The Significance of Religious Experience

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His kind of faith is a gift.

It’s like an ear for music or the talent to draw.

— *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, Woody Allen

I. Introduction: Proofs, Old and New

Occasionally one meets or reads about people who were, as we say, born at the wrong time or place. Their gifts, tendencies, and ways, awkward in the context of their lives, would have seemed natural at some other time or place. The classical proofs for the existence of God suffer a different fate. Born at precisely the right time and place, they now seem out of context, no longer compelling in the way they must have been. At least they seem that way to many of us.

The natural habitat of the proofs was the medieval philosophical world, an intellectual culture in which philosophical justification of the religious fundamentals was just what was needed.[1] If one moves back some centuries to ancient Israel and its Jewish and arguably early Christian aftermath rational

justification of religion is not on the horizon. To defend belief in God's existence would have seemed bizarre, like defending belief in the existence of the weather.

Indeed, strange as this seems to our ears, belief itself is never mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. There is talk of believing *in* God, i.e. trusting, relying upon God. But no talk of believing doctrines, believing that something is the case;[2] no commandment—no explicit one at least—to believe anything.[3]

However, by the early middle ages in Jewish religious culture—earlier in Christianity—beliefs, thoughts, and the like become very much the center of attention and there is a felt need to justify religious belief.[4]

The medieval attitude to belief's centrality has become the norm. We identify the belief that God exists as a *sine qua non* of religious commitment. The Hebrew Bible's interest is rather in one's overall stance, the essential components of which are rather affective and behavioral, most importantly awe/fear and love of God as realized in lived experience.

But while belief has become central, the proofs of the medievals—the classic philosophic defenses of that belief—have lost their punch. The considerations to which they appeal—like the order and beauty of the universe—have by no means lost their suggestiveness, their relevance to and significance for religious thought and feeling. But proof is another thing.[5]

My aim here is to reflect on a relatively new style of proof—a distant relative of the classical arguments—current throughout the twentieth century and in recent decades even more vital, the argument from individual religious experience. Here too, or so I will argue, we should distinguish the alleged proof's cogency from the religious significance of the considerations to which the proof appeals.

The focus on individual religious experience brings to mind the Protestant religious orientation. Not that individual religious experience is a mere afterthought in the other monotheisms. Indeed the proof's advocates appeal to religious experiences in a variety of traditions. Likewise advocates of the argument include philosophers as diverse as William Alston and Richard Swinburne on the Protestant side, Gary Gutting, a Catholic, and Jewish thinker Jerome Gellman.[6] For the most part, however, contemporary discussions of proofs of God's existence in the Catholic, Jewish, or Muslim traditions—as I say, they are hardly the central topic nowadays—are of the classical arguments.

My aim here is to explore the fundamental ideas of the argument, this as opposed to the numerous sophisticated variations that have emerged. I begin with William James, early in the twentieth century. Whatever the specifics of his religious views, James emerges from the American Protestant world and gives such proofs a great deal of respect. It's good to begin with James, moreover, since he has a gift for raising fundamental questions in an intuitive, technically unencumbered way. In this way he is like later philosophers P. F. Strawson and Harry Frankfurt; penetrating minds whose insights give rise to rather technical literatures.

II. Gifts to the Spirit

James characterizes experiences that purport to be of God—he includes them in the category of mystical experiences—as "gifts to our spirit." "No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these … forms of consciousness quite disregarded."

Such experiences for James bespeak quite literally another form of consciousness. It is an open question, he supposes, as to whether such forms reveal worlds, as it were, that are ordinarily beyond our reach. It's difficult to know what to do with James's seemingly extravagant notion of forms of consciousness. This raises issues of the paranormal; James was a founder of the American Society for Psychical Research in 1885.

Whatever one thinks about the paranormal, James's remarks about "gifts to the spirit" are themselves gifts. Here James evinces an appreciation of religion that is nowadays lost to many. John Dewey, a similarly sympathetic critic of religion,[7] writes:

A writer says: "I broke down from overwork and soon came to the verge of nervous prostration. One morning after a long and sleepless night…I resolved to stop drawing upon myself so continuously and begin drawing upon God. I determined to set apart a quiet time every day in which I could relate my life to its ultimate source, regain the consciousness that in God I live, move and have my being. That was thirty years ago. Since then I have had literally not one hour of darkness or despair."

This [life story constitutes] an impressive record. I do not doubt its authenticity nor that of the experience related. It illustrates a religious aspect of experience. But it illustrates also the use of that quality to carry a superimposed load of a particular religion. For having been brought up in the Christian religion, its subject interprets it in the terms of the personal God characteristic of that religion.[8]

Dewey's expression, "a religious aspect of experience" is no throwaway; he emphasizes the reality and significance of such aspects. In this passage he suggests—and in the sequel he greatly expands upon—the power of religion and its potential for influencing positively the course of life. At the same time he much more clearly and forcefully than James rejects the supernaturalist metaphysics associated with traditional religion. Nevertheless I suspect that James's phrase "gifts to the spirit" would sit well for Dewey.[9]

Speaking for myself, I very much like James's characterization. This is in part because I think with Dewey that such peak moments, and religious life more generally, can have a beneficial influence, including one's psychological balance, ability to negotiate life's challenges, the significance one accords to one's life, and the dignity one assigns to others.[10] But there is another and perhaps deeper reason, albeit one that I find difficult to express.

What makes "gifts to the spirit" so difficult to explicate is "spirit." I could explain James's idea if I could explain the concept of the spirit, and related idea of the spiritual. There is significantly more to these ideas than the largely psychological dimension that Dewey emphasizes—the various beneficial effects mentioned above as well as "the unification of the self" of which Dewey speaks.

The quotation from *Crimes and Misdemeanors* at the head of this article suggests that an affinity for things of the spirit is grounded in a natural gift, a human capacity, analogous to, in the aesthetic domain, having an ear for music or the talent to draw. I'll begin with the latter and return to religion shortly. As we will see, there is more to mine here than a mere analogy. The aesthetic dimension has its own ties to matters of the spirit.

One obstacle to establishing the link I am after is that "aesthetic" is often heard in a reductive way; ascriptions of beauty, for example, are sometimes thought of, dismissed as, merely subjective. This is a function, I believe, of thinking too abstractly about this sphere. Consider by contrast actual aesthetic

gifts, like musical talent or even having an ear for music. These abilities are far along the continuum from subjective toward objective, which is not to suggest that this distinction is either sharp or clear. Surely musical talent, an ear for music, and the like are no less aspects of the world than other abilities —including those in the domain of athletics— to perform, to discern and appreciate, etc. The "tone deaf" idiom suggests that one, otherwise sound in auditory capacities, can systematically miss something important.

One who is musically advanced may hear the same performance as the rest of us but may alone penetrate to profound levels of appreciation. Similarly, one advanced in the appreciation of the visual arts may bring something very different to, and take something very different from, a painting, or indeed a natural scene, for example a landscape with its play of light, shadow, color, and the like.

Profound aesthetic experiences, no less than the religious experiences of which James wrote, deserve to be thought of as gifts to the spirit. They may engender a sense of awe and mystery, and of the sublime; they may provoke a feeling of being privileged and so of gratitude. The experience may be at once elevating and humbling. These represent important points of contact with religious moments.

The points of contact are not limited to such reactions. Artistic and religious virtuosity both involve, even begin with, natural aptitude, as noted in the quotation from *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. Some are more given to these things than others. And in both domains, hard work, genuine focus—at times single-minded—is essential if one is to approach one's potential. We are less apt to think this way about the religious domain than the artistic. But a religious giant, a Mozart of the spirit, is a rare find; she is (certainly typically) one who has labored strenuously in pursuit of excellence.[11] And just as one who is tone-deaf can appreciate the musically gifted as responding to something of substance, one who is less able than another in matters of the spirit can recognize the latter's accomplishment. Needless to say, being tone-deaf is a rare condition in either domain. Ordinarily people occupy an intermediate position within a wide spectrum of which being tone-deaf is at one extreme.

I've been emphasizing the analogies between the two domains, and the quasi-religious character of profound aesthetic experience. Now consider one who has undergone considerable development in both domains. A religious orientation—bringing God into the picture—may heighten and deepen one's reactions to beauty. Explaining this is another matter, and not a trivial one. There may be no single story. God may play the role of an object of gratefulness, someone as it were on whom one bestows one's gratitude. Sometimes the presence of God in the picture links experiences that would otherwise feel discrete; one comes to see an array in place of discrete dots. The points in the array seem to accrue added significance; aesthetic experience can thus partake of something analogous to what is sometimes called intertextuality.[12] Sometimes it may be God's role as a partner and, as it were, a friend with whom to share the wonder. There are no doubt other dimensions, and the experience of several of these at once adds considerable power. One shares the wonders with their source, takes pleasure in their array.

Consideration of the aesthetic domain may be illuminating. Still, in much religious experience the aesthetic dimension is marginal or not present. All sorts of things can stimulate religious reflection and feeling: another's death, or the prospect of death—one's own or that of others, various sorts of horrors or extreme ugliness, witnessing simple acts of particularly touching human kindness, childbirth, the intellectual and/or moral growth of one's child or simply of another person, to name a few. It seems too much of a stretch to assimilate the religious reactions that may be prompted to reactions in the aesthetic domain.

And finally, there are James's favorite examples of gifts of the spirit, quasi-perceptual experiences of God's presence. There is no reason to assimilate these—certainly not all of them—to the aesthetic. They represent a spiritual achievement, the sense of being in God's presence. Of course, many experiences can provoke a sense of the divine presence, for example, some of the aesthetic ones discussed above. But the quasi-perceptual experiences are quite another thing, face to face with God, as James puts it.[13]

To approach religious sensibility with James is to bring to center stage the experiential side of the religious orientation. But what of religious belief? James, while he writes that religion is fundamentally a phenomenon of the gut rather than of the head, argues forcefully that the experiential aspect has important implications for the doxastic side of religion.

III. What If Anything Do Religious Experiences Prove?

James and many of the more recent advocates of the argument from religious experience treat such experiences on the model of perception; James calls them, "face to face presentations." They are, he says, "absolutely authoritative."

Our own more "rational" beliefs are based on evidence exactly similar in nature to that which mystics quote for theirs. Our senses, namely, have assured us of certain states of fact; but mystical experiences are as direct perceptions of fact for those who have them as any sensations ever were for us.[14]

This powerful "warrant for truth" does not, however, extend to those who have not themselves had such experiences. Testimony about religious experiences, according to James, is vitiated by what would seem to be a very powerful consideration, the great variety of such reports of experiences, testifying as it were to many different gods, non-gods, various metaphysical realities, and the like.[15] Here James sounds a bit like Hume, who famously denies that claims to miraculous experiences have epistemic value for those who merely hear testimony about them. By contrast, some more recent advocates maintain that such "perceptual" experiences constitute objective evidence, evidence for all of us, not only for participants.

By way of reaction to James's "absolutely authoritative" claim, it seems important that the experiences in question are not phenomenally like ordinary sense perception. Consider one of James's examples.

God is more real to me than any thought of thing or person. I feel his presence positively, and the more as I live in closer harmony with his laws as written in my body and mind. I feel him in the sunshine and rain; and awe mingled with a delicious restfulness most nearly describes my feelings. I talk to him as to a companion in prayer and praise, and our communion is delightful. He answers me again and again, often in words so clearly spoken that it seems my outer ear must have carried the tone, but generally in strong mental impressions. Usually a text of scripture, unfolding some new view of him and his love for me, and care for my safety. I could give hundreds of instances, in school matters, social problems, financial difficulties, etc. That he is mine and I am his never leaves me, it is an abiding joy. Without it life would be a blank, a desert, a shoreless, trackless waste. (p. 81)

For the most part the people James quotes are not claiming literally to see or hear God. Their sense is that they are experiencing God—in some way that is difficult for us (and them) to define. The experiences are to be sure various, ranging from ones that involve a deeply felt sense of God's presence, God's love, etc. to quasi-sensual "almost seeings, almost hearings," and the like. In the quotation just given, there is only one reference to actual hearing, and it may well be that the writer is speaking of an as-if hearing. The closer to claims of actual perceptual experience, the more likely we are to take them to be a bit crazy. Interestingly, St. Teresa of Avila, the sixteenth-century mystic, suggests, according to Rowan Williams,[16] that as a rule of thumb "the closer such perception is to … actually supposing the object of vision to be present to the senses… the less likely it is to be genuinely of God."

The differences with ordinary perception are not limited to the phenomenal aspects. The religious experiences in question are for most of the subjects once (or at most several) in a lifetime experiences. There are those mystics who more regularly enjoy such privileges but it would be surprising in the extreme if they could call them up at will. Ordinary, everyday perception, by contrast, is reliably repeatable. One can return to a room and typically see exactly what one expects to see.

In addition to the matter of repeatability, there is the question of whether what one perceives—and indeed one's perceiving it—is available to other normal perceivers. The question is not only whether others can have similar experiences, but also whether what one takes in on a particular occasion is open to others' perception. In the example above, the person talks with God and receives answers—in the special "as-if perception" mode. Whatever else one thinks about the give and take, no one takes the interaction to be available to others.

These differences do not themselves imply that anything short of veridical perception is occurring. But they do strain the analogy with ordinary sense perception. While it is less than clear that James's is exactly an argument from analogy, it's worth keeping our eyes upon these differences.

Perhaps more important, though, is James's Hume-like point about testimony, what we might call "the many-gods problem." Indeed it's difficult to understand why James supposes that the agent's "warrant for truth" survives the agent's own knowledge of the many-gods problem. After all, if one were having a notoriously unreliable sort of sense perception one would do well, despite the appearances, to question what one seems to be seeing. In the case of religious experience, the Jamesian agent would not trust another's testimony. Why then should she not apply this lesson to her own case?

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, these religious experiences do not involve any sensory apparatus. This seems to me—but evidently not to James and his followers—perhaps the most important point of all, one that puts the other points mentioned into proper perspective. I will linger a bit on it.

The accumulated experience of humankind gives much weight to the senses as yielding more or less reliable information about the environment. However this is to be rationalized, understood, theorized, all but the most strident skeptic is on board here. Indeed the rough outline of how this all works is well known. One doesn't need contemporary neuroscience; Locke had something like the basic idea.

So sense perception has for us a privileged epistemic status. But this has everything to do with the idea that our senses are trained on aspects of the environment. There are other experiences that are in a wider sense "perceptual," experiences like the religious ones we are considering, but also mental images, hallucinations, dreams. These are phenomenally more like perception than like, for example, conceptual thinking. But they do not therefore somehow automatically inherit the epistemic credentials of sense perception.

James's contrary contention, apparently, is roughly that any sufficiently vivid (if that's the right word) presentation has as much claim as any other to being veridical, the disclosure of an independent reality. But why should vividness, pace Hume, or the sense that one is making genuine perceptual contact, bridge the gap between actual perception of the environment and these other sorts of "perceptual" experiences?

It is as if, under the influence of the Cartesian tradition, one were working from the inside. Sufficiently vivid perceptual states are on a par unless one can find grounds to distinguish them. And from such a perspective, working one's way from inside to outside—finding such grounds —is the major undertaking. But this is not the only way to approach these matters. It is plausible that as human beings in perceptual touch with our surroundings, we are already outside. We begin, as Quine says, with ordinary things.[17] But such perception of the environment is a very different business than perceptual experience of the wider variety, including quasi-perceptual religious experience.

Accordingly, a reflective person, privileged to have an intense religious moment of the sort in question, might bracket the epistemology of the experience. It means ever so much, she might well say, but it proves little. My own certainly fit this pattern. They were at once powerfully significant—even if relatively tame—and epistemically inert. The question of what the experience verified never so much as arose.

Here I am not alone. Rowan Williams writes:

> [for Teresa] the mysticism is demystified, and mystical experience *as such* is accorded no particular authority. Its authority…has to be displayed in the shape of the vocation of which it is part. [Still, …] there is good reason for intensified phenomenological interest in the varieties of preternatural or paranormal occurrence in prayer, especially when (as in Teresa's case) these are to some extent organized as an ascending series. Teresa herself is fascinated by her experiences…. (Williams, p. 148)

> Teresa and her contemporaries would have found this [the idea of trying to validate doctrine] in light of such mystical experiences surprising. For all Teresa's interest in the visionary and paranormal, she is not disposed to use it as evidence for the way the universe is. "Do mystical states establish the truth [of religious claims]?," asks William James in the course of a discussion of Teresa. Teresa herself would never have imagined that "mystical states" could do such a job… . [that they] had any part whatever to play in doctrinal discussion. So far from "mystical states" being a sort of paradigm of certainty, they have authority only within a frame of reference which is believed in on quite other grounds, and are therefore properly to be tested according to their consistency with this. (p. 149)

St. Teresa, then, brackets her experiences in epistemological terms. This does not, in her view, however, militate against their being religiously significant. Indeed she seems to measure spiritual progress, at least of one significant variety, by something like the intensity and perhaps frequency of the experiences.

Such epistemological neutrality does not entail metaphysical neutrality. I'm sure that St. Teresa believed she was making contact with God that in mystical experience. Unlike a Jamesian, however, she didn't presume that one could, from reflecting on the perceptual character of the experience, rationally conclude that it really was contact with God.

Imagine now another grade of removal from the Jamesian picture. One undergoes a powerful religious experience but is less than sure about, even skeptical about, any sort of real contact with the supernatural. “I know,” he might say, “that this experience reflects my deep religious involvement, but whether I’ve actually achieved contact with God is hard to say.” Another example is provided by the advocate of a perfect being theology and some associated anti-anthropomorphism. Divinity, on such a view, might be taken to be beyond our perceptual (or even conceptual) reach. But such a theological position historically has not led to giving up prayer.[18] And such a person might indeed be subject to various sorts of religious experiences. Whatever these experiences are, she might reflect, they are powerful, elevating, and humbling; their intensity and regularity a measure of one’s spiritual situation. In short, one who departs from metaphysical/epistemological claims about the experiences might still adopt St. Teresa’s Jamesian attitude about their religious value.

IV. Interlude: Epistemic Legalism

James’s treatment of these phenomena—and even more so later advocates of the argument from religious experience—exhibits what I will call “epistemic legalism.” What I have in mind here is analogous to what Bernard Williams and others have called “scientism,” roughly the misapplication to philosophy of modes of explanation that have their home in scientific theorizing.

In Charles Griswold’s recent book, *Forgiveness*,[19] he speaks frequently of *warranted* and *unwarranted* resentment, of the *obligation* to forgive, to forswear *unjustified* resentment, of the question of who has *standing* to forgive. In remarks on Griswold’s book in a 2008 Pacific APA symposium,[20] I called attention to what seemed to me like an invasion of legal terminology/conceptualization into the ethical domain. The legalism, or so I argued, does not do justice to our experience of forgiving and being forgiven.

Of course the whole matter is controversial; for deontologists the legalistic terminology is apt. But that it is apt does not go without saying, and it is worth noting that it does not. Here too, in discussions of the epistemology of religion by James and his followers, notions like justification, warrant, and obligation are central. Since we are in the domain of epistemology, perhaps you will think that all this indeed goes without saying, that these are inevitably the pivotal notions. But perhaps not.

I spent my college years increasingly engaged with and committed to Orthodox Judaism. Religious practice and the sense of spiritual/intellectual community were extremely compelling. At the same time part and parcel of the life were beliefs: that a supernatural God exists, that God revealed the Torah to Moses on Mt. Sinai, and the like. Given that one could not be sure of such things was there something like evidence or a good reason to think that these things were actually true? Doesn’t intellectual responsibility require more than just the powerful feeling that attends to the life? Such were my pangs of intellectual conscience.

One could no doubt put these questions in terms of justification, warrant, intellectual duty/obligation and the like. And surely at the time I was not making distinctions between theoretical approaches in epistemology. But the description in terms of virtues like intellectual honesty, integrity, and responsibility seems more in line with my thinking.

Some years ago I was speaking with my then Notre Dame colleague, Fred Freddoso. We were discussing the attempt by our colleague Alvin Plantinga to show that belief in God was rational. Plantinga once commented there were many good arguments for the existence of God, 32 if I remember correctly. (I quipped that I knew the five famous ones and they didn’t do it.) I believe that Plantinga was thinking of a good argument in a different way than I. When he spoke and wrote about the rationality of belief in God, he meant something quite refined, something like— if I have him right

—one way one might proceed without irrationality. To establish that belief in God was rational was something like establishing that one had no epistemic duty to reject it. In discussing this, Freddoso, an Aquinas scholar, commented that in St. Thomas's treatment, such a sophisticated (and legalistic) conception of rationality is not at issue. What St. Thomas asks is (something like) "Is belief in God dumb?" The force of that question I can feel.

Thinking in terms of intellectual honesty, integrity, and responsibility may lead in a direction very different from that of the epistemic legalism that's been in vogue for so long.[21] As with other issues in philosophy, switching vocabulary is no guarantee of a substantially different approach. It depends of course on what one makes of the virtue talk. And of course this is a large topic at which I'm merely glancing here.

Justification is the concept from the legalistic framework that I'm most concerned with at present. Justification often has a defensive flavor, in philosophy and more generally.[22] In philosophy it's as if a Pyrrhonian homunculus were perched on one's shoulder, repeatedly whispering in one's ear, "How do you know; are you certain?" And providing a non-question-begging answer is a very difficult business even for the most pedestrian beliefs; witness Descartes. This is of course not to say that one can't theorize about justification without the skeptic in mind. But there is often the scent of skepticism in the air, perhaps especially in discussions of justifying religious belief.[23]

V. Swinburne et al.

I propose that we characterize the religious experiences we have been exploring, neutrally as possible (with respect to what they indicate about God's existence), as experiences "as of God." This lacks poetry; but not to worry, it won't come up much in conversation. Richard Swinburne, also in search of a non-question-begging description, proposes that we speak of them as "epistemic seemings."[24] For Swinburne, apparently following Chisholm, "seems epistemically that x is present" means roughly that the agent believes (or is inclined to believe) that x is present on the basis of the experience.

There is one respect in which Swinburne's terminology seemingly fails to achieve the non-question begging character he seeks. For it presupposes that to have such an experience is to believe (or be inclined to believe) that God exists on the basis of the experience. But as we have seen, on St. Teresa's approach the experience fails to provide a ground for the belief. The agent's belief is grounded elsewhere. And on the alternative I mentioned above—a further grade of removal from James—the agent can take the experience to be religiously momentous without believing that he is making perceptual contact with God. Again, the experience will hardly provide a ground for his belief.

Still, surely some people do experience such "epistemic seemings," religious experiences on the basis of which they ground their religious beliefs. Swinburne, a super-Jamesian, attempts to extend their justification to the rest of us: given the religious experiences of some people, rationality requires that we all believe that God exists.[25] The following "principle of credulity"[26] is at the heart of his argument:

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. (p. 254)

Swinburne argues for this principle on grounds that denying it would “land one in a skeptical bog” about ordinary perception. Here we have not just the scent of skepticism, detected in the emphasis on justification. Skepticism constitutes a crucial link in the argument.

Swinburne’s approach to the epistemology of individual religious experience represents an important trend in twentieth-century Christian philosophy. Respect for skepticism is one important aspect of the trend, but it’s not the only one or the deepest.[27] That honor belongs to an idea to which I now turn.

My first encounter with the idea was as a college freshman, overhearing a conversation in a coffee shop. “We all have premises,” offered a defender of religion. “These are mine.” I didn’t know a lot of philosophy at the time, but even then this sort of defense had very little appeal for me. Surely, I thought, we want more than that from philosophy. In such a fashion, one could defend just about anything one felt strongly enough about.

There is another way to take this sort of defense of religious belief. Perhaps the idea is that religious belief does not stand in need of philosophical justification; that religious belief is something with which one comes to philosophy. I myself, while I do not so approach religious belief (at least as it’s usually construed—see later), I very much do so approach other matters, for example, our common sense beliefs about the world: that my dog is lying at my feet as I write these words, that he is a dog and I’m human, and the like. As I’ve said, we start with ordinary things; we start out in and with the world.

To maintain that religious belief is something that one brings to philosophy is to give religious belief the status of common sense. But this is to deny a striking intuitive gap between ordinary and religious beliefs; between on one hand the belief that I’m a human being and on the other that a supernatural God exists outside of time and space. With respect to the former, it takes some sort of philosophical skepticism to generate concern. Not so for the latter. A normally reflective person, religious or not, will recognize that there is an issue here. Or so we often suppose.

The denial of the intuitive gap is at the heart of the trend represented by Swinburne’s approach. It is the meeting ground for James and his contemporary followers. Various philosophic strategies have been utilized to eliminate the gap. The freshman—post-Philosophy 1—comment above was one way. Closely related is the idea that religious belief is in effect (or can have the status of) common sense. Then there is James’s: to grant the special “as of God” experiences the epistemic status of sense perception. Still another way to eliminate the gap is by way of skepticism.

Here the idea is to place great weight on the skeptic’s claims. One begins with the idea that some ordinary belief is in epistemological trouble given the weight of the skeptic’s claims. Early along Alvin Plantinga emphasized belief in other minds.[28] Swinburne, in the work cited, speaks more generally of beliefs based on ordinary sense perception. How are we to deal with the skeptic? How might we, in the face of the skeptic’s good questions, account for our everyday knowledge? Only by adopting a very strong epistemic principle—for example Swinburne’s principle of credulity. But then, strong epistemic principle in hand, religious belief is no worse off than the most ordinary, pedestrian beliefs. Skepticism levels the playing field.

To the extent that one is moved by the skeptical starting point one will want to scrutinize the idea that something like the principle of credulity is the only way to rescue ordinary beliefs. From my perspective, while I worry about my beliefs being responsible, as discussed above, that constitutes no problem for ordinary beliefs and remains an issue for the religious beliefs in question.

I have explored a number of attempts to eliminate the intuitive epistemic gap I've been discussing. And of course one needs to have a look at each such proposal in detail. But something seems questionable with the general idea, with the very attempt to eliminate the gap.

Philosophy is notorious for solutions the brilliance of which outshines their contact with good sense. Russell reminded us to maintain our sense of reality "even in the most abstract studies." The intuitive gap I've been discussing is one that presents itself to many religious and non-religious people. Some of our forbears who produced elaborate rational proofs for the existence of God were presumably moved to do so by the sense that their passionately held convictions were indeed controversial, and not only in the sense that some people believed otherwise. Surely a reasonable defense would reveal good reasons to believe without suggesting that the gap was illusory.

VI. Conclusion: Making Sense of Religion

Our modern sensibilities distance us from the ancients for whom God, like the weather, was hardly optional. We have well known options. And even if one's own way is to take God for granted almost like the weather, the question of whether this makes sense almost inevitably arises at some point in one's life, certainly in the lives of those around one. In what follows I'll sketch an alternative to the approach taken in so much twentieth and twenty-first century work, by defenders of religion as well as by critics.

One thing that is striking—and new—in the Jamesian arguments we have been exploring is the idea that the experiential side of religion can serve as the foundation, specifically the epistemic foundation, of religious belief. At the same time, James is hardly interested in religious experience only for its epistemic implications. James's called his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and the varieties and their meanings—meanings in the broadest sense—are its main focus.

To thus emphasize the experiential side is to make contact with the mystical tradition, and to diverge from the spirit of medieval rationalist theology.[29] It is also to converge with the approach of the Hebrew Bible with its emphasis on what Buber calls faith, a matter of living a life characterized by an intimacy with God.[30]

The ancients lived their faith without the help of our concept of belief. But this is not to say that there is something illegitimate about the use of our notion to characterize them, although it does require a certain delicacy. Surely there were things in the religious domain that they took to be true: the historical events described in the Bible for example, with God's role in them, as well as that God is good, forgiving, at times angry, and the like.[31] There is no harm in the cautious ascription of belief here.

Here's one reason for caution: The language in which many of these beliefs are expressed is poetically infused, the way of the Bible. And where not poetic, the language is often anthropomorphic, and so problematic as to its ultimate import. We may speak of belief here, but we are quite far from the philosophers' conception of assent to a well-defined propositional content. Max Kadushin, reflecting on such belief, refers to it as "uncrystallized," an arresting image.[32]

Religious belief can engender philosophical pique from another direction as well, the not inconsiderable inconsistency in the biblical characterization of God, an inconsistency that reflects our own sense of these things. To focus on our own case, we believe passionately in how much He cares—we feel or almost feel His touch—and then, turning a corner, we feel His absence acutely, sometimes almost a sense of cruelty. Or for another dimension of inconsistency, our experience of God, as just

described, essentially involves God's feelings, thoughts, and the like. At the same time, we experience God as somehow beyond all that.[33]

The lack of clarity, the anthropomorphism, the inconsistency, these are things that while smoothly accommodated within religious life drive the philosophic mind to drink. Or to purify. When Greek philosophy enters into contact with the Israelite religious tradition there ensues a rationalizing of these earlier modes of religious thought. The literary rendering, so apt for the religious life as it was (and largely still is) lived, is seen as inadequate, as in need of translation into a non-poetic idiom, as in need of a metaphysical foundation and attendant epistemological support. And making sense of religious life comes to be seen as defending the religious metaphysics, in part by supplying a supporting epistemology. Which brings us to proofs of the existence of a God.

What, though, if we maintain our focus on lived experience rather than on any allegedly necessary metaphysical underpinning? Without a religious metaphysics and epistemology we may well be accused of not knowing of what we speak. But is it not a genuinely religious intuition that with respect to understanding God we are over our heads, that central to religious life is an intimacy, the other party to which is as it were seen through a glass darkly?

Making sense of one's commitment to a religious life is not and should not be a trivial matter. But there is a world of difference between defending supernaturalist metaphysics and making sense of the form of life. That the life genuinely speaks to one is, for example, germane to the latter project. An aspect of this, stronger for some participants than others, is a sense of God's presence. And one may reflect that one has more confidence in the wisdom of the life than in any philosophical interpretation of what it all comes to.

The effect of my approach is to reduce substantially the gap between ordinary and religious belief. The gap upon which I've insisted earlier, the gap that we ordinarily feel, is the product of a philosophical interpretation of religion, a metaphysics that we have come to think of as at the heart of a religious orientation. But this is not to suggest that there is no gap, that religious belief is somehow just common sense.

To proceed in this direction is to dethrone philosophy as the provider of foundations in this domain. This is not, however, to deny philosophy the exploration of fundamentals. Here religion provides a rich field. To provide one example, I spoke above of the ancients' (and our) religious beliefs that, I said, drive a philosopher to drink. At the same time, the religious utility of such uncrystallized beliefs is enormous; in that regard we couldn't ask any more of them. Uncrystallized belief is an idea that cries out for philosophical clarification.[34]

We are not the ancients and philosophy has made its mark on us, one that we don't wish to eschew. But it is one thing to see religious life as riding on a metaphysical picture, quite another to view the life as fundamental and the doctrinal side of one's tradition as more like the furniture in the living room, importantly expressive of the specifics of the tradition's sensibility, rather than the foundations of the edifice.[35], [36]

[1] The motivation for the production of the proofs seems mixed. For some, e.g. in the tenth century, Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), Introduction, pp. 6–9, part of the motivation seems to have been to assist those in doubt and to defeat heresies. The proofs were also thought (by various medieval philosophers and theologians) to help purify the opinions of the masses by providing insight and understanding, to supply intellectual foundations for opinions that were otherwise held on faith or on the basis of revelation,

to provide the sort of foundations that intellectual virtue requires of a reputable theology.

[2] It does not follow that the ascription of belief—utilizing *our* notion—to the ancients is illegitimate. But the matter is delicate. I return to it in Section VI.

[3] Medieval interpretations are another thing. Maimonides, for example, hears a commandment to believe in the first of the Ten Commandments (more literally and correctly, the ten statements or pronouncements): "I am the Lord, your God, who …." Similarly with respect to the prohibition to worship other gods; for Maimonides this concerns certain false beliefs. Cf. Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry* (Harvard University Press, 1998). The Bible's preferred approach is in terms of illicit intimacy, adultery as it were. For an almost overdramatized biblical example, see the Book of Hosea.

[4] Robert Bellah, in *Beyond Belief* (University of California Press, 1991), Chapter 13, "Religion and Belief: The Historical Background of "Non-Belief" argues—and I have thought this for some time—that the emphasis on *belief that*, as opposed to *belief in*, is a function of the influence of Greek philosophical thought. I argue for this in "Against Theology," in *Philosophers and the Jewish Bible*, Robert Eisen and Charles Menekin (eds.) *Philosophers and the Bible: General and Jewish Perspectives* (University Press of Maryland, 2008); available also on my website: http://www.philosophy.ucr.edu/people/faculty/wettstein/index.html

My focus in "Against Theology" is the Hebrew Bible, but Bellah speaks more generally: even in the New Testament the dominant notion of belief is *belief in.* At the conclusion of the present paper, I quote Buber in *Two Types of Faith* (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1951), according to whom *belief in* is indeed the dominant notion until the Gospel of John.

[5] It has been suggested that perhaps the proofs were an intellectualized (and historically conditioned) mode of expressing religious affect. For example, one could see the argument from design as the intellectualized expression of awe towards God concerning the order of the universe. It is plausible that propounders of the proofs were in part expressing such things, but one does not want to minimize the intellectual work that the proofs attempt to do on the face of it.

[6] William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Cornell University Press, 1991); Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Cornell University Press, 1997), and *Mystical Experience of God, a Philosophical Enquiry* (Ashgate Publishers, 2001); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

[7] As opposed to a flurry of recent books by Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchins, and Richard Dawkins that are critical of religion in a more wholesale fashion.

[8] *A Common Faith* (Yale University Press), 1934, pp. 11–12.

[9] And, perhaps surprisingly, even for Nietzsche who, in *Human, All Too Human* (Prometheus Books, 2009), p. 40, refers to religion as among "the blossoms of the world." This does not mean, he adds, that this blossom is close to the root of the world, that through religion one can better understand the nature of things.

[10]This is not to deny the awfulness unleashed in human history by the religions. Religion represents and unleashes powerful forces, potentially and actually in many directions.

[11] Occasionally one finds an individual whose natural gifts seem to emerge virtually whole (although I suspect this is often apocryphal or at least exaggerated). Perhaps Mozart himself; perhaps some of the religious giants. And John McEnroe practiced his tennis serve very little, or so I seem to remember. Nevertheless, typically, almost essentially, one's initial gifts await focused development. It is particularly inspiring to read of strenuous labor in the pursuit of excellence. See Bill Russell's autobiographical *Second Wind* (Random House, 1979) for an account of extreme devotion in just such service. Russell's book articulates the spiritual heights that such devotion makes possible, perhaps surprisingly in the context of sport. See esp. pp. 155–158.

[12] A religious orientation may help to create this sense of significant array. This is not to say, however, that such a sense is not available otherwise.

[13] The Bible suggests that only Moses spoke with God "face to face." At the same time, when Moses asks to see God's face, his request is unceremoniously denied; it's not possible, he is told, for a human being. But there are moments at which one feels that one has come close.

[14] *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Lecture XVII, p. 382 in *William James' Writings: 1902–1910.*

[15] On the face of it, or so it seems to me, James' point has great power. This matter has received considerable attention in the literature, some defending, some criticizing, James's contention concerning the epistemic significance of such varied, often competing, pieces of testimony.

[16] Williams is the Archbishop of Canterbury. The quote is from his *Teresa of Avila* (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), p. 147 ff.

[17] What Quine means by this phrase—it is the title of the first section of *Word and Object*—is another matter. Without prejudice, I like the phrase.

[18] How to work out the theory is another question. But certainly some philosophers, from medieval times to the present, have held extreme anti-anthropomorphic views about God without abandoning traditional religious practice.

[19] Cambridge University Press, 2008.

[20] For a later reflection on those comments, see my paper, "Forgiveness: Virtue and Happening" forthcoming in a symposium on Griswold's *Forgiveness* in *Philosophia*, and available on my website: http://www.philosophy.ucr.edu/people/faculty/wettstein/index.html

[21] See especially Lorraine Code, *Epistemic Responsibility.* My sense is that the recent "virtue epistemology" literature would be a rich source for thinking through these matters. Here I am grateful to a discussion with Linda Zabzebski.

[22]Think about interpersonal strife, or strife between nations or peoples; when a focus on justification becomes paramount, attention wanes about one's opponent's point of view or interests. The idea of justification feels overworked, overemphasized, and overvalued quite generally.

[23] To call attention to this scent is not to say that all attempts to provide arguments for God's existence are responsive to skepticism. See footnote 1 above.

[24] In *the Existence of God*, Revised Edition (Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 254.

[25] This formulation needs qualifications which I ignore here: needless to say, if the percipient in question was notably unreliable, etc. then her testimony could well be ignored.

[26] At first it seemed to me that Swinburne's use of "credulity" was very strange since it suggests credulousness. But Nick Wolterstorff pointed out that there is an older usage—one finds it in Reid—in which credulity refers to a natural tendency to believe in certain circumstances.

[27] In James's discussion in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, skepticism does not play any sort of central role in the argument from religious experience.

[28] See his *God and other Minds*, (Cornell University Press, 1968).

[29] With its emphasis on philosophically refined doctrine, and the sometime tendency to deemphasize the experiential side. In my own tradition, for example, Maimonides (in *Guide of the Perplexed*, see esp. Book 3, Chapter 51 and the following chapters) sees the philosophic contemplation of God as the highest form of worship and sees the more ordinary aspects of religious life as clearly inferior even if having their own sort of practical utility.

[30] A crucial component of Buber's "faith"—here the emphasis is different than the Jamesians—is the realization of the intimacy with God in all one's relationships and projects. Buber emphasizes aspects of faith like "walking in God's tempo" and "standing firm in one's commitment to God"—is to distinguish this notion of faith, which he attributes to the Israelites and early Christians, from the later Christian, Muslim, and eventually Jewish notion of belief in the doxastic sense. See C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*, (Simon and Schuster, 1980 reprint), Book III, "Christian Behavior," Chapters 11 and 12, both entitled "Faith," for what is in some ways a complementary conception.

[31] I steer clear here of attributions that don't seem obviously biblical—at least not when we are discussing the Hebrew Bible—like that of the various perfections or omni-properties that later come to be seen as essential.

[32] See *The Rabbinic Mind* (Jewish Theological Seminary, 1952) for an illuminating treatment of religious belief and related matters, including those I discuss in the next paragraph of the text. See esp. Chapters VI and VII.

[33] I don't mean that we believe, on philosophical grounds, that God is, in principle, beyond anthropomorphic description, that such description belies God's nature. Some of us think such things, but the Rabbis of the Talmud, as Max Kadushin points out, had no such in principle objection to anthropomorphic description. But their experience of God had the two-fold character. They experienced God's touch and the like, and at the same time it was part of their experience of God that God was beyond all that.

[34] Religious belief, on my conception, may not be as different from some other central beliefs as one might have supposed e.g., political beliefs, like "All people are created equal," or various beliefs about political rights. In such cases beliefs clearly set out a path for one's life, but what the belief comes to in theoretical terms may be entirely up for grabs. I discuss this matter further in "Against Theology," mentioned in footnote 4 above.

A related topic—I explore it in my book, *The Magic Prism* (Oxford University Press, 2004)—is the adequacy of the philosophical notion of "propositional content." It may be that "uncrystallized belief" has a more general application, although surely the religious examples as well as the political one just mentioned are special and in some ways extreme cases.

[35] Joseph Almog has made parallel remarks about "the foundations of mathematics." While this latter domain includes topics that are of the first importance, this is not to say, suggests Almog, that the area somehow constitutes or even explores the epistemic underpinnings of mathematics.

[36] This paper is based on my comments on a paper by Yehudah (Jerome) Gellman at the 2008 Henle Conference at St. Louis University. I am grateful to Gellman for virtually introducing me to the topic, and to continued discussions with Jeff Helmreich. Helmreich remarked that in his parents' home talk about God was as easy and uncontroversial as talk about the weather. This proved very suggestive, perhaps especially as an entry point into early Israelite modes of thought. I owe the furniture analogy to one among many helpful conversations with Jack Miles. Finally, I wish to thank Joseph Almog, Yehudah Gellman, John Greco, Charles Griswold, Paul Hoffman, Richie Lewis, Richard Mendelsohn, Calvin Normore, David Shatz, and Nicolas Wolterstorff for comments on an earlier draft.