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ON COGNITIVE VALIDITY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

From religious experience to meaningful beliefs about God

Does the alleged religious experience of a mystic constitute a reliable source of knowledge about the object of his or her experience? Or does it rationally justify a move from such experience to meaningful beliefs about God or the Absolute which is supposed to be the object of that experience? And are religious beliefs in need of being grounded in religious experience in order to be rationally justified? Although it seems pretty obvious that a great many adherents of all religions find reasons for their beliefs in their religious traditions rather than in their personal religious experiences, one could note that (1) usually these traditions present religious experiences of their founder figures as constituting evidence for their authenticity and truthfulness (consider the importance of Abraham's and Moses' encounters with God for Judaism, the experience of the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost for Christianity, or the experience of Mahomet receiving the Koran for Islam); (2) the supposed mystical experiences of some adherents of a given religious tradition are often treated by their co-believers as an important evidence which increases credibility of their own religious convictions (it seems that primarily for this reason some of the great Christian mystics have been granted the title of 'Doctor of the Church', Chasidic Jews venerate the memory of their saintly leaders making pilgrimages to their graves, and some *sufi* mystics of medieval Islam are still held in high esteem nearly a thousand years after their death). If one considers in addition the fact that (3) in our own days many individuals report that they have had some sort of religious experience and they take these experiences to be among main reasons for their being religious, or at least among reasons for their deep religious involvement, then it has to be concluded that arguments against the

cognitive validity and authenticity of religious experience as a means of justification for religious beliefs, if not refuted, would constitute a serious challenge to the rationality of religious stance in general.

In the following paper I will attempt to show that there are good reasons for believing that *some* religious experience *may* be a mode of cognitive experience and as such it may justify a move from religious experience to meaningful beliefs about God. I will not claim however that a religious belief has to be grounded in religious experience in order to be considered rational but only that religious reports of religious experiences contribute in specific cases to rational justifiability of religious beliefs related to them. Moreover I am not going to address the question whether construction of the successful theistic argument (for the existence of God) from religious experience is possible.

Arguing for cognitive validity of religious experience I will highlight the advantages of the approach shared too a large extent by W.P. Alston and W.J. Wainwright who hold that some religious experiences are *sufficiently similar to ordinary sense experience* to create presumption in favour of their cognitive validity. Taking into account classic explorations in the field made by C. Franks Davis¹, I will consider attempts to defeat this presumption, and I will conclude that they do not seem to be successful, as they do not provide any explanation of *all* religious experiences that would be both convincing and more probable than the religious explanation which assumes that at least some of the experiences in question are examples of an authentic encounter with God or the Divine Reality independent of the subject's mind. Reductionist hypotheses that have been put forward so far do not seem to be sufficiently strong to convince us that the basic human intuition (the Principle of Credulity, as R. Swinburne calls it²), that the way things seem is always evidence of the way they are, fails in the case of religious experience.

Although there is no place here for detailed discussion of the complex problem as to what counts as a 'religious experience' (as there are accounts of such a variety of religious experiences in various traditions), we have to note at least one important distinction. In the first paragraph, giving popular reasons for the importance of religious experience in the context of justification of religious beliefs I pointed out, somewhat provocatively, to very different examples of experiences which different people could consider as falling into category of 'religious experiences'. Accepting the arguments of numerous authors I would like to affirm

¹ Cf. C. Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, Oxford 1989.

² Cf. R. Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, Oxford 1979, 254.

validity and crucial importance of the distinction between a religious experience and a miracle. The difference here is not entirely easy to define but the simplest way of formulating could go along the following lines. The term 'miracle' refers to an event or experience of such nature that even if in fact witnessed or experienced by a single individual, it would be observed or shared by every individual who would find himself in similar circumstances. In contrast to this, a religious experience is of individual nature, i.e. may be experienced by a single person although other individuals close to him in space and time do not experience anything like that. So roughly speaking 'miracle' has a 'public' nature while religious experience is essentially 'private'. Thus on this account Moses' 'experience' of God in the Burning Bush, as well as the 'experience' of the Apostles in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost, are to be seen as examples of miracles in the above sense.

Bearing this in mind I propose, for the purposes of this brief study, to use the term 'religious experience' in rather strong and restricted sense, which would be presumed in a workable idea of a *mystical* experience that most of the adherents of the world religions would have. I will be concerned only with those experiences that are taken by their subjects to be of some objective reality that transcends their consciousness and exists independently of being experienced. I will assume that experiences described by St Teresa of Avila in the following passages of her *Autobiography* could count as paradigmatic cases of religious experience. It is worth noting that they are somewhat different, the latter being less concrete and not falling under natural senses. Thus we have to do with two rather than one paradigmatic case of religious experience, and though they are different, the argument will go that they are both sufficiently similar to sense experience to create presumption in favour of its cognitive validity. In chapter 28 St Teresa writes: „Once when I was at Mass on the St Paul's Day, there stood before me the most sacred Humanity, in all the beauty and majesty of His resurrection body, as it appears in paintings”³. In chapter 27 we read: „One day when I was at prayer (...) I saw Christ at my side – or, to put it better, I was conscious of Him, for I saw nothing with the eyes of the body or the eyes of the soul. He seemed quite close to me, and I saw that it was He”⁴.

³ St Teresa, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*, translated by J.M. Cohen, Penguin 1957, 196.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 187-188.

Constructivist challenge to the cognitive validity of religious experience

One of the earliest and most influential authors on the subject who maintained that religious experience is able to serve as justification for belief in the objective reality of God or Deity was Williams James. After considering a wide range of accounts of presumed religious experiences he concluded in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*⁵ that some of them cannot find sufficient explanation in terms of one's socio-religious context and can be rightly taken as experiences of the Divine (understood in rather broad sense of a godlike object) which has an existence distinct from the reality of human life. James claims that religious experience begins with a divine initiative which calls for a human response. In terms of understanding the nature of these religious experiences the roles of both the religious context and the ensuing rational religious concepts are secondary in that they only assume a role at all because of a prior immediate contact between the individual and the Divine. Highly relevant to our topic is James's conclusion that individual religious experiences, rather than the tenets of organized religions, form the backbone of religious life and therefore in search of grounds of religious beliefs, one should turn to the sphere of religious experience.

James' view of the nature and epistemic status of religious experience has been shared to a large extent by R. Otto, and later embraced and developed by such writers as E. Underhill or W.T. Stace. Taken as a group these authors are often labelled as Essentialists. Leaving minor differences aside, all Essentialists hold that (a) religious experiences across time, traditions and cultures have some *core characteristics* and so are essentially the same; (b) religious experiences all have the same objective reference, that is, they involve immediate and direct contact with an Absolute Principle which may be known by different subjects of religious experience under various names.

Assertion that different experiences labelled as religious have a common objective reference which is metaphysical in nature has been challenged by a number of authors known as constructivists. Constructivists, like S.T. Katz and W. Proudfoot, point out that there are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences⁶. The influence of our social context upon the nature of our experiences is so profound that expe-

⁵ W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, Routledge 2002.

⁶ Cf. S.T. Katz, „Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism”, in S.T. Katz (ed.), *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, London and New York 1978, 26.

rience can never be unmediated but is always shaped by prior linguistic, conceptual, discursive and institutional presumptions such that the lived experience conforms to a pre-existent pattern that has been learned, then intended, and then actualized in the experiential reality.

Using Kantian idealism (or rather its particular interpretation) as a theoretical framework constructivists argue that our ideas, our concepts and our language, do not just correspond to reality but in some sense impose upon the world the structures we experience. We constitute our own experience in the sense that we provide the rules and structures according to which we experience objects. The subject's conceptual context sets structures and boundaries for what may or may not be experienced. Consequently, if we are to understand the nature of religious experience, it is necessary that we study not only the reports provided by the subject after the experience (i.e. its interpretation), but also the subject's conceptual context prior to the experience. Now, Constructivists will argue against Essentialists that, as the conceptual context of the alleged religious experience may radically differ from case to case, it cannot be said that all such experiences are necessarily the same. As Katz points out rather convincingly: „There is no intelligible way that anyone can legitimately argue that a *no self* experience of *empty* calm (Nirvana) is the same experience of intense, loving, intimate relationship between two substantial selves, one of whom is conceived of as the personal God of western religion and all that this entails”⁷. Katz considers the possibility of speaking of one ultimate objective Reality or the Real and arrives at the conclusion that the claims to have discovered such Reality are often quite incompatible: Jewish and Christian mysticism found the ultimate Reality in God, Buddhism in Nirvana, Neoplatonism found it in Ideas, while the Reality of a Hindu and a Muslim mystic may have either theistic or pantheistic nature, depending on the prior beliefs of the mystic about the nature of the ultimate Reality. Thus the experiences of the Reality in each of the mentioned cases cannot be described as similar which suggests to Katz that the Real itself is linguistically and culturally dependent⁸.

From here there is only one step to the claim that religious experience is not only influenced by the subject's religious context, but may indeed be *created* by this context. W. Proudfoot holds that religious experience can be *fully* explained through a mapping of the concepts and beliefs which were available to the subjects prior to the experience itself, the commitments they brought to the experience, and the contextual conditions that might have led them to identify their

⁷ Cf. S.T. Katz, *Op. cit.*, 39.

⁸ Cf. S.T. Katz, *Op. cit.*, 50.

experiences as religious. As a result, Proudfoot concludes that religious experiences do not require any transcendent referential point but can be fully explained in a naturalistic way⁹.

However, it seems that linguistic constructivist model is ill-suited to account for *much* of the data of religious experience for a number of reasons. Firstly, it cannot be said that religious experience is always conservative in character (in that the experience which has been shaped by context confirms the expectations which have been given by the tradition). Very often the opposite is true. For example, Teresa of Avila reflecting on her experience stresses the irrelevance of her expectations when she writes: „My soul (...) had never been moved to desire this, nor had it come to my knowledge that such an experience was possible”¹⁰. Moreover, the fact that frequently religious experiences inspired religious reformers to transform their own traditions would be impossible to account for, if their experiences were to be determined by what they received from their tradition. Secondly, some religious experiences appear as contentless and therefore there is lacking within the experience itself any contextual concept which could constitute a link between the experience and the subject's tradition (mysticism of Meister Eckhart could serve here as a good example).

Most importantly, the main constructivist assumption, that there are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences, can be challenged. For example, W.P. Alston in his *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* allows for some unmediated experiences and speaks of such experiences from the side of the subject and from the side of the object. From the side of the subject, unmediated experiences consist in 'direct awareness' of the object. From the side of the object, in unmediated experience the object is 'presented' or 'given' to the subject. In Alston's opinion, such experiences are independent of any conceptualisation, belief, judgement or any other application of general concepts to the object. In most experiences, he admits, the subject's direct awareness of the object is intimately entangled with concepts and interpretations but in certain cases the subject's direct awareness of the object can exist independently of concepts. Turning against one of the main constructivist critics of religious experience Alston notices: „Proudfoot confuses between what is involved in identifying an experience as of a certain sort and what the experience is or consists of. Proudfoot repeatedly argues that since concepts are involved in identifying an experience as religious, as mystical, the experience itself is not independent of concepts (...). But from the fact that we use a concept to

⁹ Cf. W. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1985, 348.

¹⁰ St Teresa, *Op. cit.*, 190.

identify an experience of something as of a certain type, it does not follow that what we are identifying involves concepts and judgments"¹¹.

W.T. Stace, a leading contemporary Essentialist, makes rather similar point distinguishing between the central mystical *experience*, the central mystical *concept* and the *interpretations* given.¹² For Stace, the central experience is that of the One or the Unity, and this is directly apprehended by the mystic, prior to any interpretation. The central concept is that which is drawn up by a proper, empirical analysis of mystical experiences. The interpretations are varying accounts given by mystics themselves, accounts which are subsequent to the immediately apprehended experience of the One. These interpretations are likely to be influenced by the teachings of the particular religious tradition to which the mystic belongs. However, the fact that there are varying interpretations does not negate the fact that the genuine mystical experience is the same in each case, that is, it is the experience of the One. As she puts it: „The Unity, the One, is the central experience and the central concept of all mysticism (...) The unity is perceived, or directly apprehended. That is to say, it belongs to the experience and not to the interpretation, in so far as it is possible to make this distinction. The unity may be variously interpreted, and the interpretation will as a rule largely depend on the cultural environment and the prior beliefs of the individual mystic"¹³.

E. Underhill¹⁴ making a simple distinction between the *experience* and its *context* argues that religious experience is essentially independent of a particular religious context. Union between God and the individual that according to Underhill constitutes the essential of mysticism is the same even across varying cultures and religious traditions. The cultural influences of the context are secondary and can be separated from the experience itself. The particular mental image which the mystic forms of his objective, the traditional theology he accepts, is not essential, and it is possible to arrive at the experience of union with God which is the core of every mystical experience.

Reductionist challenge

The reductionist challenge is based on the firm belief that science can fully explain away religious experience. Broadly speaking there are

¹¹ W.P. Alston, *Perceiving God*, Ithaca and London 1991, 40-41.

¹² Cf. W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, MacMillan 1960, 5nn.

¹³ W.T. Stace, *Op. cit.*, 66.

¹⁴ E. Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, Oneworld Publications 1999.

two main alternative explanations of religious experience: pathological and non-pathological¹⁵. Pathological explanations are those which seek to explain religious experiences in ways which are normally held to be associated with misperceptions or non-perceptions. This being the case, religious experience cannot be held to be reliable as a basis for beliefs formed as a result of such experiences. C. Franks Davis outlines four main groups of explanation which most of us would consider to be pathological: (1) hypersuggestibility; (2) deprivation and maladjustment; (3) mental illness; (4) abnormal psychological states. Hypersuggestibility implies that religious experiences are brought about through processes which are somewhat akin to hypnosis. As to the first explanation, it seems that while hypersuggestibility may be involved in some cases of alleged religious experience, most of the reported religious experiences do not appear to have anything to do with such situations. Argument against the cognitive validity of religious experience on the ground that such experiences are examples of a maladjustment being merely a form of compensation for people who are socially deprived (as suggested by Karl Marx's maxim 'Religion is the opium of the people') can be countered by the results of sociological studies which show that religious experiences do not simply pertain to lower socio-economic groups. A further argument says that religious experiences can be sufficiently explained by reference to the unconscious mechanism of the human psyche because the alleged religious experiences tend to occur among those who suffer from emotional frustrations and anxiety. It seems however that in those cases where the concept of God does operate in some way as a super-ego (as S. Freud would suggest), it cannot be proven that this is merely a human projection, rather than something which in reality relates to us along the lines of the super-ego.

Some would question the cognitive validity of religious experiences on the grounds that they are similar to experiences which are known to be pathological like hysteria, delusions, mania or depression. Against this, it needs to be noted that mental illness may produce psychotic revelations, but these are generally held to be nonsense by the subject after recovery from the illness. The insights associated with religious experiences, however, are valued and treasured long after the experience itself. While mental illness is not considered to be in itself life-enhancing, religious experience is often serving as an integrative step in the furthering of human growth. It has sometimes been argued that religious experiences are similar to drug-induced experiences: but again, it needs to be noted that while it is possible that abnormal psychological states produced by the influence of drugs may in certain circumstances

¹⁵ Cf. C. Franks Davis, *Op. cit.*, chapter 8.

make a subject more prone to certain types of religious experiences, the presence of drugs is absent from the vast majority of religious experience.

J.L. Mackie challenges the cognitive validity of religious experience by proposing non-pathological naturalistic explanation¹⁶. In seeking to provide an explanation for religious experience, Ockham's razor is applied to give preference to familiar operations within human experience over more hypothetical theistic positions. Mackie is convinced that religious beliefs and religious practices emerge through the normal processes which come with living in society. This entails being conditioned to attribute certain experiences to a divine cause. In this perspective the idea of God merely helps to fill in the gaps which at present scientific knowledge cannot account for. However, Mackie's naturalistic approach seems somewhat misguided, as usually religion does not seek to be a form of science. Science seeks reasons for why things are as they are. Religion seeks reasons for why things exist at all and is concerned with ultimate questions concerning the purpose and destiny of human life. Such questions lie beyond the scope of science to answer. Scientific answers constitute part of the world-view of a religious person and these answers can have as its background a picture of the Universe with God in its centre, but science rarely provides answers to the questions that religion usually addresses.

In yet another commonly employed naturalistic argument against the cognitive validity of religious experience, the claim is being made that religious experience can be scientifically explained because science has identified the type of electrical stimuli upon the brain which will result in experiences which are described as religious or mystical. What can be said about the claim that mystical experiences are caused by neurophysiological factors? The question here is whether the nature of any experience can always be *fully* explained in terms of chemical or electric stimuli upon the brain. The point which can be made here is that an experience is not assessed simply in terms of what it was that immediately caused the experience. Let's take the example of visual perception. I may claim that I see a book. The actual experience of seeing is not immediately caused by the book. The immediate cause is to be found in the electrical stimuli which allow sight – if these were not operative, the book could be in front of me all day and I still would not see it. The fact, however, that the book is not the immediate cause of the experience does not mean that the book is not seen by me. Nobody would draw that conclusion, because even though the book is not the immediate cause of the experience, it still figures further back

¹⁶ Cf. J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford 1982, 197.

along the causal chain leading to the experience. If there were no book there, I would certainly not see a book – unless I was hallucinating! The condition required to assert the cognitive validity of my experience of seeing a book is not that the book is the immediate cause of the experience, but that the book figures somewhere in the causal chain which leads up to the experience. In a similar way, it may be argued that it is not necessary to claim that God is the immediate cause of a mystical experience – the immediate cause may well be chemical or electrical stimuli. All that is required is that God figures among the chain of causes.

'Conflicting truth claims' challenge

The challenge posed by the fact of religious diversity is sometimes known as the conflicting claims challenge. One of the most prominent exponents of this challenge was A. Flew¹⁷. The challenge rests on the contention that since the subjects of religious experience cannot agree on a description of what it is that they have experienced, their experiences must be illusory or constitute serious misrepresentation – in both cases, their experiences would certainly be unreliable as a means of justification for rationally held beliefs. Indeed, one could point out that the enormous variety of religious experiences, if taken at face value, would in fact substantiate innumerable religious beliefs. Since many of these beliefs are in contradiction with each other, how can it be possible for religious experience to serve as a reliable way of justifying religious beliefs? C. Franks Davis considers five representative types of experiences that can be described as 'religious': numinous experiences of a holy power; mystical experiences of union with *the Other*; monistic experiences of identity with the Supreme Self; natural mystical experiences of the fundamental unity behind all creation; the experience of the impermanence and transience of all reality¹⁸. At face value it would appear that they cannot make reference to the same kind of religious reality without contradicting each other. This seems to constitute a serious threat to any argument which attempts to proceed from religious experience to meaningful beliefs about God. What are the ways out here?

The most obvious solution is to follow in the steps of W. James and to argue that religious experiences across time, religious traditions and cultures have some core characteristics and so *are essentially the same*. According to this approach experiences never conflict, only doctrines and

¹⁷ Cf. A. Flew, *God and Philosophy*, London 1966, 124-139.

¹⁸ Cf. C. Franks Davis, *Op. cit.*, chapter 7.

interpretations do. It is crucial to note that this does not necessarily presuppose the claim that all religious or mystical 'experiences' amount simply to one identical experience which is later variously interpreted. What is here pointed out as common maybe much more complex than that. To see this one can follow C. Franks Davis who asserts that there are four irreducible types of mystical experience: (a) experiences of an awesome wholly Other; (b) experiences of a loving relationship with a personal Other; (c) experiences of the unity of the whole diverse creation; (d) experiences of the unity of the Self. According to her, much of the alleged conflict among mystical experiences is superficial, as all four types of experience are to be found in each major religious tradition and it is possible to derive a common core. In her opinion all numinous and mystical experiences have similarity in that they are experiences of *the eternal, indescribable, truly real*. Since interpretation can often be incorporated into the experience (as constructivists argue and not doubt they are to some extent right), the type of experience one has (in terms of the four irreducible types mentioned above) may be dependent upon both one's personality and the particular cultural and historical background. Therefore it does not follow that different types of experience exclude a common referent.

J. Hick argues (against the background of a Kantian epistemology) that religious experience consists in the presence of a transcendent Reality coming to consciousness in terms of our human concepts. Because the different ways of being human have produced a variety of conceptual systems, the transcendent Reality is experienced in a variety of ways which have become enshrined in the different religious traditions¹⁹. Thus Hick sees the language and concepts used about God in different religious traditions not as true about God as God really is, but as depictions of how God appears to be within the conceptual and cultural forms of each tradition. Hick maintains that we cannot suppose that any of these depictions are true of 'God' as God really is. „None of the concrete descriptions that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable ground of that realm. For whereas the phenomenal world is structured by our own conceptual frameworks, its noumenal ground is not... But it is nevertheless the noumenal ground of these characteristics”²⁰.

However W.P. Alston raises the point that Hick leaves the religious believer with the unsolvable dilemma: why should one prefer one religious tradition to another if all are more or less equally truth-

¹⁹ Cf. J. Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, New Haven 1993, 21.

²⁰ J. Hick, *The Interpretation of Religion*, New Haven 1989, 246-7.

depicting (we leave aside the question why Hick thinks that they are at all truth depicting). Moreover, following W. Hasker, Alston notices that on this ground the point can be made against Christian belief because „if there are several conceptual schemes for interpreting religious experience which are alternative to, and incompatible with, Christianity, and if there are no decisive reasons for thinking those schemes to be incorrect, then there is a good reason to think the Christian practice unreliable”²¹. What is the solution then? Alston uses here the example of forming beliefs on the basis of visual experience, beliefs which I believe it is rational to hold. These beliefs are formed against the wider ‘Aristotelian’ belief that in visual experience, I perceive separate objects scattered about in space. It may be that in another culture, what is seen is seen in quite a different way and hence on the basis of visual experience, different beliefs would be formed about the nature of the world. This possibility, however, does not cause me to give up on visual experience as a reliable way of forming beliefs about the world. „In the absence of any external reason for supposing that one of the (possible) competing practices is more accurate than my own, the only rational course for me is to sit tight with the practice of which I am a master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world”²². Alston maintains that the same principle should apply in respect to the reliability of a Christian forming beliefs about God on the basis of Christian religious experience.

W.J. Wainwright sharing Alston's broadly exclusivist stance makes the crucial point that as ‘religious experience’ is an umbrella term covering many different types of experience, religious experience in general may indeed support conflicting claims, but the most that follows is that not all of these experiences can be cognitive. But it does not follow that none of them are cognitive, or that all delusive²³.

Analogical arguments for the cognitive validity of religious experience

Given that none of the arguments against the cognitive validity of religious experience considered so far seemed to be decisive we could conclude at this point that (some) religious experiences indeed may provide evidential support for (some) religious beliefs. We could do it by affirming the basic intuition that in the absence of sufficiently strong positive reasons for challenge, what a person seems to perceive is

²¹ W.P. Alston, *Op. cit.*, 272.

²² W.P. Alston, *Op. cit.*, 274.

²³ Cf. W. Wainwright, *Mysticism*, The Harvester Press 1981, 107.

probably so. However, that may appear a minimalist conclusion as, after all, the present lack of decisive defeaters does not exclude the unreliability of religious experience on some other ground which still may be pointed out sooner or later. What is needed is the epistemological model which helps to understand in what way and to what extent religious experiences may constitute a ground for religious beliefs. W.P. Alston in his *Perceiving God* supplies us with such a model.

Alston draws a parallel between the question of the reliability of ordinary (direct) perceptual experiences and the reliability of religious experience. His central thesis is that religious experience, or more precisely 'experiential awareness of God', which he refers to as the perception of God, makes contribution to the grounds of religious belief in such a way that a person can be justified in holding certain kinds of beliefs about God by virtue of perceiving God as being or doing so-and-so. Alston openly denies that he is trying to provide an argument from religious experience for the existence of God. He does not hold that the existence of God provides the best explanation for facts about religious experience or that it is possible to argue in any way from the latter to the former, but confines himself to claim that people sometimes do perceive God and thereby acquire justified beliefs about God. (Although he seems to accept the point made by A. Plantinga and W.J. Wainwright that even if 'God exists' is not the propositional content of typical theistic perceptual beliefs, those propositional contents self-evidently entail it²⁴.) Alston proposes a model of perception according to which perception consists of something presenting itself to me in a certain way, apart from my conceptualizing it or making judgments about it, and applies it to direct religious experiences, showing that many who have religious experiences understand their experiences along similar lines. He concludes that there is no good reason for denying possibility of someone's having a direct, genuine perception of God. To the objection that the properties by which God presents himself to us are very different from those presented by sensory objects, Alston replies that we often report appearances by using comparative concepts, which is what we use to report how God presents himself to our experience. In general he stresses that the problems that arise when one makes an attempt to establish the truth value of religious experience are in principle no different from those that arise from ordinary perceptual experience.

Similar line of argument was earlier presented, though less developed, by W.J. Wainwright²⁵. He argues that as mystical experien-

²⁴ Cf. W. Wainwright, *Op. cit.*, 1-3.

²⁵ Cf. W. Wainwright, *Op. cit.*, chapter 3.

ce is similar to sense experience it creates a presumption in favour of its *cognitive validity*. The argument goes like this: (1) Religious experiences are analogous to sense experiences, (2) sense experiences are cognitive therefore (3) religious experiences are cognitive. Like Alston, Wainwright dismisses the alleged differences between religious experience and sense experience as insignificant. Moreover he points out that it is not true (as some critics like C. B. Martin asserted) that sense experiences are radically unlike mystical experiences because they are 'private', not 'public' in the sense that when the mystic claims to experience God his or her claims are not corrigible, as there are no independent tests and check-up procedures which he and others would regard as relevant to a determination of the truth or falsity of the claims he makes²⁶. He presents a number of criteria of validity used in this respect in religious communities. Among them are few which deny popular assumption that there can be no paradigms of genuine religious experiences and therefore no criteria of their verification.

P. Draper considered this approach and came to conclusion that 'theistic experiences' do not by themselves make God's existence more probable than not²⁷. He argues that though Alston and Wainwright will not be ready to admit it there is at least one major dissimilarity between religious and perceptual experiences that is epistemically significant and undermines the whole argument which is based on the presumed analogy. The difference, according to Draper, is as follows: while we managed to establish numerous law-like regularities governing sense perception, no such regularities have been discovered in the area of religious experience. Draper does not agree with Alston and Wainwright that the failure to discover such regularities does nothing to diminish the cognitive value of theistic experiences. After all, it is exactly our ability to discern law-like regularities governing sense experiences that make them strong indirect evidence for the presence of their apparent physical objects. It is important to note that Draper does not claim that religious experience cannot provide evidence for God's existence, but only that it cannot be done in the analogous way presumed by Alston and Wainwright.

R. Gale argues along similar lines pointing out dissimilarities between sense perception and religious experience²⁸. He holds that the case for religious experiences being cognitive is too weak to convince him that religious experience can serve as epistemological basis for the

²⁶ Cf. Wainwright, *Op. cit.*, 85.

²⁷ Cf. P. Draper, *God and perceptual evidence*, in „Philosophy of Religion” 32 (1992), 149-165.

²⁸ Cf. R.M. Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God*, Cambridge 1991, chapter 8.

belief in the existence of God. Gale holds that it is impossible to have a veridical religious experience which could be described as nonsensory perception of God (as Alston would like). He does not claim that an 'of-God-type experience' could not be caused by God and qualify as some kind of nonperceptual apprehension of God but he holds (against Alston and Wainwright) that even if such experience would be possible it would not be analogous enough to an ordinary veridical sense experience and therefore it would not constitute an evidence or epistemic warrant for believing in the existence of its object. Simply, there are no truth-directed reasons for believing in the existence of the apparent object of religious experience (there may be pragmatic ones, Gale remarks, though later he will dismiss them too). Gale rightly notices that Alston's and Wainwright's argument (which he calls 'analogical argument for cognitivity') rests on the presumption that sense experiences are a paradigm of cognitivity and therefore, showing that religious experiences are sufficiently analogous to sense experiences, will be a good way of establishing their cognitive credentials. Then he puts the question how close the analogy must be to make the argument work and points out that there is no decision procedure for determining this. After examining different versions of the 'analogical argument' he concludes that the analogies are always too weak to enable us to infer the cognitivity of religious experience from the admitted cognitivity of sense experience. The main problem here is that the claims based upon religious experiences do not allow for defeating conditions, i.e. they are falsifiable. „Because there are no tests for the veridicality of religious experience, there is no basis for drawing the distinction between his actually perceiving God and it just seeming to him as if he is perceiving God. By not providing for any chance of being wrong, the analogy fails to make religious experience relevantly similar to sense experiences, for which the veridical-unveridical distinction holds”²⁹. Gale dismisses efforts of Alston, Wainwright, Swinburne and G. Gutting to show that there are such tests. Gale thinks they are all bound to suffer from vicious circularity. By considering a number of sensory tests, that is conditions of reliability of ordinary sense experiences Gale highlights dissimilarities between sense experience and religious experience thus undermining the whole 'analogical argument'. However, it seems that the success of his project depends on his assumption of a highly restrictive notion of sense perception (as his extensive list of sensory tests makes clear) and his refusal to allow the religious experience to be treated as *sui generis*, yet without losing its analogy to sensory experience from his sight.

²⁹ R.M. Gale, *Op. cit.*, 294.

This seems to me the most sensitive area of the whole debate. Here, it seems, Gale and Alston, Wainwright, Swinburne, Plantinga (and the present author) will not find sufficient common ground to reach any agreement. For the latter religious experience is sufficiently analogical to ordinary sense experience to make religious beliefs based on it *prima facie* justified. And yet it is too specific in nature, too *sui generis*, to be accepted by Gale as analogical enough to pass his sensory tests. God unlike a table or an animal does not 'behave' in such a way as to make human experience of Him sufficiently analogous to sense experience to satisfy conditions set by Gale.

By way of conclusion it needs to be said that Gale's arguments do show that, even if religious experience can be considered as a ground for religious beliefs (making the believer justified in holding them on this ground), it is much more difficult to argue from religious experience to the existence of God. However, even if that would turn out to be impossible it would still not strip religious experience of all its evidential value. The debate in the analytic philosophy of religion as it is conducted in the last two decades concerns itself more explicitly with the problem of justifiability of religious beliefs (or their warrant) rather than with the possibility of proving God's existence (and even more so the existence of a specifically theistic God) beginning with the multiplicity of reports of various religious experiences. To be sure, the tradition of Christian philosophy does not know too many examples of conscious attempts to argue from religious experience to the existence of God. However, the more modest claim that religious experience has some cognitive validity, because it makes contribution to the grounds of religious belief in such a way that a person can be justified in holding certain kinds of beliefs about God by virtue of Alstonian 'perception of God', seems to be rather well founded. The arguments of the fiercest critics of the cognitive validity of religious experience, like Gale, Mackie, Proudfoot, Katz or Flew are apparently directed against the strongest claims of defenders of the cognitive value of religious experience, that is against so called arguments from religious experience (for the existence of God), but are insufficient to refute the weaker claim, that religious beliefs may be considered *rationaly justified* by virtue of their being grounded in religious experience, in analogy to perceptual beliefs being grounded in ordinary sense perception.

WARTOŚĆ POZNAWCZA DOŚWIADCZENIA RELIGIJNEGO

Streszczenie

W centrum toczącej się aktualnie w środowisku filozofii analitycznej debaty nad epistemicznym statusem doświadczenia religijnego znajduje się spór między obrońcami jego poznawczej wartości, takimi jak W. P. Alston i W. J. Wainwright, oraz licznymi autorami odmawiającymi mu epistemicznej wiarygodności.

Punktem odniesienia w dyskusji jest stanowisko Williama Jamesa, który opierając się na bogatych danych empirycznych doszedł do wniosku, że niektórych fenomenów uznawanych za doświadczenie religijne nie sposób wyjaśnić odwołując się do społecznych czy psychologicznych aspektów religii i dlatego należy je uznać za doświadczenie obiektywnej Rzeczywistości Boskiej. James postawił ponadto tezę, że instytucjonalny kontekst określonej religii czy wyznania, jak i zracjonalizowany system teologicznych pojęć, które ukształtowały podmiot doświadczenia, odgrywają przy próbie zrozumienia natury doświadczenia religijnego drugorzędną rolę, gdyż są ostatecznie jedynie narzędziami interpretacji poprzedzającego ją chronologicznie i logicznie przeżycia bezpośredniego kontaktu podmiotu z Rzeczywistością Boską.

Tę właśnie tezę odrzucają tzw. konstruktywiści (np. T. S. Katz i W. Proudfoot), którzy bazując na specyficznej interpretacji transcendentalnego idealizmu I. Kanta utrzymują, że każdy przypadek doświadczenia religijnego da się w pełni wyjaśnić w naturalistyczny sposób, odwołując się do pojęciowego kontekstu tegoż doświadczenia i przecząc jakoby doświadczenie religijne miało jakikolwiek metafizycznie transcendentny przedmiot. Konstruktywiści stawiają tezę, że nie ma w ogóle czegoś takiego jako 'czyste' doświadczenie, które nie byłoby zapośredniczone w społecznym, językowym i konceptualnym kontekście, w którym funkcjonuje podmiot doświadczenia, i w związku z tym doświadczenie zawsze jest ukształtowane przez uprzednie oczekiwania podmiotu, jego obraz rzeczywistości itd., i to do tego stopnia, że doświadczenie może być całkowicie wytworem tegoż kontekstu i nie posiadać żadnego obiektywnego przedmiotu.

Główne założenie konstruktywistów, że nie może istnieć 'czyste' doświadczenie wydaje się jednak być pozbawione podstaw. Fenomenologiczne analizy W. P. Alstona wskazują na to, że bezpośrednia świadomość obecności jakiegoś przedmiotu doświadczenia religijnego jest możliwa i nie musi być ona w ogóle zapośredniczona w konceptualnym czy instytucjonalnym kontekście podmiotu. Konceptualizacja pojawia się

bowiem dopiero na etapie interpretacji i jest chronologicznie i logicznie późniejsza od samej konfrontacji podmiotu z przedmiotem doświadczenia. Konstruktywiści popełniają błąd sądząc, że ponieważ interpretacja doświadczenia dokonuje się zazwyczaj w kluczu pojęć, którymi podmiot dysponował, zanim doświadczenie miało miejsce, to samo doświadczenie musi być jakoś 'filtrowane' przez tę siatkę pojęć.

Redukcjonistyczni krytycy kognitywnej wartości doświadczenia religijnego interpretują je w kategoriach psychicznej dewiacji lub błędu poznawczego inspirowanego przez społeczny czy intelektualny kontekst podmiotu. Redukcjonisci pielęgnują zazwyczaj ciągle żywe tradycje K. Marxa i S. Freuda, a jeszcze częściej nawiązują do scjentyistycznego ducha pozytywizmu logicznego (przykładem wpływowy J. L. Mackie) w przekonaniu, że 'naukowe' wyjaśnienie fenomenu religii w ogólności, a doświadczenia religijnego w szczególności jest konkluzywne i jednoznacznie negatywne.

Wśród popularnych zarzutów mamy też ten, który za punkt wyjścia bierze niezaprzeczalny fakt rozbieżnych i wykluczających się wzajemnie interpretacji doświadczenia religijnego w różnych religiach. Zarzut ten opiera się na założeniu, że skoro różne podmioty rzekomego doświadczenia religijnego nie mogą się zgodzić co do opisu przedmiotu owych doświadczeń, to należy uznać, że wszystkie one są iluzją, albo w najlepszym razie mają bardzo niski stopień epistemicznej wiarygodności i nie mogą służyć za uzasadnienie racjonalnie żywionych przekonań religijnych. To założenie jest jednak z gruntu fałszywe. Istnieją różnorakie konstrukcje epistemologiczne, które starają się wyjaśnić, jak to jest możliwe, że podmioty doświadczenia religijnego wywodzące się z różnych tradycji religijnych z niezwykle regularnością interpretują swoje doświadczenia w sposób rozbieżny. Oczywiście, zawsze do rozważenia pozostaje teza, że niektóre doświadczenia są istotnie iluzoryczne, a inne nimi nie są.

W niniejszym artykule, występując w obronie kognitywnej wartości doświadczenia religijnego i podejmując próbę odparcia poszczególnych zarzutów, sugeruje się, że za szczególnie atrakcyjny model epistemologiczny doświadczenia religijnego należałoby uznać ten, który podkreśla analogię między doświadczeniem religijnym i zwyczajną praktyką percepcji zmysłowej. Aplikacja takiego modelu stawia doświadczenie religijne w 'sytuacji epistemicznej' podobnej do percepcji zmysłowej z wszystkimi jej zaletami i wadami. Jedną z konsekwencji takiego ujęcia jest to, że dostarcza ono racjonalnego uzasadnienia dla przekonań religijnych opartych na doświadczeniu religijnym, pozwalając uznać je za racjonalne, ale jednocześnie czyni trudną obronę silniejszej tezy o możliwości skonstruowania jakiegokolwiek 'dowodu' z doświadczenia religijnego na istnienie Boga ze względu na rozbieżne rozumienie pojęcia Absolutu w różnych religiach.