

# THE CHRISTIAN'S APPEAL TO RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

by Douglas E. Chismar

It is odd that in recent years the defenders of Christianity have been so willing to join the secular critics in downplaying the importance of the Christian's experience of God. This seems strange, inasmuch as Paul appealed readily and often to his conversion experience as an argument for the faith (see, for example, Acts 22:1-21). He was also not averse to calling the attention of his readers to their own personal experiences (Gal. 3:2-5).<sup>1</sup> To appeal to one's relationship with Christ seems the most natural place to start when testifying to others about God. Highly sophisticated and abstract philosophical arguments pale when contrasted with the concrete, real-life power of a personal testimony. Why are Christian apologists so concerned to exclude the appeal to religious experience from the domain of Christian apologetics?

The answer to this question is simple: appeals to personal experience are *subjective*.<sup>2</sup> The task of providing objective and valid reasons for accepting claims about God is not furthered by appeal to something which is itself in need of defense. Subjective claims are simply not reliable. To answer the question, "why should I believe in God?" with, "because *I* do!" doesn't take things much farther down the road. In a culture already beset with narcissism, the last thing needed from the believer is more mushy talk about "my personal experiences."

Yet, there surely is a place for communicating to the unbeliever that God still touches individual lives. Before embracing scholasticism for fear of subjectivism, it might do to seek a closer analysis of the problems surrounding the appeal to religious experience. In this article, we will review these alleged difficulties, suggesting that they have been overstated. With Paul, we can proclaim our encounter with the risen Lord, without fear that we are babbling in subjectivistic irrelevance.

Gleaning from the literature devoted to religious experience arguments, it is possible to analyze the charge of "subjectivism" into four distinct objections.<sup>3</sup> There may be other problems with religious experience appeals, but these are the most talked about. The four objections are:

1. The problem of ineffability
2. The problem of verifiability
3. The problem of reliability
4. The problem of alternative interpretations

We will treat each of these objections in turn.

1. *The problem of ineffability.* About twenty years ago, a controversy brewed in the world of British-American philosophy concerning the meaning of religious language. It was argued by some that if God is really the exalted being He is claimed to be by believers, religious language would fall short in trying to describe Him or speak about Him. The prevalence of neo-orthodox "Wholly Other" conceptions of God in these years exacerbated this problem.<sup>4</sup> The controversy has import for appeals to religious experience. If it is impossible to use language to meaningfully speak about God, then it is also impossible to meaningfully testify about one's personal encounter with God. The silenced religious experienter obviously has little to offer qua defender of the faith.

In recent years, this controversy has died down a great deal. With the onset of what was called "ordinary language philosophy" or "linguistic analysis," philosophers came to have a greater appreciation for the flexibility of language. Language was no longer pressed, as it had been in the previous philosophical fad of logical positivism, into a rigid logical or supposedly scientific mold. It is now allowed that within the scope of meaningful human discourse, there are numerous forms of discourse ("language games"), some quite direct and specifiable, others more indirect, metaphorical and meaning-variant. Recent philosophers of religion (e.g., Richard Swinburne) have sought to make a case for the Thomist notion of religious language as "analogous."<sup>5</sup>

When speaking about God, believers may rely upon images and metaphors borrowed from other subject areas: e.g., God as "Father" or Christ as "Redeemer." It is not claimed that God is exactly like these mundane counterparts. Yet these terms are neither empty or meaningless. Some of God's character and actions can be correctly and meaningfully understood as "father-like." That is, God sometimes acts in ways very much like a loving human father.

The objection from ineffability succeeds only if the believer claims to be offering an exhaustive characterization of God's nature by means of ordinary language. Believers who recognize the limitations of their knowledge of God, and of their ability to speak of Him, are not vulnerable to this objection.

Before leaving this area, it is wise to consider other interpretations of the objection. Some might argue that God, in His greatness, is too transcendent to be experienced by a mere human. Claims to religious experience are *a priori* impossible, given the advertised biblical concept of God. There is something to this, of course. Moses was obliged to hide himself in the cleft of a rock, and to view God only after He had passed by. But to suggest that God's

attributes prevent Him from having any contact with His creations is to do Him a philosophical injustice. It is to attribute to Him a sort of "metaphysical obesity" which is not justified by the view of Him given in the Scripture (from which we here are drawing our concept of God). As personal, God has the capacity to refrain from exercising His full potential. He is not an Aristotelian collection of rigid impersonal qualities. Though He has the power to dissolve the earth into its constituent elements in a burst of holy fire, He also has the power — at His personal command — to keep this from occurring when He brings a believer into His presence.

Sometimes the objection from ineffability is made to refer to the spiritual (non-material) nature of God. It can also refer to the mysteriousness or sometimes apparent illogicality of God's ways. Concerning God's spiritual nature, we will have more to say when treating the second objection. As to God's mysterious ways of operating, it is again acknowledged that Christians do not claim to possess a comprehensive knowledge of God or of His ways. Nonetheless, to tell a mystery, one must tell a story. It is one thing to be missing some of the facts; it is another not to know anything at all about God. To appeal to religious experience is to make the relatively limited claim that one knows of God, that He exists, and that certain things are true of His character. This state of limited yet significant acquaintance is no different than that which exists between most people, including even the closest of friends.

2. *The problem of verifiability.* John Wisdom's famous parable of the Invisible Gardener set off a controversy which continued for a number of years.<sup>6</sup> It concerned the question of the public testability of religious claims. How are claims about private, spiritual experience to be tested? To what can the believer point as public evidence, available to all, for the truth of his or her claims? In the years since Wisdom put forth his parable, demands for precise verification have lessened. Philosophers came to realize that in many areas of knowledge, conclusive verification is often impossible for the fundamental axioms and assumptions on which all inquiry rests.<sup>7</sup> Appreciation increased for the way in which structural and systemic factors figure into our evaluation of hypotheses, theories and world-views. Yet the question has still remained: what is it which the Christian apologist is supposed to show in order to fulfill his or her biblical responsibility to provide reasons for belief?

This is an especially crucial issue for appeals to religious experience. When should we believe the individual who claims to have met or heard from God? For several years, philosophers attempted to defend the claim that religious experience is "self-authenticating." For the believer who meets God, nothing could be more sure

and indubitable. He or she *just knows* that God is there. While this is clearly an accurate account of the psychological state of many believers, it does not do justice to the epistemic question which inevitably arises. Religious believers have all too often made mistakes. The mental hospitals are well-populated with religious claimants, many of whom purportedly take their cues to psychotic behavior directly from God Himself. Even the more mentally balanced believer must sometimes ask whether it is God who is directing him or her, or whether it is an all too human impulse. Though some religious experiences are highly self-authenticating or self-convincing from a psychological point of view, the rational individual must always be prepared to ask whether, in fact, things are as they *seem* to be. Could he or she perhaps be deluded?

It is here that the objector to religious experience-claims makes an important mistake. Since religious experience is not epistemically self-authenticating, it must therefore be epistemically worthless. D.G. Attfeld, John Hick and others, however, have argued that this is an overreaction.<sup>8</sup> Attfeld notes an interesting analogy between the perception of ordinary material objects and the religious person's claims to non-sensory phenomenological apprehension of God. He suggests that "the same logical features hold of claims to apprehend God as hold with claims to perceive a material object."<sup>9</sup> In the case of sense-experience, there are three standards commonly appealed to for deciding the question of objectivity. These are (1) "agreement between the data of sight and touch (and the other senses)," (2) "whether what is claimed to be apprehended fits into the structure and normal expectations of a public world of material objects with positions in space and enduring through time," and (3) "whether support from other observers is available in practice or at least in principle."<sup>10</sup> Attfeld argues that similar kinds of standards exist for the religious person, by which veridical experiences may be distinguished from those which are illusory. He writes:

In the spiritual sphere a huge dimension of awareness of God seems to be available comparable to that men have through their senses and indeed partly overlapping with or extending the latter. A coherent, conceptual scheme has in fact evolved to articulate religious experience and to determine how items within it are to be described and interpreted: among and inside the enormous class of occasions of allegedly apprehending God, there are instances where it is necessary to decide on illusion or reality and canons for this appear to have emerged, as they have in the conceptual system that articulates the public world of material objects.<sup>11</sup>

That procedures exist for distinguishing between genuine and illusory religious experiences constitutes an important analogy with perception. Our perceptual experience is usually not, as a

whole, questioned, except by a minority school of philosophers (sceptics) who have unusually high requirements for admissible truth claims. Attfield argues that, in the same way, it is only when epistemic standards are raised to an artificial strictness that *all* religious experience is questioned.

Scepticism in both perception and religion is reasonable in particular cases and procedures exist in both areas to settle disputes. But scepticism about whole dimensions of apprehension, it may be argued, is radically different and may belong to that special kind of doubt only philosophers have. Corresponding to normal human confidence in perception it may be reasonable to claim that there is a conviction religious men have as part of *their* commonsense, that *their* experience is in general veridical and that they only need to reconsider their stance if weighty and irrefutable arguments can be brought against it.<sup>12</sup>

Questioning whether or not these "weighty and irrefutable arguments" against theism exist, leads one, unfortunately, to the notorious and unsettleable question of who carries the "burden of proof." For my part, I am inclined to doubt whether such arguments in fact exist. The closest candidates are those *reductio ad absurdum* arguments which seek to demonstrate an incoherence in the Christian system (e.g., due to the problem of evil). Such arguments require that Christian foundational premises first be accepted. Even if they succeed, they would thus fail to justify an *initial* scepticism about the whole of religious experience.

All this is to show that the criteria for verification of religious experience are extremely difficult to specify. Just as it is hard to imagine what would constitute criteria for the verification of the whole of sense-experience, so also it is difficult to imagine how the entire domain of spiritual experiencing could be tested. We will note one attempt at this when treating the third objection. Meanwhile, we must question whether the call for verification can be specified adequately such that clear criteria are assigned which do justice to the unique nature of religious experience.

3. *The problem of reliability.* There is an empirical approach to testing religious experience that appears most prominently in Sigmund Freud's *The Future of an Illusion*.<sup>13</sup> This consists of the attempt to provide a naturalistic counter-explanation for a claimed religious experience. If it can be shown that what an individual thought to be the experience of God can be interpreted in a wholly non-supernatural way — e.g., as a psychological aberration — then the individual's appeal to another dimension is rendered unnecessary. A wholly this-worldly explanation is adequate. This approach is particularly powerful if it can be shown that, empirically speaking, the naturalistic phenomena described are of a kind that are often correlated with false belief-behavior on the part of the

individual making the claim. Thus Keith Yandell summarizes Freud's objection to religious experiences:

1. Obsessional neuroses are characterized by certain factors (say, a, b, c, d, e, f) and the beliefs that accompany neuroses are known to be almost always false.
  2. Religious conviction is characterized by certain factors which are very similar, if not identical, to a-f, and is accompanied by certain beliefs.
- So:
3. The beliefs which accompany religious conviction are very likely false.<sup>14</sup>

In this context, we will note just two of the difficulties. First, as Yandell points out, the fact that a belief is associated with certain personal or psychological characteristics in the believer does not *guarantee*, or even necessarily make it probable, that the belief itself is false.<sup>15</sup> Hosts of people hold beliefs for the strangest and most inadequate reasons. This may make such people unreliable as intellectual authorities, but it does not imply that any particular belief or set of beliefs is false. In order to avoid committing the genetic fallacy, the objector must show that the individual's belief is clearly the causal result of the psychological aberrations which characterize him or her, *and* that the belief is not supported by any other evidential claims. Even then, the person's belief, say, that there is a God, may be true, though the person has turned out to believe it for inadequate reasons.

A second point is even more crucial. Has anyone successfully demonstrated that religious belief is characterized by (a)-(f)? Certainly, some correlations are observed. As noted above, the religious have done a rather effective job of infiltrating the mental hospitals. Some Christian groups studied by psychologists of religion have scored rather badly on personality profiles, suggesting that their religious fervor may be the result of non-religious unresolved internal conflicts.<sup>16</sup> And there is Freud's argument that religious people are only seeking wish fulfillment — an argument which unfortunately stigmatizes anyone who achieves satisfaction of fulfillment through their belief-system. Charging these individuals with wish fulfillment works, however, only if it can be shown that this is the single reason these individuals are happy. Freud's arguments in *The Future of an Illusion* fail strikingly in this department.<sup>17</sup>

Granting that some, perhaps many, religious people are characterized in ways which suspiciously resemble judgment-aberrating psychological syndromes, it remains to be seen whether *all* religious people are so characterized.<sup>18</sup> Here the objection begins to break down. Psychologists of religion, like all human spectators, tend to pick out the most fanatical, boisterous, and unusual groups for

study. Often it is the constituency of these individuals in mental institutions which spurs the study of their etiology and habits.<sup>19</sup> Mystics making some of the more extreme claims about their experience are also of perpetual interest. Yet many of these individuals have been the most alienated from society, and some bordered on heresy in their beliefs. What of the mass of relatively normal, uninteresting religious people who claim a daily "walk with God," making slow and gradual progress at self-acceptance, personal integration and improved relationships with others? It is sheer dogmatism to claim that such individuals do not exist. Because of their basically unexciting character (and hence anonymity), they may exist in numbers which far exceed anyone's expectation.

The fact of the existence of this latter group endangers the kind of argument put forward as objection #3. This is particularly so if one considers an oft-overlooked characteristic of Christianity — viz., the randomness of conversion experiences. Christian converts can be discovered from all different economic and social backgrounds. Psychological histories vary: some choose to believe following a tragic life or particular trauma, while others come to a rather non-climactic realization that God has been a real force in their lives. Naturalistic objections to religious experience depend upon correlations with specifiable psychological syndromes, which themselves involve a unified causal story accounting for the appearance of the syndrome in individuals. Randomness wreaks havoc upon such counter-explanations by preventing the establishment of the necessary generalizations based on psycho-history, economic and social backgrounds, etc. Again, some religious groups and forms of religious behavior may lend themselves easily to such generalizations. We argue here, however, that when the Christian populace is considered on the basis of a wide sample, sufficient randomness exists to prevent the successful construction of naturalistic counter-explanations.

In fact, the naturalistic type of objection can be turned around to produce a positive argument for the validity of some religious experiences. Just as lack of reliability may constitute an empirical means of falsifying claims to religious experience, so established credibility may serve the cause of empirical verification of religious claims. Yandell's argument schema might be rewritten as follows:

1. Well-integrated or self-actualizing persons are characterized by certain factors (a, b, c, d, e, f) and the beliefs held by such individuals tend to be reasoned-through, reality-based and credible.
2. Religious conviction is characterized by certain factors which are very similar, if not identical, to a-f, and is accompanied by certain beliefs.

So:

3. The beliefs which accompany religious conviction are very likely reasoned-out, reality-based and credible.<sup>20</sup>

This argument must be received with the same qualifications which were made upon Yandell's formulation of Freud's argument. Note that the argument has a familiar ring. It appears in Jesus's exhortation that "ye shall know them by their fruits" (Matt. 7:16). Paul makes a similar appeal to personal credibility in II Corinthians:

For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word; but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ (II Cor. 2:15-17, RSV).<sup>21</sup>

There is something valid about judging a person's religious testimony at least in part by his or her observed lifestyle. Thus the objection from naturalistic counter-explanations suggests what may be the closest thing to an empirical verification of religious experience-claims.

4. *The problem of alternative interpretations.* A final objection to the appeal to experience, commonly noted in the literature, is the variety of interpretations of religious experience. If we look to experience-claims for truth, then how do we decide whom to believe? The Hindu claims one kind of experience, the Zen Buddhist another kind, the Christian another. Vital to untangling this knot is deciding what our attitude is to be toward other religions. For example, as a Christian one might take one of three postures toward other religions.

1. Proponents of other religions are completely deluded — they actually experience nothing at all
2. Proponents of other religions are partially correct — they experience aspects of reality
3. Proponents of other religions are completely correct — they experience God, but in a different way

Immediate problems arise if we choose either the first or last posture. It is difficult to argue that representatives of other religious traditions are experiencing nothing at all. This would fail to account for the lasting contributions which those traditions have made to human understanding. On the other hand, to regard them as experiencing the same God, but in different ways is to overlook the quite radical differences of belief between the major religions. Holding the law of non-contradiction in public scorn, some try to hold onto all competing interpretations at the same time. The price is either philosophical absurdity or the covert reintroduction of some one concept of God, to the detriment of the variety of insights of all the other contributors.

The second posture is most preferable. It does not force an identification of the object of experience of alternative religious traditions with the Christian God. It also allows that individuals in these other traditions experience *something*, though not the Christian God. Some may take a derogatory view of these experiences (they are experiences of the demonic); others of a more ecumenical stripe may ascribe value to these experiences. It is not our intention to take a stand on the question of evaluation in this context.

If we take the second posture, the problem of alternative interpretations disappears. Insofar as individuals of differing religious traditions experience different objects, they do not disagree with each other. Their experience claims do not constitute alternative interpretations of the same object, but rather differing experiences, with accompanying interpretations, of alternative aspects of reality. The appearance of alternative interpretations of *one* object arises from a constricted semantics. Despite the considerable variety of possible "religious" experiences, a fairly limited vocabulary of religious terms is forced to do everyone's interpretative service. The result is that very different kinds of experiences, similar perhaps only in a limited respect, are given the same descriptive names.

A different case is that of individuals of the same religious tradition who make contradictory or differing claims. For example, there were the Münsterites, who claimed that God had called them to a medieval form of communism, or the Montanists, who expected Christ to appear in second century Asia Minor. Obviously, these individuals, who identified themselves with the Christian tradition, were getting very different signals from God than were their peers. Where this is the case, appeal must be made to the tests available within the relevant tradition. In this case the appeal to Scripture and the examination of lifestyles would be appropriate tests.

It is now time to sum up our discussion. Religious experience is not wholly self-authenticating. There is always some question as to whether another person, or even one's self, has veridically experienced God or correctly heard His voice. But this does not imply that religious experience is wholly illusory or unimportant. The objections which we have considered fail to show that all cases of religious experience are either non-veridical or untestable. Our discussion has suggested that where religious experience-claims are at issue, the credibility of the individual represents an important qualifying or disqualifying feature. Where an individual, to all appearances, is a rational, well-adjusted and psychologically-integrated person, his or her claim to religious experience deserves a hearing. There is no reason to *a priori* disqualify the individual's

testimony, anymore than we would disqualify the verdict of sense-experience as to the existence and character of everyday material objects, simply because we sometimes make mistakes in identification.

Appeals to religious experience are legitimate in the field of Christian apologetics; they deserve a hearing, provided some means of establishing credibility is also present at hand. Where a religious witness makes a brute claim to the experience of God with no accompanying demonstration of his or her credibility, it is wrong to expect others to accept the subject's claims *carte blanche*. We are thus brought back to the early Christian model of a *lived* testimony to Christ's resurrection power. Even more, we are challenged to transform the present-day Church into a model and exhibition which lends credence to the claims we make about our private lives with God. As a requirement for the successful appeal to religious experience we are hence called to the urgent tasks of personal sanctification and corporate reformation.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See B. B. Warfield, "Paul's Argument from Experience," in *Selected Shorter Writings*, edited by John E. Meeter, Volume 2 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), 142-51.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., John W. Montgomery, "Constructive Religious Empiricism: An Analysis and Criticism," in *The Shape of the Past* (Edwards, 1962), 257-311.

<sup>3</sup>Some representative discussions are: D. G. Attfeld, "The Argument from Religious Experience," *Religious Studies* 11 (1975): 335-43; Sidney Hook, *Religious Experience and Truth* (New York University Press, 1961); H. J. N. Horsburgh, "The Claims of Religious Experience," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 335 (1975): 186-200; H. D. Lewis, *Our Experience of God* (N.Y.: MacMillan, 1959); Eugene Thomas Long, "Experience and the Justification of Religious Belief," *Religious Studies* 17 (1981): 499-510; C. B. Martin, *Religious Belief* (Ithica, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1959); George I. Mavrodes, *Belief in God* (N.Y.: Random House, 1970); Robert A. Oakes, "Religious Experience and Rational Certainty," *Religious Studies* 12 (1976): 311-18; Keith E. Yandell, *Basic Issues in the Philosophy of Religion* (Allyn & Bacon, 1976).

<sup>4</sup>See Lawrence C. Becker, "A Note on Religious Experience Arguments," *Religious Studies* 7 (1971): 63-68.

<sup>5</sup>Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), see 50-84.

<sup>6</sup>John Wisdom, "Gods" in *Logic and Language*, edited by Antony Flew (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1951). See also Antony Flew, R. M. Hare, Basil Mitchell, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, edited by Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: SCM

Press, 1955), 96-105. In the parable of the Invisible Gardener, an investigator asks how he can hope to verify the existence of the gardener, who is "invisible, intangible, (and) eternally elusive."

<sup>7</sup>For a review, with reference to theology, see Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>8</sup>D. G. Attfield, op. cit.; John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (N.Y.: Herder & Herder, 1971), see esp. the last chapter.

<sup>9</sup>Attfield, 335.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 337.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 338.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (N.Y.: W. W. Norton, 1976 ed.).

<sup>14</sup>Yandell, op. cit., 121.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 121-23.

<sup>16</sup>A useful overview of studies is James E. Dittes, "Psychology of Religion," in *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. by Gardner Lindzey, Elliot Aronson, Volume 5: *Applied Social Psychology* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969 ed.), 602-59.

<sup>17</sup>See Hans Kung, *Freud and the Problem of God*, trans. by Edward Quinn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

<sup>18</sup>See Michael Argyle, *Religious Behavior* (Glencoe, Ill.: Glencoe, 1959).

<sup>19</sup>An exception to this pattern is the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, which has published studies of a broad cross-section of the religious world in a variety of contexts.

<sup>20</sup>A positive view of this kind is found in Abraham H. Maslow, *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1976 ed.). See also the recently evolved genre of books concerned with religious development and psychological health: e.g., James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

<sup>21</sup>See also II Cor. 3:1-3; Gal. 1; I Thess. 1:5; 2:3-12.