinitatis*, whether or not it has its own neurological wiring, was designed by God, since he might want us to know him. If God exists (granted: a big 'if'), then our properly basic belief in him is warranted; no more and no less than our book-beliefs.

William Alston (1991) develops a general theory of doxastic practice (i.e., belief forming practices). Some of these practices can be justified in terms of other doxastic practices. The practice of science, for example, can be justified in terms of the practices of sense-perception, and reasoning. But many doxastic practices cannot be justified without circularity. Famously, for instance, induction (i.e. reasoning from historical patterns to predictions about the future) can only be justified on the basis of induction itself (since using induction generally worked well in the past, induction advises us to predict that it will work well in the future).

According to Alston, our only justification for continuing to rely on these circular practices is somewhat pragmatic. They have proven themselves to be well behaved, since they haven't produced massive, unavoidable contradictions on central matters, nor have they clashed in any major way with other equally well-established practices.

With this picture in place, Alston goes on to argue that the Christian practice of belief-formation (and, by extension, the doxastic practice of any religion that doesn't give rise to massive contradictions) has all of the relevant features of a justified doxastic practice. To undermine Alston's argument, you would have to argue that his criteria for the rationality of a doxastic practice are too permissive – but you'd better be careful not to make your ordinary book-beliefs irrational too.

### Possible Conclusions

I offer a number of alternative conclusions from which to choose. Starting with the most ambitious, I'll dial it down notch by notch.

**Conclusion 1:** God, as described by the generic God concept, exists. God-experiences are a wide spread feature of human life, whether or not you've had one yourself. You believe that this book exists on the basis of your book-experiences, and you *would* believe that it exists even had you not seen it yourself, on the basis of another person's testimony that *they* experienced it. So too, you should believe that God – as described by the generic concept – exists, either on the basis of your own God-experiences (if you have any), or on the basis of other people's. We have found no good reason to make any relevant distinction between God-experiences and book-experiences, so as to block this argument, unless we can find some independent proof that God doesn't exist.

**Conclusion 2:** We *have* found reason to be somewhat less trusting of God-experiences than we are of book-experiences. The variety of crosschecking available for God-experiences are less direct and less compelling. Nevertheless, God-experiences – whether we've had them personally, or heard of them via testimony – still provide *sufficient* warrant for believing in God – as described by the generic concept; *less* warrant than we have for believing in books, but sufficient warrant notwithstanding.

**Conclusion 3:** God-experiences provide such a reduced level of justification for God-beliefs that they cannot justify, on their own, belief that God exists. Nevertheless, God-experiences still provide *evidence* that God – as described by the generic concept – exists; evidence that's simply insufficient for belief. God-experiences are a start. They need to be supplemented with further evidence.

**Conclusion 4:** God-experiences only have the evidential weight of a *seeming*. If it seems to you that God exists, and you can find no equally compelling evidence to suggest that he doesn't, then you might have good reason to believe that he does – at least as he is described by the generic concept. But *seemings* only carry weight for the people that have them.

**Conclusion 5:** If God *exists*, then God-experiences *are* likely to be epistemically analogous to our everyday sensory experiences. If, on the other hand, God *doesn't* exist, then they're certainly not reliable, and can easily be explained away in terms of some sort of pathology or evolutionary accident.

Conclusion 5 – the weakest of the options – still concedes a lot to the theist. It grants her that she *is* warranted in her belief that God exists – that she *is* acting with due rationality in giving weight to her religious experience – so long, that is, as God exists. The theist likewise has to accept that if God *doesn't* exist, her God-experiences were delusional. But on the off chance that God *does* exist, then the atheist will have to accept that he lacked a certain sensibility, leaving him tone-deaf to the genuine music of religious experience.<sup>9</sup>

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