

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE: REFRAMING THE QUESTION

GEORGE KARUVELIL, S.J.

*Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Religion,
Pune, India*

Abstract. It is thought that Schleiermacher used religious experience as a new kind of argument to safeguard Christian faith when he was faced with the failure of traditional arguments for the existence of God. This paper argues that such a view does not do justice to the newness of his approach in constructing a propaedeutic to Christian theology. It is further argued that, irrespective of whether one agrees with what Schleiermacher was trying to do, if religious experience is to become a contemporary *preambula fidei* to Christian theology, the focus should be on *communicating* a positive experience rather than on *arguing* for God's existence.

It has become commonplace in contemporary theology to assume that experience “is the only valid way to get in touch with religious reality”¹ and that religious experience is the “living heart”² or the “inner spiritual life”³ that provides vitality to the external structures of religion such as creeds and codes. Friedrich Schleiermacher is credited with this achievement. However, there is little evidence to show that the larger goals that prompted him towards this “experience-revolution” is even understood, much less pursued. It is well known that his turn to religious experience was prompted by the desire to give a new starting point to Christian theology, a new kind of propaedeutic, in place of the natural

¹ Mary E. Hines, *The Transformation of Dogma: An Introduction to Karl Rahner on Doctrine* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 3.

² John Hick, *The New Frontier of Religion and Science: Religious Experience, Neuroscience and the Transcendent* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), xi.

³ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 51.

theology prevalent at the time. It is also well known that he addressed his propaedeutic to his friends who were disillusioned with Christian faith, the “cultured despisers” of religion.⁴ But his attempt at engaging them seems to have got so derailed in contemporary discussions that the conversation between religious believers and naturalists has become more a polemic based on prior ideological commitments than rational dialogue.⁵ How has Schleiermacher’s dialogical project ended up in this quandary?

While it would be wrong to trace the present state of affairs to a single cause, I want to explore the possibility that a major factor that has contributed to this failure is a certain bewitchment by natural theology.⁶ The ingrained habit of centuries of engagement with arguments for God’s existence seems to have prevented thinkers from realizing that approaching religion from the perspective of experience calls for a radically new way of looking at the propaedeutic task than the wonted ways of arguing for God’s existence. This realization would help us to reframe the question in a way

⁴ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Addresses in Response to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1821; reprint, 1969).

⁵ The best recent example of it is perhaps the exchange between Paul Griffiths and Russell McCutcheon. See, Paul J. Griffiths, “Some Confusions About Critical Intelligence: A Response to Russell T. McCutcheon,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 4 (1998); Russell T. McCutcheon, “Talking Past Each Other: Public Intellectuals Revisited: Rejoinder to Paul J. Griffiths and June O’connor,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 4 (1998). The same can be seen in the case those defenders of religious beliefs such as the Reformed Epistemologists who arbitrarily restrict their idea of an epistemic community to the Christians on the one hand (see, Terrence W. Tilley, “Reformed Epistemology in a Jamesian Perspective,” *Horizons* 19, no. 1 (1992) and the “evangelical” atheism of the kind engaged in by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens on the other. See, R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheists* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2008). Surveying the religious scene and the numerous inter-religious and intra-religious dialogues that have become common today, John Shook wonders as to why the non-religious too cannot join the conversation to the mutual benefit of all. John R. Shook, *The God Debates: A 21st Century Guide for Atheists and Believers (and Everyone in between)* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 2. It is remarkable that the question of non-religious joining the conversation should be raised even two centuries after Schleiermacher’s attempted dialogue with them!

⁶ At least two more factors that have contributed to this state of affairs can be pointed out. One is that religious experience is not so easily separable from its outer manifestations like beliefs and morals as Schleiermacher thought (see, Steven T. Katz, “Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22-72. Another is that though Schleiermacher thought that once he directs the attention of his interlocutors inwards they will be able to find a distinctly religious moment of experience within has turned out to be pretty much elusive.

that is more in keeping with the dialogical intent of Schleiermacher than the way in which religious experience is discussed today.

I. THE DISPUTED LEGACY OF SCHLEIERMACHER

The medieval Christian thinkers inherited a twofold legacy that posed a problem. There was the tradition of natural theology coming from the Greek philosophers; there was also the tradition of theology based on revelation in Jesus Christ. The former argued from certain experienced features of our world to the existence of God; the latter sought to explicate a set of doctrines about God that was already believed. The two were in tension. The basis of the former was reason (considered universal); the basis of the latter was a particular revelation. No reasoning could yield the truths of revelation such as “Jesus is God” or “There are three persons in one God”. The tension between the two would not have mattered if they considered only one of these legacies to be true. But both were held to be true and therefore the two had to be in harmony with each other. They harmonized both by giving distinct roles to each in their system. The more universal natural theology was to be a propaedeutic that enables Christian theology to get started.⁷ Its task was to prove God’s existence and elaborate some of the attributes of God so that one could move on to the domain of theology based on revelation.⁸

This solution worked well within the theocentric worldview of the Middle Ages, but ran into difficulties with the anthropocentric view of the Enlightenment. Anthropocentrism was itself a part of a larger naturalistic outlook⁹ that saw nature as a self-sufficient totality, a gigantic machine that functioned on its own without any divine interventions like miracles,

⁷ David A. Pailin, “Natural Theology,” in *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*, ed. Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden (London; New York: Routledge, 1995), 389.

⁸ For a brief history of how this came about, see Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993).

⁹ For the evolution and development of the concept of naturalism, see, Gianfranco Fioravanti, “Naturalism,” in *Encyclopedia of Christian theology*, ed. Jean-Yves Lacoste (New York: Routledge, 2005), 1105-07. A fuller statement of naturalism in the religious context will have to take into account the ontological as well as methodological dimensions. See, Philip Pettit, “Naturalism,” in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy, Ernest Sosa, and Matthias Steup (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). For a detailed treatment of naturalism in other contexts see, Jack Ritchie, *Understanding Naturalism, Understanding Movements in Modern Thought* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008).

revelation, and so on. Religious thinkers tried to fit God into this picture by arguing that the origins and the functioning of this machine needed a God. But such arguments were becoming less and less convincing to a sceptical world. As the theocentric outlook began to retreat “into the backwaters of intellectual and cultural isolation”¹⁰ Schleiermacher appears on the scene.

As a person who had subjected his Christian faith to a process of critical questioning, Schleiermacher could understand the disillusionment his contemporaries felt towards Christianity. But unlike them, Schleiermacher’s questioning had made him more a convinced Christian than before; he came to have a personalized faith that he was eager to impart to them. It is as a man riding these two boats – one who had great sympathy with his romantic friends on the one hand and yet deeply rooted in the Christian faith on the other – that he addressed the religious sceptics. He told them that they are right in despising the metaphysical doctrines and moral codes with which they identified religion. But he went on to add that genuine religion does not consist in these; genuine religion is an inner experience. Thus Schleiermacher ushered in a radical shift in Western religious thinking from God and his revelation to the human beings who experience the divine. The propaedeutic role given to natural theology by the earlier Christian thinkers was now given to a theory of religious experience. Thus, he extended Kant’s “Copernican revolution” (anthropocentric thinking) to Christian theology. Subsequent thinkers have recognized the significance of that move to the extent that discussions of “religious experience” have become common in philosophy and theology.¹¹ But how exactly is he supposed to have resisted the creeping naturalism? How was his understanding of religious experience to play the role of a propaedeutic to Christian theology? Was he engaged in natural theology in a new garb?

Opinion is sharply divided on this point. According to one view advanced by Wayne Proudfoot and others Schleiermacher attempted to resist naturalism by adopting “protective strategies that serve apologetic purposes.”¹² Once Kant had undermined traditional forms of apologetics

¹⁰ Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 (1799-1870) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 59.

¹¹ According to Louis Dupré, Schleiermacher’s “impact on the development of both theology and the philosophy of religion has probably not been surpassed by any thinker in the last 150 years (with the possible exception of Kierkegaard).” Louis Dupré, “Toward a Reevaluation of Schleiermacher’s ‘Philosophy of Religion’,” *The Journal of Religion* 44, no. 2 (1964), 97.

¹² Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), xv, xvi.

(i.e., natural theology)¹³ and blocked the possibility of assessing God's existence on the basis of empirical evidence, Schleiermacher, as an apologist of religion, invented a new way of defending religion.¹⁴ The core of this new strategy consisted in declaring religion to be an autonomous realm, independent of sciences. It was natural theology by another name. Instead of arguing for God's existence on metaphysical grounds, the new argument based on religious experience resembled "a transcendental version of the cosmological argument."¹⁵ Georg Behrens follows Proudfoot's lead and reconstructs the various steps of this argument.¹⁶ Ninian Smart also mentions Schleiermacher as bringing about a "new blend of natural and revealed theology."¹⁷

On the other side there are factors that do not square with the view that Schleiermacher was engaged in natural theology under a new name. First of all, there is Schleiermacher's manifest dislike for natural theology, whether it was the kind of natural theology inherited from the Greeks or the Kantian defence of God based on moral grounds. For Schleiermacher these "hodgepodge of metaphysical and ethical crumbs" had very little to do with genuine religion.¹⁸ Moreover, contrary to the view that Schleiermacher resorted to the autonomy of religious experience to insulate religion from scientific scrutiny, Andrew Dole finds that "Schleiermacher embraced the ideal of 'scientific' research even into religious phenomena."¹⁹

Our question is whether the view that Schleiermacher was doing natural theology in a new garb does justice to that which is genuinely new in his approach, especially to the dialogical process that he attempted. There can hardly be any doubt that Schleiermacher considered religion to be an autonomous realm, an indispensable third dimension of human life that must find its place alongside science and morality.²⁰ But how does

¹³ For a brief overview of the different historical forms of apologetics, see, Avery Dulles, "Apologetics I: History," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (New York: St. Paul's, 1990) 28-35.

¹⁴ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, xiii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁶ Georg Behrens, "The Order of Nature in Pious Self-Consciousness: Schleiermacher's Apologetic Argument," *Religious Studies* 32, no. 1 (1996) His argument is from "the world as a system of nature" to God as the ground of that system, the connecting link being reflection on religious experience of absolute dependence.

¹⁷ Ninian Smart, "Our Experience of the Ultimate," *Religious Studies* 20, no. 1 (1984), 19.

¹⁸ Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Addresses in Response to Its Cultured Despisers*, 73.

¹⁹ Andrew Dole, "Schleiermacher and Otto on Religion," *Religious Studies* 40, no. 4 (2004), 408.

²⁰ Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Addresses in Response to Its Cultured Despisers*, 62; 80.

it warrant the conclusion that Schleiermacher is engaged in a protective strategy? This accusation overlooks the fact that unlike the common apologetic practice that saw the interlocutors as adversaries against whom faith needed to be defended²¹ Schleiermacher sought to dialogue with them. They were his friends for whose position he had considerable sympathy. He sought to understand them rather than erect protective walls of arguments. It is in this spirit that he invited them to look within and recognize the religious moment of experience in their own “innermost depths from which every religiously oriented experience and interpretation takes form”.²² In order to understand how Schleiermacher’s dialogical project got derailed into the kind of polemics between naturalists and believers we find today, we need to focus on the nature of natural theology that the medieval thinkers appropriated from the Greeks.

II. THE BEWITCHMENT OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

It would be an understatement to say that the Greek philosophical tradition did not value experience greatly. What goes unstated is that they identified experience with sense experience.²³ It follows from this identification that the content of experience is exhausted by that which is given to the senses, i.e., the natural world.²⁴ Since experience was unreliable, the task of philosophy was to go beyond it by clinging to reason. It is in this manner that natural theology found a God who functioned as the “First Cause,” and the “Unmoved Mover”. In this scheme of things, God is never a matter of experience, but appears as an explanation for the experienced world, a God who appears at the end of a syllogism, to use that memorable phrase of Walter Stace.²⁵ The fundamental assumption of this whole procedure is that there “is one correct way of describing the world and this description

²¹ René Latourelle, “Introduction to the English Language Edition,” in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (New York: St. Paul’s, 1990) xiii-xvi, xiv. For the different historical forms apologetics, understood as a defence of Christian faith, has taken, see, Dulles, “Apologetics I: History,” 10.

²² Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Addresses in Response to Its Cultured Despisers*, 51.

²³ George Karuvelil, “Experience,” in *ACPI Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Johnson Puthenpurackal (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010).

²⁴ This identification of experience with perception is reflected in the very title of the following collection of essays on perception: Tim Crane, ed. *The Contents of Experience: Essays on Perception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). This identification of experience with sense experience was not questioned until Schleiermacher.

²⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Terence_Stace (accessed on 15/11/10).

either contains an object (entity, item) such as God or it doesn't."²⁶ Since there is just one correct way of describing the world, the God who appears as an explanation of the world is "a scientific theory or hypothesis, which differs only in scope and not in kind from the question, say, of whether elementary particles exist or not."²⁷

Since the God of natural theology differs from a scientific hypothesis only in terms of greater generality and not in terms of content, it suffers from a fatal flaw: this God will always remain a provisional (hypothetical) entity that may be accepted or rejected on the basis of the quality of the arguments and the explanation it gives. This was dramatically brought home by the celebrated response of Pierre Simon Laplace to Napoleon. When asked about the place of God in his cosmology he replied: "I have no need of that hypothesis."²⁸ Laplace found that when properly understood, natural laws were sufficient to explain the functioning of the cosmos and there was no need to bring God for the purpose. Michael Buckley has made us keenly aware that an excessive reliance on this kind of natural theology lies at the origins of modern atheism.²⁹

Seen against this background where God had become superfluous for explaining the experienced world, it makes good sense to say that Schleiermacher's proposal about the autonomy of religious experience is a protective strategy. Affirming the autonomy of religious experience has a great advantage over the old kind of natural theology. Since the unstated assumption of natural theology is that the world has a single determinate structure governed by natural laws, God can have any place in it only if available explanations are inadequate, as exemplified in the Laplace episode. One way of escaping this fate is to say that God or the religious reality falls outside this singular structure of the world. Rather than argue

²⁶ Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 158. Schönbaumsfeld is referring to Swinburne's God, but the Aristotelian God is no different as his metaphysics differs from physics only in terms of its greater generality.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 158. For the differences between Aristotle's and Aquinas' God, see, Diogenes Allen and Eric O Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology, 2nd ed.* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 106.

²⁸ Earlier calculations made by Isaac Newton showed some apparent irregularities in the movements of the planets. Newton had believed that remedying these irregularities would require occasional direct interventions of God. Laplace's calculations had showed gravitational forces could account for all the details and there was no need for God's direct intervention in the working of nature. Hence, his response.

²⁹ Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

for an unexperienced God for explaining the experienced world, religious experience provides its own content that is independent of the empirical content available to the senses. On this view religious of autonomy, then, “science and doctrine cannot conflict, because they are about two separate domains of objects.”³⁰ Seen from this perspective, matters of the origin of the cosmos have no significance. The cosmos might have existed eternally; it might have come into existence with the Big Bang; it might have come into existence just a year ago, with or without help from some source beyond the cosmos. It just does not play in the same league as the sciences.

While it makes good sense to argue this way about Schleiermacher’s claim to autonomy, it makes equally good sense to argue that the autonomy of religious experience is a genuine insight, but blinded by the ingrained habit of centuries of natural theology, this insight gets lost in execution. Let us consider this possibility. First, other than the circumstantial evidence that Schleiermacher appears at a time when arguments from the world to God had run into rough weather, critics have not produced any evidence to show that Schleiermacher was indeed engaged in a protective strategy. If anything, evidence seems to point in the other direction. Even Behrens who reconstructs Schleiermacher’s argument in terms of natural theology finds that “development of science has a piety-enhancing effect” in Schleiermacher.³¹ If so, he could not have been erecting protective walls around religion to prevent science from poaching into its territory, as that would amount to undermining the enhancement of piety.

Second, if Schleiermacher was indeed inventing the autonomy of religion as a ploy to protect religion from critical scrutiny, then he has singularly failed in the task; two centuries after him autonomy continues to be neglected and the practice of the old kind of natural theology continues unabated. A recent book dealing with “classic and contemporary issues” in philosophy of religion devotes a chapter to “A Naturalistic Account of the Universe” where material from latest work in Big Bang cosmology is used in an attempt to show that it is reasonable to believe that universe caused itself.³² The same can be said of Richard Dawkins who understands God as a “*supernatural* creative intelligence lurking behind the

³⁰ Behrens, “The Order of Nature in Pious Self-Consciousness: Schleiermacher’s Apologetic Argument,” 95.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³² Quentin Smith, “A Naturalistic Account of the Universe,” in *Philosophy of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Paul Copan and Chad Meister (Malden, M.A: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 156-69.

observable universe”, which he sets out to demolish³³ and the more recent controversy around Stephen Hawking’s claim that origins of the universe does not require the existence of God.³⁴ Going by these indications alone, Schleiermacher’s alleged protective strategy has utterly failed and the religiously irrelevant question of the origins of the world continues to dominate the conversation between believers and naturalists.

Moreover, having failed to persuade others about the autonomy of religion, it would seem that all that Schleiermacher succeed was in adding one more kind of argument to the traditional arguments: arguments from religious experience.³⁵ But taken as an argument, Schleiermacher’s view is incoherent, as Proudfoot has rightly pointed out.³⁶ Before attributing such massive failure to a thinker of Schleiermacher’s stature, it would seem to be only fair that we consider other possibilities.

Third, there are indications to show that targeting claims to religious autonomy comes from lack of familiarity with religious experience, aided by the blindness of the Western philosophical tradition that identified experience with sense experience. Other cultures like the Indian one, with its long history of reflecting on religious experience, never identified experience with sense perception. On the contrary, religious experience was considered to be an entirely different kind of experience, an “intuitive insight of a Buddha, a Jina, or a saint.”³⁷ The distinction between sense experience and religious experience is so well entrenched in the Indian ethos that scripture (based on religious experience) is even defined as that which “can be known by neither perception nor inference.”³⁸ The *Bhagavad Gita* is as explicit about the chasm between sense experience and religious experience as any text can be: “It is not possible for you [devotee] to see me [Lord] with your eyes” (chapter 11, verse 8). That the divine is not a matter

³³ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London, Toronto: Bantam Press, 2006), 14.

³⁴ Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (Bantam Press, 2010).

³⁵ One of the best arguments of this kind, with a brief history of such arguments, can be found in Kai-Man Kwan, “The Argument from Religious Experience,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, ed. William Lane Craig and James Porter Moreland (Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 498-552.

³⁶ Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 18.

³⁷ Bimal Krishna Matilal, *Perception : An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge* (Oxford-New York: Clarendon Press, 1986), 34.

³⁸ Ibid. 32. A more detailed discussion of the differences between the Indian and Western ways of understanding experience is to be found in Bina Gupta, *Reason and Experience in Indian Philosophy* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 2009). The key difference she finds is that the kind of opposition between ‘reason’ and ‘experience’ or between ‘reason’ and ‘revelation’ seen in Western thought is not to be found in the Indian understanding.

of sense experience is no news to the Western religious tradition. What is news is that sense experience does not exhaust the realm of cognitive experience. Even the Naiyayikas who engage in arguments for God's existence (against the Buddhists) do not identify cognitive experience with ordinary sense perception; the supra-sensory perception attained by yogis is also acknowledged as cognitive.

In a cultural context like that of India, even to talk about the autonomy of religious experience would have been superfluous. But for a philosophical culture that not only looked down on experience in general in favour of reason (the Greeks) or revelation (the Christians), but also identified that devalued experience with ordinary sense perception any talk of the autonomy of religious experience could only be an outrageous heresy. When Proudfoot gives vent to this outrage by accusing Schleiermacher of adopting a protective strategy, not for a moment does it occur to him that it may be the Greek identification of experience with sense perception that is outrageous and not Schleiermacher's claim about the autonomy of religious experience. And Schleiermacher is not the only target of attack for the entrenched tradition; Wittgenstein who insisted that the philosophical grammar of "God" functions very differently from that of a scientific hypothesis is often accused of fideism.³⁹

Fourth, accusations of religious autonomy as a protective strategy work only if religious autonomy is understood in a particular manner that I shall call "exclusionary autonomy". Just as the basic assumption that leads to the Laplace episode is that there is only one correct way of describing the world that either includes God in it or did not, so too, the fundamental assumption underlying most attacks on religious autonomy is that there is a single level or kind of reality.⁴⁰ This reality is either natural or religious, but not both because the one excludes the other. We find this assumption in Hume's definition of miracle as a violation of the laws of nature. According to this view, an event results either from the natural laws or is brought about by a God who decides to suspend the natural laws. The same idea is operative when Proudfoot argues that a religious experience is caused either by social and psychological factors or through divine intervention;⁴¹ it cannot be both.

³⁹ Kai Nielsen, "Wittgensteinian Fideism" *Philosophy* 42, no. 161 (1967). For a defense of the Wittgensteinian position, see Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion*.

⁴⁰ In the words of Dawkins, "there is only one kind of stuff in the universe ..." Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 14.

⁴¹ See Proudfoot's treatment of the experience of Stephen Bradley and Sarah Edwards. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* 195, 223.

It is not just Proudfoot and the naturalists who have been bewitched by the exclusionary view of autonomy. Most contemporary arguments from religious experience follow the same track. Leonard Angel finds that the arguments from religious experience given by eminent religious philosophers like John Hick and William Alston are based on the incompleteness of physical causation, prompting him to argue for the physical causal completeness principle.⁴² In effect, Angel's argument is a contemporary version of the Laplace episode. Similar arguments are seen between V.S. Ramachandran who argues for a neurological explanation of religious experience on the one hand and Matthew Ratcliffe who argues against it; between Evan Fales on the one hand and Jerome Gellman on the other.⁴³ Both sides agree that if physical causes are complete or if religious experience has an adequate neurological/ psychological/social explanation, religious explanations are superfluous.

It is anybody's guess as to what the man who dubbed his contemporaries' approach to religion as mere hotchpotch metaphysics and morals (that has nothing to do with genuine religion) would have thought of these debates. Irrespective of what Schleiermacher would have thought of the exclusionary view of religious autonomy there is a very good reason for religious believers, especially Christians, to repudiate this view – a reason that takes us to the very heart of the claim to religious autonomy. I suggest that the real issue concerning the autonomy of religion is the nature of divine transcendence.

III. TRANSCENDENCE AND AUTONOMY

When Greek philosophy, with its bifurcation of human cognitive faculties into sense and reason, argued for God's existence, there was a sense of transcendence that was attributed to that God: it was transcendent to the senses and available only to reason. Since this God differed from sense knowledge only in terms of its greater scope and generality, and transcendence is a merely a matter of going beyond the senses, the

⁴² Leonard Angel, "Mystical Naturalism," *Religious Studies* 38, no. 3 (2002). See also Leonard Angel, "Universal Self Consciousness Mysticism and the Physical Completeness Principle," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 55, no. 1 (2004).

⁴³ Matthew Ratcliffe, "Scientific Naturalism and the Neurology of Religious Experience," *Religious Studies* 39, no. 3 (2003); Evan Fales, "Can Science Explain Mysticism?" *Religious Studies* 35 (1999).

Newtonian system was as much transcendent as the Aristotelian God. That such a God is indeed superfluous is the moral of the Laplace episode.

When religious autonomy is understood in the exclusionary sense, it claims to introduce fresh content that is not available either to the senses or to reason. But the basic assumption of older natural theology – that there is just one correct description of reality – still remains. The content introduced by religious experience, therefore, is either genuinely religious (in which case it excludes the natural) or it is natural (in which case it is not really religious). Exclusionary autonomy, therefore, is based on the idea of transcendence that excludes immanence. An event (including the occurrence of a religious experience) is either caused by natural laws or by supernatural intervention, but not both. This is the logic of Proudfoot's argument that if a religious experience is caused by natural factors, it is unnecessary to bring in religious factors. A Christian understanding has no choice but to reject this view because Christians have always maintained that God is immanent and transcendent, present and active in the natural world without being identical with it.

It is not that Christianity has always given the impression that God is both immanent and transcendent; the impression has been just the opposite sometimes. Marcus Borg, a leading Jesus scholar, gives a succinct and personal account of a popular Christian view of God when he said, "I thought I knew what the word God meant: a supernatural being 'out there' who created the world a long time ago and had occasionally intervened in the aeons since, especially in the events recorded in the Bible. God was not 'here' but 'somewhere else'..."⁴⁴ Nor is this impression merely a popular misconception from which scholars are exempt; Peter Berger sees the biblical understanding of God as one who "stands outside the cosmos, which is his creation but which he confronts and does not permeate..."⁴⁵ It is worth noting that Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion* that seeks to address naturalism is subtitled "Human Responses to the Transcendent," with hardly any mention of immanence in the whole book.⁴⁶ Angel is not far

⁴⁴ Marcus Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) p.1

⁴⁵ Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Hammondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1973), 121.

⁴⁶ Grace Jantzen has correctly pointed out that the mainline Anglo-American philosophy of religion has conceived God in terms of the empirical human self without a body, 'a cosmic mind', implying exclusionary autonomy. Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), Chapter 2.

off the mark when he finds practically all the scholars who deal with religious experience arguing on the basis of physical causal incompleteness. The issue involved in the argument is an exclusionary view of transcendence: for God to be transcendent, he should not be immanent; if physical causes are complete, God is superfluous.

In spite of such widespread tendency to misinterpret the Christian understanding of God, there can hardly be any doubt that the Christian God has always been both immanent and transcendent.⁴⁷ The Old Testament God who created the heavens and the earth is also the one who appears to Moses *in* the burning bush; the God who liberated his people from their slavery did it through their leaders like Moses and Aaron. The Johannine Word who was with God (Jn. 1:1) was also the one that became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn.1:14). The exclusionary view of religious autonomy, therefore, is not Christian. Such being the case, a theory of religious experience that is exclusionary cannot function as a propaedeutic to Christian theology. A preamble may be only a preliminary understanding of what is to come, but it should not give misleading picture of what lies ahead. This is the decisive reason as to why a theory of religious experience based on the exclusionary view cannot function as a propaedeutic to Christian theology.

IV. INCLUSIONARY AUTONOMY AND A THEOLOGICAL PROPAEDEUTIC

One notable exception to this exclusionary approach to religious experience is William James. His concern was very similar to that of Schleiermacher. If Schleiermacher was concerned about the reduction of religion to metaphysics and morals, James was concerned about the “medical materialists” who sought to explain religious experience purely in terms of “the perverted action of various glands which physiology will yet discover.”⁴⁸ But James did not think of natural and religious causes as excluding each other. He had no difficulty in acknowledging the role of chemistry in religious experience when he acknowledged the organic

⁴⁷ I speak of the Christian tradition not only because the concern is to have an understanding of religious experience that can function as a propaedeutic to Christian theology (that was Schleiermacher’s concern), but also because Eastern traditions are much less prone to think of religious autonomy in exclusionary terms.

⁴⁸ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Mentor, Penguin Books, 1958), 29.

basis of religious experiences; but he also made us aware that *all* mental states (not only mystical states) have a chemical basis.⁴⁹ He recognized the psychological dimension of mystical experiences when he identified the ‘hither side’ of such experiences with the subconscious. But he was careful not to identify the whole of religious experience with it. He continues to talk about a “farther side”, a “*wider self from which saving experiences come*”.⁵⁰ A religious experience, for him, then, is not like a miracle in the Humean sense; rather, it is a window that enables us to glimpse into another order of reality that remain hidden from our rational consciousness.⁵¹

Being a window to another order of reality, the glimpsed content would be different indeed from what is experienced in ordinary perceptual experience. In this sense it affirms religious autonomy, but unlike exclusionary autonomy, it does not exclude the natural. If the term ‘supernatural’ is used for religious reality understood in the exclusionary sense, the term ‘supra-natural’ befits the inclusionary view of religious autonomy. This is not merely a change of terminology. An inclusionary view of religious autonomy has far reaching consequences.

V. REFRAMING THE QUESTION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

First of all, the vitality of religion, according to the inclusionary view, does not depend on the inadequacies of the empirical sciences to explain religious experience. The physical, chemical, social, and psychological influences on experience may be causally complete, as Angel argues, or they may be causally incomplete, as he accuses others of arguing. But these are of no consequence or relevance when the autonomy of religious experience is understood in an inclusionary sense. When religious autonomy is understood in the inclusionary sense, its vitality depends on that which is glimpsed through the window of religious experience and not on the inadequacy of the natural. This means that the urge of a person who has glimpsed into another order of reality (or, had a profound religious experience) is to communicate that experience to others, and not to prove God’s existence.

The focus on communication gives a completely different perspective on a theological propaedeutic. Arguments from religious experience, even at their best, make it justified for a person who has the experience to

⁴⁹ In his words, “Scientific theories are organically conditioned just as much as religious emotions are...” Ibid. 30.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 388; 384.

⁵¹ Ibid., 324.

believe on the basis of that experience. Set as it is in the Cartesian context of overcoming inner doubts, it has almost nothing to offer to the naturalist or the sceptical other.⁵² In contrast, a communication perspective shifts attention from oneself and one's inner doubts to the addressee, which in this case, is the religious sceptic. The inner life of the communicator comes into the picture only to the extent that all communication has an underlying "ought" dimension that functions as its motivating factor.⁵³ This "oughtness" comes from the internal meaning system of an individual or the community where the message originates. Since all theology is communication⁵⁴ of this kind, we could say that the "ought" of theological communication comes from one's acquaintance with God (as Aquinas said⁵⁵), or more generally from a religious experience. It involves a sense of having seen or heard or experienced something that is extra-ordinary, not easily seen or heard by others, but something that is beneficial to them, even if they do not see it. It is this conviction that drives religious communication. "Woe to me, if I do not preach the gospel" (1 Cor 9:16), said St. Paul. An enlightened Siddhartha (Buddha) had no choice but to reach out to others.

When communication is brought to the forefront, then, the difference between theology and its propaedeutic is not a difference in the message communicated, but a difference of the addressee. Theology would be addressed to one's own religious community with whom the theologian shares a maximum of shared beliefs whereas the propaedeutic would be addressed to those with whom the shared beliefs would be far less.⁵⁶ A propaedeutic that is addressed to the naturalist would be guided by the same

⁵² This was the conclusion of William James more than a century ago. Ibid. 323-24. This situation has hardly changed, irrespective of the multiplicity of arguments from religious experience. See, George Karuvelil, "Some Problems in the Epistemology of Religion," in *Interrelations and Interpretations*, ed. Job Kozhamthadom (New Delhi: Intercultural Publications, 1997), 109-140. For the inadequacy of such epistemology, see George Karu, "Epistemic Justification and the Possibility of Empirical Evidence," *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 12, no. 1 (1994).

⁵³ Barnett Pearce, "The Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)," in *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication*, ed. William B. Gudykunst (Thousand Oaks, Calif.; London: Sage, 2005) 35-5440.

⁵⁴ Rino Fisichella, "Fundamental Theology II: Addressee," in *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. René Latourelle and Rino Fisichella (New York: St. Paul's, 1990) 332-36., 332.

⁵⁵ Thomas Aquinas, according to Nicholas Lash, considered the fundamental purpose of revelation, preaching, catechesis, and theology as communicating one's acquaintance with God. See Nicholas Lash, "Considering the Trinity," *Modern Theology* 2, no. 3 (1986), 187.

⁵⁶ For further details, see George Karuvelil, "Religious Pluralists: what are they up to?" *Journal of Dharma* 35, no. 1 (2010), 3-22.

religious insight as theology but would remain a minimal communication of that insight; it would provide an understanding of religious experience that functions as a kind of interstitial zone between naturalism and first order theology.⁵⁷ Though minimal, such communication will have to remain truthful to the originating insight and not mislead the addressee; only then can that communication function as a propaedeutic to theology. Moreover such initial communication will also have to be adequate to leave room for further deepening as the interlocutors move towards communication that is closer to the theological home.

A theory of religious experience that can function as propaedeutic of this kind, however, is more easily said than done, because it will have to meet three formidable challenges. First, following the dictum that “there is no entity without identity”, there is the problem of identity of the supra-natural experience.⁵⁸ Used as we are to exclusionary thinking, it is difficult even to identify an experience in the inclusionary manner without making it into a mere “gratuitous embellishment, a logical fifth wheel, an optional language-game” as John Hick put it.⁵⁹ Second, a theory of religious experience that would function as a propaedeutic to contemporary theology must be adequate to the variety of experiences, such as the numinous and the mystical, the panenhenic and the shamanic, with any number of variations within each. Third, such a theory will have to be accessible to the naturalists. Since I have shown the importance of the first two elsewhere, I shall conclude with a brief consideration about the importance of the last.⁶⁰

When the dialogical thrust that Schleiermacher gave to the propaedeutic task is taken seriously, it goes without saying that what is communicated to the naturalists must be accessible to them. But the dead weight of the older style of thinking is such that accessibility to the naturalists is not even recognized as a problem by religious thinkers. An excellent example

⁵⁷ Calling it metatheology, a term borrowed from Raimudo Panikkar, I have expanded on this to some extent in G. Karuvelil, “Metatheology: Mediating Christianity in the Contemporary World,” in *La Filosofía Como Mediación*, ed. Philippe Capelle (Mexico: COMUICAP and Universidad Iberoamericana, 2007) 115-21.

⁵⁸ The original dictum is from W. V. Quine, *Theories and Things* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981). Strawson gives us an excellent explication of the same in P. F. Strawson, *Entity and Identity and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 22-51.

⁵⁹ John Hick, “Eschatological Verification Reconsidered,” *Religious Studies* 13, no. 2 (1977), 189.

⁶⁰ George Karuvelil, “Mysticism, Language and Truth,” *Journal of Dharma* 35, no. 3 (2010), 259-275.

is Hick's discussion of eschatological verification. His foray into an imaginative Christian eschatology is hardly the kind of language that is accessible to the naturalists, prompting Flew to demand that the would-be apologist must explain the meaning of "God" as if to a person who has not even heard that word before.⁶¹ Michael Tooley raises the same issue: "Could a person understand what experiences Hick has in mind here if he did not understand theological language? If not, reference to these purportedly verifying experiences will not explain the meaning of theological statements to one who does not already understand them."⁶² What is instructive is Hick's response that eschatological verification was never meant to serve that purpose and that he is addressing the believers.⁶³ If this is the fate of a discussion that is set explicitly in the background of a dialogue between naturalists and believers,⁶⁴ it takes no great imagination to see how Schleiermacher's dialogical project has come to be replaced by partisan polemics found in contemporary discussions.

⁶¹ Antony Flew, *God: A Critical Enquiry* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1984), x-xi.

⁶² Michael Tooley, "John Hick and the Concept of Eschatological Verification," *Religious Studies* 12, no. 2 (1976), 188.

⁶³ He says, "I have not suggested that the eschatological situation will explain the meaning of theological statements to one who does not already understand them. I begin from the fact that there is already, in this present life, a putative awareness of God, expressed in religious statements which the religious believer understands. ... These statements are part of a unitary body of beliefs which include eschatological beliefs, and it is these latter that give factual-assertion status to the system as a whole". Hick, "Eschatological Verification Reconsidered," 200, fn.2.

⁶⁴ One needs to keep in mind that the context of the discussion is the naturalistic challenge posed by Antony Flew about the logical identity of religious experience. See, Antony Flew, R.M. Hare, and Basil Mitchell, "Theology and Falsification," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (London: S.C.M Press, 1955). The logical challenge was already met by Basil Mitchell and I.M. Crombie in their responses to Flew. But in shifting from logic to epistemology, not only has Hick forgotten the original question (see, Paul Edwards, *God and the Philosophers* [Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2009], 284) but also brings about the problem of access, because verification requires experiential content, unlike the formal logical identity provided by Mitchell and Crombie.