

Philosophy of Religion

6. *Religious Experience*

What are the principal varieties of religious experience? How far is “experience of the presence of God” analogous to sense perception, and can this analogy be used to give it epistemological support? Overall, can religious experience provide significant evidence for the existence of God?

Overview

Taliaferro’s excellent textbook provides a useful overview of the debate, mentioning contributions in favour of the reliability of religious experience from writers such as Alston, Davis, Hick, Jantzen, Swinburne, and Yandell, and on the other side from Blanshard, Gale, M. Martin, and Rowe:

Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 1998), chapter 8, pp. 246-98.

The first part of Taliaferro’s chapter sets the debate in a general epistemological context, explaining how it fits with issues such as internalism, externalism, naturalism reliabilism, and considerations about the “burden of proof”. The main focus on religious experience is from p. 264 onwards, and from pp. 287-90 he touches on its role within a “Cumulative Case” for religion, of the sort advocated by Mitchell and Swinburne.

Another (less even-handed) overview worth mentioning is in Keith Yandell’s book *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (CUP, 1993), whose chapter 10 (pp. 215-232) is entitled “The Argument in Twentieth-Century Philosophy”, and discusses contributions from Broad, C.B. Martin, Mavrodes, Conway, and Rowe.

Main Readings

Perhaps the best understanding of the central points can be gleaned from:

William P. Alston and Evan Fales, debate (paper, plus reply, from each) in Peterson, Michael L. and VanArragon, Raymond J. (eds), *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Religion* (Blackwell, 2004), pp. 135-63.

Alston is a particularly prominent advocate of the argument from religious experience, having written a major book devoted to the topic (*Perceiving God*, Cornell UP, 1991), and excerpts from his work feature in many collections (e.g. Plantinga, A. and Wolterstorff, N., *Faith and Rationality* (University of Notre-Dame, 1983). Another major figure is:

Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* chapter 13, 1st edition (OUP 1979), pp. 244-76, or 2nd edition (OUP, 2004), pp. 293-327.

Swinburne puts a great deal of emphasis on his “Principle of Credulity” (p. 254 or 303), ascribing this sufficient force to give religious experience a key role in his case for the existence of God. The opposite case, in favour of naturalistic explanations of religious experience (and religious belief generally) is made by:

J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (OUP, 1982), chapter 10, pp. 177-98.

Mackie makes reference to Hume’s *Natural History of Religion* (1757), which is well worth reading as a pioneering attempt to provide such a naturalistic explanation. It is most easily available in the Oxford *World’s Classics* edition by J. C. A. Gaskin, bundled with Hume’s *Dialogues*.

Other References

Yandell, Keith, "Religious Experience", in Quinn, P, and Taliaferro, C., eds., *A companion to philosophy of religion* (Blackwell, 1997), pp. 371-2, suggests a basic typology of religious experiences.

Davis, Caroline Franks, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Clarendon, 1989) is a book devoted to the topic of religious experience. note particularly chapter 7 "The Conflicting Claims Challenge" (on the apparent conflicts between "numinous" and "mystical" experiences) and chapter 8 "The Reductionist Challenge" (on naturalistic explanations of religious experience).

Draper, P., "God and Perceptual Evidence" in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* vol 32 (1992), pp 149-165.

Wainwright, W., "Natural Explanations and Religious Experience" in *Ratio* vol 15 (1973), pp 98-102 or his *Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications* (Harvester, 1981) ch 3.

These last two references are from the Faculty reading list, and I have not yet been able to check them out personally.

Further Readings

Pojman, L. ed., *Philosophy of Religion* 3rd edition, Wadsworth, 1998 has a section devoted to religious experience, with some good contributions.

Rowe, W. & Wainwright, W. eds *The Philosophy of Religion: selected readings* (OUP, 3rd edition 1998) contains a (somewhat one-sided) range of relevant papers in Section V "Mysticism and Religious Experience".

Davies, Brian ed., *Philosophy of Religion: A guide and Anthology* (OUP, 2000) also has relevant material.