

Can We Trust
Religious Experience
To Help Us Know God?

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The question of how much trust we can place in ‘religious experience’ is a subject of ongoing discussion. William P. Alston takes a position supporting the concept that religious experience does provide knowledge about God when he writes

I want to explore and *defend* the idea that the experience, or, as I shall say, the *perception* of God plays an epistemic role with respect to beliefs about God importantly analogous to that play by sense perception with respect to beliefs about the physical world.¹

In our everyday lives we experience *sense perception* continuously throughout the day. We consider sense perception to be that information that we take in by our five basic senses of touch, taste, smell, seeing, and hearing. We tend to interpret these sense perceptions as very concrete experiences. I can tell you and describe to you what I touch, taste, smell, see, and hear. Thus, we tend to think of sense perception as fairly objective.

Religious experience, on the other hand, we tend to see as very subjective. The same experience can be received very differently by different people. In fact, what one person interprets as a religious experience may be completely explained by science for another person. There seems to be sort of an insider’s knowledge to *having* and *understanding* religious experience. Thus, we consider religious experience as very subjective.

Alston begins to use the phrase ‘experience of God’ but then he changes it to “*perception* of God.” What he rightly argues for is that the way we use religious experience is not all that different from the way we use our sense perception to gain knowledge about what we perceive or experience. He wants us to realize that experience and perception are not all that different.

The *Infoplease* dictionary defines perception as “the act or faculty of apprehending by means of the senses or of the mind.”² Clearly, in perception the senses are important. The same

¹ I add the emphasis on the word ‘defend’ to demonstrate Alston’s positive position on the argument. William P. Alston, “Perceiving God,” in R. Martin – Ch. Bernard (Eds.), *God Matters. Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*. New York 2003, 375-381, 376.

² Infoplease.com, s.v. “Perception,” <http://www.infoplease.com/ipd/A0583371.html>, accessed October 4, 2006.

dictionary then defines *apprehend* as “to grasp the meaning of.”³ So, even sense perception involves some understanding. *Experience* is defined as “the process or fact of personally observing, encountering, or undergoing something.”⁴ Both ‘perception’ and ‘experience’ involve our encounter with the world.

Religious experience tends to be something that we describe in terms of our senses but it is not always apprehended by means of the senses. Religious experience can be more a matter of the soul or the mind. The definition of perception above does not exclude this. Rather, it includes that which we apprehend by the mind.

Above, I described how we tend to think of our sense perceptions as objective and religious experience as subjective. As Alston said, clearly both lead us to “knowledge,” whether it be objective or subjective. I freely admit what we describe as sense perception tends to be more objective than that which we describe as religious experience. We, then tend to interpret this to mean the knowledge from sense perception is more reliable. However, I wish to point out that even our sense perception requires *subjective* interpretation. Kasper writes, “Experience is not be reduced to something purely objective or to something purely subjective.”⁵ For example, when I touch a stove that is on, I know is hot, because I can feel it. I do not think anyone would argue that a stove that is on is hot. Yet, who defines it as hot? Is 50^oF hot or 70^oF or 90^oF or 110^oF? While the interpretation of ‘hot’ may be a common temperature, it is nonetheless a subjective definition. Likewise, much of our sense perception requires some degree of subjective interpretation before it can give us knowledge about what we perceive.

I echo the words of Alston when he writes

³ Infoplease.com, s.v. “Apprehend,” <http://www.infoplease.com/ipd/A0322173.html>. Accessed October 4, 2006.

⁴ Infoplease.com, s.v. “Experience,” <http://www.infoplease.com/ipd/A0432214.html>. Accessed October 4, 2006.

⁵ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*. Trans. By Matthew J. O’Connell. New York: Herder & Herder, The Crossroad Publishing Company. ©1984, printed 2005, 82.

I don't want to deny either the existence of these differences or the importance of these differences. I want to deny only that they have the alleged bearing on the epistemic situation.⁶

Indeed there are differences. Religious experience tends to be a different level of 'experiencing' than sense perception, particularly in the abstractness of religious experience. While that which we perceive as sense perception is received through the physical body, as Kasper writes, "The experience of God takes place in the heart."⁷ However, just as our sense perception tells us something about our physical world, our religious experiences tell us something about God.

Alston then turns to the question of the "exclusiveness" of religious experience. Some people wish to question the reliability of religious experience because it is not "accessible" to everyone. Two questions arise here. First, is "religious experience" not accessible to all, i.e. for a chosen few, or is it available to all. Secondly, if some specialized knowledge is required to understand it, is that any different than specialized knowledge, say in the medical field or astrophysics?

The first question of accessibility for all is not unfounded question. In speaking of God, Job says, "Should he come near me, I see him not; should he pass by, I am not aware of him."⁸ If God does not wish to be seen, then he cannot be seen. Who does God allow to see him? In the Old Testament, the Israelites are a chosen people. They enjoy a *special* relationship with God. However, it would not appear to be an exclusive relationship. For example, during a drought Elijah goes to stay with a widow who lives outside Israel.⁹ In the New Testament salvation is made open to all. As John the Baptist begins his mission in Luke 3:1ff, we are

⁶ Alston, *Perceiving God*, 378.

⁷ Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ.*, 82.

⁸ Job 9:11. All biblical citations from the *New American Bible*.

⁹ 1 Kings 17:1-24

reminded of the passage from Isaiah “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”¹⁰ In the Gospel of Matthew, the last words of the Resurrected Jesus are “Go, therefore, and make disciples of *all nations*.”¹¹ God does not limit accessibility to him. However, we may limit our own accessibility to God if we fail to be open to the experience.

The second question of specialized knowledge is a different question. If the specialized knowledge is available to all, it does not limit its function as a universal possibility. Anyone who wishes to can learn the required background. In this sense, some religious experiences do require specialized knowledge. This is a simple fact of life that knowledge must be learned in progressive increments. We must realize, as Kasper writes

That experience never takes place at an isolated point of time through the here-and-know digestion of momentary perceptions. Experiential knowledge emerges, rather, from repeated and increasingly proficient intercourse with reality.¹²

For example, an eighteen year old who wishes to be a doctor does not immediately advance to the final year of medical school. Rather, before beginning medical school, the student first completes elementary school, high school, and an undergraduate degree before entering medical school. Perhaps this is one of the key differences between sense perception and religious experience. While our interpretation of sense perception depends on our previous experiences, it is more closely about a specific moment. When we speak of religious experience, what we describe may relate to a moment in time but it can also be the sum of all our faith and knowledge of God encapsulated in one experience.

Likewise, the reliability of knowledge is not diminished if only a few people know it. For example, even within the medical field there are specializations. Only a limited number of doctors specialize in cardiology. However, we do not question the reliability of their medical

¹⁰ Luke 3:6, Isaiah 40:3-5

¹¹ My emphasis, Matthew 28:19.

¹² Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 82.

knowledge just because not everyone has the same knowledge. Likewise, some theology is known by only a few theologians. However, many people may benefit from the knowledge of a limited few.

In the end, Alston is arguing that religious experience does lead us to knowledge of God. Kasper writes, “Like all knowledge, the knowledge of God requires a basis in experience.”¹³ Kasper further writes, “The first and traditional formulation of the relation says: faith comes from hearing (Rom 10:17) . . . The second and basically modernistic definition of the relation says: faith is an expression of religious experience.”¹⁴ Religious experience leads us to faith, which is relationship to God. Then, in turn our faith leads us to further understand our experience. Thus, one of the pieces of specialization required to understand religious experience is some concept of faith. As created in the image of God, we all have the seed of faith that opens up the possibility of religious experience.

In conclusion, is religious experience known to all *equally*? No. Is it open to all? Yes. Are we all open to religious experience? No. Yet, none of that denies that our religious experiences do indeed tell us about God. The question of reliability of religious experience is not so much a question of reliability of the experience as it is a question of reliability of how one interprets what one experiences. A person may grow up in a home where they are abused by their dad. From this, they may develop a belief in God as a punishing God. This is not a question of how they have experienced God but a question of how their past experiences and preconceptions shape their image of God.

¹³ Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 78.

¹⁴ Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, 80.

Likewise, the cardiologist, who has a rare knowledge, is not always reliable as a doctor. This is not necessarily a question of the knowledge they have but rather their interpretation of the situation and circumstances.

Certainly the common religious experience of a large number of people can be deemed more credible than the experience of one. Yet, for that one person, their experience still tells something about God. Is he a loving God, a compassionate God, how does he allow himself to be seen to us? Only our religious experience in light of scripture and tradition can answer that question. Indeed, religious experience leads us to knowledge about God.

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