

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE,  
JUSTIFICATION, AND  
HISTORY

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*Introduction: spectral evidences*

The whole business is become hereupon so *sarled*, and the determination of the Question one way or another, so *dismal*, that our Honourable Judges have a Room for *Jehoshaphat's* Exclamation, *We know not what to do!* They have used, as Judges heretofore have done, the *Spectral Evidences*, to introduce their further Enquiries into the *Lives* of the persons accused; and they have thereupon, by the wonderful Providence of God, been so strengthened with *other evidences*, that some of the *Witch Gang* have been fairly Executed.

Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692)<sup>1</sup>

Ever since Schleiermacher exalted feeling when addressing religion's "cultured despisers," apologists have periodically exploited religious experience. With all the more traditional avenues of theism's defense generally in disrepute, modern theologians and religious philosophers have repeatedly sought to justify religious belief rationally by reference to the individual's experience. Charles Darwin in 1876 remarked on the prevalence of this strategy. "At the present day the most usual argument for the existence of an intelligent God is drawn from the deep inward conviction and feelings which are experienced by most persons."<sup>2</sup> This argument left Darwin rightfully unpersuaded. Experience has recently once again, however, become the focus of those aiming to vindicate the rationality of religious belief. This time the apologists hail from the ranks of

<sup>1</sup> *Cotton Mather on Witchcraft* (New York: Dorset Press, 1991), p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, Nora Barlow, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969), p. 90.

analytic philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Increasingly, we find philosophers defending the justification of theistic beliefs based on extraordinary experiences (so-called “perceptions of God”). In this study I concentrate on this latter-day revival and ultimately deny that religious experiences rationally justify religious beliefs.

Both of the central concepts in this discussion, experience and justification, reward careful scrutiny. The philosophers sympathetic to an experiential justification of theism subscribe to congenial analyses of experience and justification. They stake out a position on each which, when taken together, license beliefs based on extraordinary religious experience. My inquiries into a proper understanding of experience and justification bring to the fore two features suppressed or ignored in this prevailing philosophical approach to religious experience: explanation and historical context.

First, I emphasize the ubiquity of explanation in both experience and justification. Experience is, and justification should be, informed by commitments about what constitutes the best explanation of the phenomena in question. Experience exhibits explanatory logic; we experience what we (usually unreflectively) suppose the best explanation of the experiential situation. Similarly, in justifying our beliefs about some domain, we should refer to our best overall explanatory account relevant to that domain. In a philosophical account of justification, to isolate it from explanation artificially segregates our epistemic resources. The apologetic character of much previous philosophical literature on religious experience accounts for its tendency to marginalize explanation; properly attending to the explanatory element in these issues opens the door to unsympathetic explanations.

<sup>3</sup> To name a few: William Alston, *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), ch. 13; Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), ch. 5; Keith Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Jerome Gellman, *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

Second (in part, because of the contextually conditioned nature of “good” explanations), I stress the paramount importance of historical and cultural context for philosophical inquiry about religious experience. The analytic style of the previous literature helps account for its tendency to pay little attention to historical, linguistic, and cultural context. Analytic philosophy generally neglects context. Indeed, it calls to mind Nietzsche’s ironical observation, “As is the hallowed custom with philosophers, the thinking of all of them is *by nature* unhistorical.”<sup>4</sup> When applied to religious experience, an analytic approach usually includes a few excerpts from different cultures or historical periods which serve merely to exemplify a “type” of experience. Such passages spin their wheels; rarely do the philosophers engage the texts in any deep way. A disciplinary parochialism within the humanities results whereby philosophers regularly laud philosophical works about religious experience which scholars of religion dismiss as inaccurate and anachronistic. Sampling the reviews of Nelson Pike’s recent *Mystic Union*, ironically a book intended to surmount these weaknesses, reveals a case in point.<sup>5</sup> McGinn, the historian of Christian spirituality, objects that “Pike’s account of Christian mysticism is at least as seriously limited and erroneous as those he criticizes” and claims that “it would be difficult to find a more recent expression of so outdated and narrow a view.”<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Wainwright, a philosopher, declares *Mystic Union* “the best book of its kind to have appeared since . . . the early part of the century. It is superior . . . in its analytic acumen and philosophical sophistication.”<sup>7</sup> The same disciplinary insularity which results in potted history and shallow textual interpretation on the philosophers’ part conversely leads many scholars of religion to discount the questions addressed by the philosophers. To remedy this situation (for, as the epigraph evinces, I believe the philosophical questions potentially have tremendous

<sup>4</sup> *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, trs. (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), p. 25. Italics original.

<sup>5</sup> Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. I discuss the shortcomings of Pike’s hermeticism in chapter 6.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard McGinn, *The Journal of Religion*, 74 (1994), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> William Wainwright, *Faith and Philosophy*, 11 (1994), p. 495.

practical importance), I bring to the philosophical discussion of religious experience the full weight of an historicism and a careful study of one prominent Christian mystic: Saint Teresa of Avila. In Emerson's words, "Man is explicable by nothing less than all his history."

Few terms have as many incompatible uses as "historicism." I employ it to call attention to an unexceptional relativism which allows for communication and rational commensuration between historical contexts but fully recognizes the extent of the difference and discontinuity between them. "Historicism" as I define it reminds us that *serious attention to history is integral to textual or philosophical understanding*. This dark saying requires some explication. First, I do not mean to say that serious attention to history is necessary for *any* textual or philosophical inquiry. The relative importance of history will depend on our interests. I rest with the minimal claim that historical study provides insight not necessarily available otherwise. Second, my historicism does not necessarily hold that history is integral to *solving* philosophical problems. One familiar stance today maintains that serious attention to history sometimes enables us to *dissolve* or dismiss philosophical problems. In my chapter on justification, I rely on historical understanding in this way to evade a whole range of standard issues in the analysis of justification that I link to a long-obsolete obsession with skepticism. The overall argument of this book, however, uses historical understanding to answer straightforwardly, rather than evade, the philosophical question about the experiential justification of religious beliefs. Third, the history referred to in "historicism" can be either philosophical history or cultural and social history. I rely on both in my arguments. Fourth, by the admittedly uninformative phrase "serious attention to history" I mean that historicism should try (as much as possible) to view the historical data in light of the concerns of the subjects of history, rather than viewing the data in light of contemporary preoccupations. The understanding of a text or philosophical problem which historical research can offer derives from this insight into the relatively alien.

In chapters 2 and 3 I present my case for the centrality of

explanation and historicism to experience and justification respectively. Chapter 2, “The explanation in experience and the explanation of experience,” compares the fuller account of experience William James offers in his *Principles of Psychology* with remarks he makes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In arguing that the *Varieties* does not present as accurate nor as subtle a picture as the *Principles*, I adopt a view of experience wherein expectation and cognition play a crucial role. Expanding on some passages in James, I describe experience as including implicit explanatory commitments, commitments about the best explanation of the experience’s cause. We experience what we suppose the best explanation of an event or series of events impinging on us. Obviously, the best available explanation will largely depend on context.

I must qualify my description of experience as including an inference to the best explanation. I do not mean that all experience includes conscious consideration of evidence leading to an adopted conclusion. Nor do I mean that experience relies on deductive argument. Rather, I do mean that experience includes tacit commitments as to how best to interpret a stimulus. These commitments rarely reach the light of day. The logic of experience comes most completely to light when we realize we have erred in a perception and can then view our mistaken presumptions. Historical allies of mine have occasionally referred to the explanatory character of experience as “unconscious inference.” James astutely notes that this phrase sounds so preposterous because the process usually functions through habit. We must remember, moreover, to disambiguate phenomenological immediacy from epistemic immediacy. Much of our experience, unlike memory or cogitation, exhibits phenomenological immediacy or givenness. We usually do not *feel* ourselves bringing our background beliefs and commitments to bear on our experience. This fact does not mean, however, that experience is immediate in any sense that excludes the considerable influence of our epistemic background on it. The hypothesis of epistemic immediacy does not, in fact, comprise the best explanation of the cognitive mechanism of experience.

Explanation I construe as description relevant to a set of circumstances. I have in mind no conception of explanation as satisfying formal criteria. I understand explanation as a pragmatic notion, subordinating its structure to the uses mandated by the thinker's interests, and allowing the standards for an acceptable explanation to vary with a community of inquirers' interests. Roughly, an explanation answers a "why-question." For something to count as an explanation, the why-question need not be explicit, consciously recognized nor especially profound. In this sense, every experience answers a tacit why-question about sensory stimuli.

In chapter 3, "Justification by reasons alone," I explore the intuitions motivating the philosophical use of the term "justification," the seeming focal point for those debating the rationality of religious belief. A copious literature has grown around the explication of the concept. Naturally, a philosopher's intuition about justification depends on the epistemology of which it forms a part. I argue here that the early modern worry about skepticism continues to guide the discussion. Abjuring those concerns allows the philosophical use of "justification" to resemble more closely its non-philosophical uses. A justified belief is one for which someone has offered explanatory reasons, reasons that contribute to the best overall explanatory account of the relevant phenomena. Evidential goodness, on this view, presupposes explanatory goodness. I characterize a justified belief as one for which the reasons offered exemplify the good in the way of belief. Clearly, this conception of justification involves judgment. We must judge the goodness of reasons. Furthermore, judgments of goodness presuppose values. This conception of justification presupposes social standards for acceptability, reflecting shared epistemic values. I view our epistemic values as one species, alongside others like ethical values, constituting our conception of human flourishing. If one claims an experience justifies a belief, I argue, one must make its implicit explanation explicit and submit it to debate based on shared values.

In the next two chapters, which do not directly contribute to my positive argument, I undertake limited engagements against



two recent philosophical works in the philosophy of religious experience. In chapter 4, “Perennialism revisited,” I contend with Robert Forman’s defense of a type of experience entirely unaffected by the subject’s prior background beliefs. Forman challenges Steven Katz and promotes the possibility of a trans-cultural experience of pure consciousness, a waking, non-intentional consciousness.<sup>8</sup> He maintains that mystics in many traditions have perfected techniques for achieving experience unclouded by cognitive activity. Naturally, these different mystics enjoy the qualitatively identical experience because their differing background beliefs and expectations do not operate in this pure consciousness.

Forman’s work ostensibly has little to do with religion *per se* because contentless consciousness cannot have an intrinsic religious importance; religious importance could only enter with a religious interpretation of this pure consciousness. The great interest his work generates stems in part, I think, from the central role the possibility of unmediated experience plays in the justification of religious beliefs. Forman himself notes that for some scholars “a transcultural perennial philosophy ... supported an argument for the existence of a (variously defined) divinity on the basis of experience.”<sup>9</sup> Unmediated experience occupies such a place of prominence in discussions of religious experience because if other background beliefs or cognitions enter into the experience, then the justification conferred on the experiential beliefs depends at least in part on the background beliefs. When exploring the rationality of religious beliefs generally, the apologist cannot then, without vicious circularity, use the experiential evidence to justify the beliefs. Unmediated experience amounts to a protective strategy, whereby the scholar can “bracket” significant considerations to render the religious claims more convincing.<sup>10</sup>

In chapter 5, “The miracle of minimal foundationalism,” I

<sup>8</sup> Robert K. C. Forman (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> In this book I frequently use the term “protective strategy” borrowed from Wayne Proudfoot’s book *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). I mean to employ it in a manner analogous to the specific sense outlined in his work.

address the work of William Alston (among others) who has provided the most nuanced and thoughtful version of an epistemological argument justifying religious beliefs based on direct perceptions of God. Alston's position works as a foil not only for my theory of justification, but also for my project as a whole. On his theory, the human epistemic makeup relies on a multitude of socially established doxastic practices, or belief-forming mechanisms. We cannot justify our doxastic practices, he sensibly maintains, in a non-circular manner. We cannot, for example, support our beliefs formed on the basis of sense perception without further recourse to sense perception. These doxastic practices nevertheless constitute the basic sources of *prima facie* justified beliefs (subject to defeat). Because none of our generally reliable belief-forming mechanisms has a more secure justification than any other, we cannot use the standards of one practice to indict another. Alston portrays the non-sensory perception of God as one of our basic, but unjustifiable, doxastic practices. To employ the criteria appropriate to sensory perception in order to judge religious perception unsatisfactory amounts to an unfair privileging of the characteristics of one practice over another. Doxastic practices thereby counter a whole range of standard objections to the argument from religious experience.

If, for example, we seek to debunk religious perception because it doesn't evince the sort of universal distribution enjoyed by sensory perception, we illicitly use the traits of one practice to judge another. Alston here parries those like Darwin who, farther into the passage I quoted above, rejects an analogy between religious experience and sense perception.

It may be truly said that I am like a man who has become colour-blind, and the universal belief by men of the existence of redness makes my present loss of perception of not the least value as evidence. This argument would be a valid one if all men of all races had the same inward conviction of the existence of one God; but we know that this is very far from being the case. Therefore I cannot see that such

He describes those who reject the explanatory reduction of religion as attempting "to preclude critical inquiry from outside the religious life" (p. xvi).

inward convictions and feelings are of any weight as evidence of what really exists.<sup>11</sup>

Darwin argues that the parochial character of religious experience vitiates any analogy with sense perception. Alston's doxastic practice approach attempts to preserve the analogy while disarming the significant disanalogies. As a result he licenses the isolation of our different sources of belief from one another. Obviously, he employs his epistemology as a protective strategy.

Although seemingly discrete issues, the possibility, raised by Forman, of pure consciousness shares both content and strategy with the attempt by Alston and others to justify religious beliefs by recourse to religious experience. They both arbitrarily narrow the scope of the experiences they consider in order to render their contentions more plausible. Forman distinguishes hallucinations, visions, and auditions from what Roland Fischer calls "trophotropic" states marked by low levels of cognitive and physiological activity. He limits his discussion to only these non-sensory, introvertive experiences. Alston, for his part, limits his aim to justifying beliefs based on non-sensory perceptions or awarenesses of God acting in some relation to the mystic. He excludes the types of experiences that Forman considers and also excludes the sensory sorts of experiences which Forman likewise shuns. By focusing on such specific agendas, they give the impression of greater unanimity between the mystical traditions than a broader sampling would suggest.

Additionally, Forman and Alston, despite the epistemological niceties of their theories, finally resort to intuition as a court of last appeal. They grant the fact that someone undergoes an extraordinary experience far too much weight in assessing the experience. This failing results from neglecting adequately to distinguish the event which causes an experience from the first-person experience of the event. Forman, for instance, in labeling contentless consciousness a "Pure Consciousness *Event*" (italics added), rather than a "Pure Consciousness *Experience*," lends the experience of putative pure consciousness greater authority. The insistence on unmediated experience

<sup>11</sup> Darwin, *Autobiography*, p. 91.

forms another case in point. Both Forman and Alston argue from the phenomenological immediacy of an experience, that it feels unmediated, to its actual epistemic immediacy, that it provides a source of evidential grounds at least relatively independent of background beliefs. In speaking of similar confusions, William James coined the phrase “the psychologist’s fallacy.” It occurs when psychologists impute their knowledge of a phenomenon to the mental state of the subjects. They introduce their explanations into the others’ descriptions. These methods, shared by Forman and Alston, contribute to the carapace which privileges the claims of the mystics and fends off explanation from outside the religious life.

The protective intentions prevalent in the philosophy of mysticism finally shine most clearly in the repeated injunction to treat the mystics’ claims as “innocent until proven guilty.” This maxim follows from the epistemologies many contemporary philosophers promote, but plays to apologetic aims as well. The judicial conceit, gaining plausibility, no doubt, from its resonance with Plato’s canonical *Apology*, enjoys a durable and prominent history in the philosophy of religion, first appearing no later than Thomas Sherlock’s 1729 *The Tryal of the Witnesses of the Resurrection of Jesus*. By setting his dialogue as a court proceeding, Sherlock effectively shifts the onus of proof onto the religious skeptic. With religious believers literally on trial, it seems natural for the skeptic to bear the burden of proof; the believer need only provide a defense. The counsel for the defense argues, “And this I take to be the known Method of proceeding in such Cases; no Man is obliged to produce his Title to his Possession; it is sufficient if he maintains it when it is called in question.”<sup>12</sup> Beliefs remain innocent until proven guilty. Sherlock cleverly extends juridical conventions beyond their accepted range of application and imports them into the philosophy of religion. This apologetic tactic has proved successful and is increasingly common. In the coming chapters I will subject to scrutiny the epistemological credentials for this

<sup>12</sup> London, p. 7.

incursion and (to speak in terms of the metaphor) restore the burden of proof to the theist.

In contrast to Forman and Alston, I would like to portray experience as something that includes inference (of a sort) from previous beliefs and commitments, something which we need not take at face value and which we can critique in light of our wider cultural values. Justification includes judgment informed by values and debate in light of values. I contest accounts of justification which obviate the giving of reasons. We would not, then, want to grant controversial beliefs based on religious experience *prima facie* justification as does Alston. Nor would we necessarily want to accept either the mystic's claims to contentless consciousness or the philosopher's claims to unmediated experience because such a claim itself represents an explanation which we might not accept as the best explanation of the event. I contend we can best profit from an account of religious experience and its evidential potential that attends to, rather than obscures, the values informing it. One important consequence of this view suggests that different cultures and historical epochs can take different stances regarding the justification of certain beliefs. Jeffrey Stout argues in defense of this position that "the rationality of a given person's beliefs or actions is relative to the reasons or reasoning available to that person. And the availability of reasons and reasoning varies with historical and social context."<sup>13</sup> A belief justified in an earlier age may no longer be justified today because of the very different epistemic commitments we hold in light of our evolving values.

As I made clear, I view explanation as the paramount factor in both the production of experience and the justification of beliefs. In addition, however, I also view explanation as fundamental to the epistemic character of an era. The sorts of explanations and the assessments of explanations uncontroversially accepted in an era reveal much about the epistemic values of the culture. In the last chapter, "Modernity and its discontents," I attempt to elucidate the epistemic values of two

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *The Flight from Authority* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 168.

different eras, the late medieval and the contemporary, by reference to the explanatory commitments they evince. I attempt to defend the conclusion that although religious experiences might well have justified religious beliefs at other points in Western history (had anyone conceived of employing them that way), in our contemporary context with our ultimate values and explanatory commitments, they can no longer do so. I must of necessity preserve a certain degree of vagueness in describing cultural values and commitments because we cannot boil a rich, embodied culture down to hard, skeletal criteria of rationality. I must also insist that I do not deny that both the medieval and the modern mystical perceiver belong to communities that validate for them their beliefs and provide them with interpretations of their experience. Both sets of experiences exhibit a grammar and make sense within a context and community. I contend that, given the present condition of Western culture, the explanations of experience licensed and encouraged in some sub-communities within the modern West nonetheless fail to exemplify the culture's larger commitments and values. The implicit religious explanation of religious experience no longer represents the best explanation of the event experienced religiously.

A religious perception of the sort singled out by Alston includes a commitment to a supernatural cause as the best explanation. The first section of the last chapter illustrates how even Alston's theory surreptitiously trades in supernatural explanations. The next section summarizes the results of the previous chapter where I carefully map out the mystical path as Teresa of Avila describes it. (In chapter 6, I depict her social setting and try to recount her thought and experiences comprehensively without distorting them through selective attention.) To read Teresa as justifying her beliefs through her experiences anachronistically misinterprets her testimony (if anything she justified her experiences through her beliefs). The point here, however, is to highlight the supernatural explanations she employs and to indicate that supernatural explanations were acceptable and informative for her and her contemporaries.

The final section argues that supernatural explanations no

longer represent good explanations. Claiming that self-assertion represents the defining feature of the modern world-view, I try here to demonstrate why supernatural explanations are both empty and unacceptable to us. Self-assertion denotes the tendency to judge our thought in accord with our own plans and by standards we ourselves set rather than by trying to satisfy God's plan. I argue that in a culture with this commitment to self-assertion, and the understanding of the supernatural/natural bifurcation implicit in natural laws, we can never assert that, in principle, an event resists naturalistic explanation. A perfectly substantiated, anomalous event, rather than providing evidence for the supernatural, merely calls into question our understanding of particular natural laws. In the modern era, this position fairly accurately represents the educated response to novelty. Rather than invoke the supernatural, we can always adjust our knowledge of the natural in extreme cases. In the modern age in actual inquiry, we never reach the point where we throw up our hands and appeal to divine intervention to explain a localized event like an extraordinary experience.

This claim represents something more than a simple sociological observation; it carries normative weight. The advent of this form of self-assertion, furthermore, appears irreversible. While supernatural explanations might conceivably become culturally prevalent once more, there could be no foreseeable warrant for invoking them. We could have no good reason for asserting that an event, in principle, resists naturalistic explanation. The changes in our beliefs and values necessary to render supernatural explanations rationally acceptable again are so radical as to make such a circumstance unimaginable. To borrow Charles Taylor's idiom, self-assertion has become, through a "ratchet effect," a permanent feature of developed human potential.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, I believe that although Teresa may have been justified in the beliefs she gained through her religious experiences, in our historical context, the implicit supernatural explanation of an experience can never be judged justified in the social sense I explicate as the best explanation.

<sup>14</sup> "Comparison, History, Truth," in *Myth and Philosophy*, Frank E. Reynolds and David Trac, eds. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), p. 52.

My approach to experience and justification centers on explanation and ultimately my position on mystical perception turns on my rejection of supernatural explanations. Essentially, I believe the whole issue concerning the justificatory value of extraordinary religious experience reduces to the equally live debate about the acceptability of supernatural explanations. A recent textbook in the philosophy of religion has come to this same conclusion:

If religious experience is shaped by each person's concepts and beliefs, how can we determine which account – the natural or the supernatural – provides the best explanation . . . ? Let us suppose that Jane, as a strict naturalist, does not believe in God. Will not the imposition of Jane's own belief systems or her explanation of Joe's experience merely juxtapose belief structures, so that ultimately one cannot decide which explanation – naturalistic or supernaturalistic – is correct? This becomes clear when Proudfoot assigns the analyst the task of trying to ferret out why people who have had religious experiences understand them as they do and contends that "what we want is a historical or cultural explanation." This assignment begs the question concerning which belief system provides the appropriate framework for explaining the events, for why should one assume that a historical or cultural explanation is more to the point than a supernatural or theistic one?<sup>15</sup>

The authors want to know why, if we have competing explanations of an event, the naturalistic explanation takes precedence. They ask this question rhetorically. Similarly, Philip Clayton, in *Explanation from Physics to Theology*, limits the topic of his book and stops short of answering "the question of how rational it is to appeal to religious explanations in the modern world."<sup>16</sup> I intend to answer both these questions.

Edward Schoen in his 1985 book, *Religious Explanations*, lays down the gauntlet which I pick up in the last chapter. He defends the legitimacy of supernatural explanations of spatio-temporal events, but also allows that modernity somehow raises suspicions about supernatural explanations. "The simple possibility of formulating such explanations along rigidly scientific

<sup>15</sup> Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 132.



lines would lose much, if not all, of its interest,” he concedes, “were it discovered that there is not even the remotest chance that they could prove acceptable to modern, educated people.”<sup>17</sup> Supernatural explanations modeled on scientific explanations carry no weight, he observes, if the whole notion of a supernatural explanation of a spatio-temporal event proves unsatisfactory to the modern. Whereas he formulates this insight in terms of “people,” I prefer to think in terms of cultural values because, sadly, “modern, educated people” all too often cling to patterns of thought and action incompatible with their basic values. With that caveat, the central focus of my work straightforwardly denies the acceptability of supernatural explanations.

Despite the occasional references to natural law and science both here and in the final chapter which might suggest otherwise, I intend my use of “natural” to entail (1) no commitments to a physicalistic ontology; (2) no valorization of the specific methods, vocabularies, presuppositions, or conclusions peculiar to natural science; (3) no view about the reducibility of the mental to the physical; (4) no position on the ontological status of logic or mathematics, and (5) no denial of the possibility of moral knowledge. Beliefs, values, and logical truths, for example, count as natural and folk psychological explanations, therefore, are natural explanations. The concept of the natural, in the sense I use it, has virtually no content except as the definitional correlative to the supernatural, taken here as a transcendent order of reality (and causation) distinct from the mundane order presupposed alike by the natural scientist and the rest of us in our quotidian affairs. My “naturalism” is perhaps best viewed as a variant of what we might refer to as the great New York school of naturalism, represented by such figures as Woodbridge, Dewey, Hook, and Cohen. Sydney Hook, in particular, took great pains to distinguish naturalism from materialism and positivism on the one hand and supernaturalism on the other. He defined naturalism as the view that “the furniture of heaven and earth, the way things are and the

<sup>17</sup> Durham: Duke University Press, p. 82.

way they behave, are best described by the scientific disciplines when the latter are conceived as continuous with, although sometimes critical of, common-sense experience.”<sup>18</sup> Like Hook, I believe that ordinary problem-solving procedures sufficiently characterize naturalism and also serve to undermine the rationality of belief in the supernatural.

The conceptual distinction between the natural and the supernatural has a history, of course, but it is something which we in large part share with Teresa (even if perhaps it is somewhat sharper for us). The notion dates to pre-Christian Greece and Rome and the concept that theologians sometimes designate the “finite supernatural” enjoys a rich medieval heritage.<sup>19</sup> The finite supernatural concerns supernatural beings, qualities, or effects within the finite, created, natural universe. I will argue in the final chapter that although we share these conceptual distinctions with Teresa, our values put us in a position where we cannot make any good epistemic use of the finite supernatural. The supernatural has become explanatorily otiose, a category which has no legitimate application as an explanation of particular events within the mundane order. Its recent reappearance indicates (to echo Hook) a renewed failure of nerve.

I do not, however, consider my position a polemic directed against religious belief. In fact I have little to say about religious belief *per se* or its rationality. Rather, I intend to argue specifically against seeking evidential support for religious belief through the perception of God. In other words, although I have reservations about the supernatural in general, my argument concerns only the finite supernatural. Despite my conclusions and reluctance to address the larger issues of rationality and religious belief, I nonetheless see my work as broadly pertinent for believers. To remain strong and viable religious beliefs must not violate the norms and values we hold concerning epistemic goodness or flourishing. When our religious beliefs contravene

<sup>18</sup> *The Quest For Being* (New York: Delta, 1963), Introduction.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Stinson provides a brief but comprehensive history of the term “supernatural” in “The Finite Supernatural: Theological Perspectives,” *Religious Studies* 9 (1973), pp. 325–337.

our ideal of human flourishing, they can only do so *malgré eux*. To retain a vibrant and healthy belief, the believer should self-critically reflect on the springs of his belief and subject them to scrutiny. Arguments for faith shouldn't fly in the face of our epistemic values, lest the faith become marginalized and idiosyncratic by way of consequence. Ironically, Schleiermacher, the theological figure who lurks in the background of the contemporary interest in religious experience, for these very reasons strongly opposed supernatural explanations of events occurring within the causal nexus. He concluded that when assigning causes to discrete phenomena, "we should abandon the idea of the absolutely supernatural . . ." <sup>20</sup> Recognizing the logic and impetus of modernity, he sought to establish an "eternal covenant" between religion and science whereby "we can . . . allow science the freedom to take into its crucible all facts of interest to us . . ." <sup>21</sup> Otherwise, he felt religion risked becoming isolated from and irrelevant to the animating center of cultural life.

Essentially, I maintain that we shouldn't seek to protect one subset of our beliefs and values from others. Clearly, my advocacy of self-critical scrutiny of the commitments informing our beliefs stems from my values, but self-critical reflection arguably represents one of the central values of modernity, one we would find ourselves at pains to repudiate. In one of his few felicitous phrases, Peirce nicely captures this component of the ethics of belief. "Integrity of belief," he declares, is "more wholesome than any particular belief." <sup>22</sup> This demand for reflective self-criticism, furthermore, can also derive from more traditional, religious scruples about purity and devotion. A central theme in Augustinian strands of Christianity, for instance, is the obligation to scrutinize reflectively the bases and role of one's belief, assessing the honesty, centrality and character of one's religious commitment. Not only do Nietzsche and

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, eds. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1928), p. 183.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *On the "Glaubenslehre,"* James Duke and Francis Fiorenza, trs. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1981), pp. 64–65.

<sup>22</sup> "The Fixation of Belief," *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings*, Philip Wiener, ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1966), p. 111.

Freud, but Augustine, Teresa and Kierkegaard also maintain that religious belief can be culpably self-deceptive. The latter three, therefore, all enjoin self-knowledge as essential to the Christian life. Kierkegaard's elusive term "transparency" gains its content from these concerns about purity. A religious ethics of belief can arrive at the same conclusion as mine: that one shouldn't seek to preserve one's faith at the cost of inconsistencies and protective strategies.<sup>23</sup>

One common and understandable charge I hear levied at me when I profess these views questions my right to judge the beliefs and experiences of others. I seem to offend "postmodern," pluralist sensibilities. How dare I presume to legislate the character of epistemic goodness for others who embrace different beliefs, values, and ideals? I don't completely deny this depiction; I only shun the tone of indignation. Alasdair MacIntyre captured the logic of my stance when in a now famous essay he asserted, "Thus the sceptic is committed to saying that he understands the Christian's use of concepts in a way that the Christian himself does not, and presumably *vice versa*."<sup>24</sup> As I made quite clear when discussing my intuitions about justification, I do wish to find rational ways, invoking our values, to criticize others' beliefs and for others to criticize my beliefs. Without this social element doesn't justification lose its point? If justification obtains solely relative to individuals, then as a notion it doesn't hold much interest.<sup>25</sup>

The claim that we cannot condemn values we do not share, while seemingly a popular stance today, needs further attention.

<sup>23</sup> David Wisdo conducts a suggestive inquiry into an ethics of religious belief that does not rely on evidentialist assumptions in *The Life of Irony and the Ethics of Belief* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, "Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing?," *Rationality*, Bryan Wilson, ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), p. 76. On MacIntyre's view the skeptic claims to know how certain religious concepts, deracinated from the context to which they integrally belonged, have lost their purchase on us.

<sup>25</sup> I make this general point about justification in chapter 3, but the notion that justification is relative to individuals has a distinguished lineage in philosophy of religion. William James's conclusion about the evidential value of mysticism in the mysticism chapter of the *Varieties* gives such an answer and most everyone who has pondered James's conclusions goes away dissatisfied. Plantinga's apologetics result in something like this as well: the religious experience justifies the mystic's beliefs while it need not carry any authority for those who did not undergo the experience.

In fact, I would argue, under many circumstances we do summarily reject values with which we disagree, *but only* when we feel something of importance is at stake. Most of us, I trust, would condemn many of the values informing the religious community once inhabiting Jonestown, Guyana. Our scruples about pluralism don't restrain us much when we consider the consequences of divergent values serious enough. In the case of religious beliefs based on religious perception, we tolerate diversity because of the generally innocuous character of the issues involved. Nothing truly important to us rides on the respective positions espoused in this question. This fact is entirely contingent, however. Cotton Mather reminds us of a context in which a socially established practice of belief formation based on a sort of religious experience had profound civic importance. Moreover, because of the high stakes involved, even he, the ideological bulwark for the witch trials, insists that "spectral evidences" deliver no presumption in favor of the beliefs based on them.<sup>26</sup> Judges should not treat these beliefs as innocent until proven guilty (indeed, to presume the beliefs innocent would be tantamount to presuming the defendants guilty). They must seek evidence of a wholly different nature (i.e. from other practices of belief formation) to corroborate them in the best overall account of the case. The witch trials present an example wherein urgent consequences attend religious perception. They suggest that the indulgence toward religious perception lately recommended remains but a provisional luxury.

Let me draw out the analogy with ethical values further. Remember that ethical and epistemic values both constitute species of the good. Many in our culture embrace values that render the abortion of an unborn human fetus objectionable. Others embrace values that lead them to place greater weight on the well-being of the mother and the quality of the child's life once born. Both groups find social support within communities which share these values. Yet rather than manifesting outrage that one group would legislate about the values of the other

<sup>26</sup> Mather, *Witchcraft*, p. 23.

(though we do hear this complaint), at least a portion of the din raised by the issue represents (quasi-) reasoned argument from shared principles, beliefs, or values to convince the other group of the correctness of their values and beliefs. This underlying and often overlooked agreement serves to make the disagreement intelligible. All partisans to the debate find unjustified homicide abhorrent and support coercive laws preventing it. The pro-life faction believes abortion to be unjustified homicide and therefore supports coercive laws preventing it. Members of the various pro-choice factions, however, either do not believe abortion to be homicide because the fetus is not a person, or they believe it to be justified in some cases. They object, therefore, to coercive laws preventing abortion. But at the bottom of it all, there does lie a right answer (both sides believe at least this much, or they wouldn't evince such wholehearted commitment). Judging from the values we share, there subsists a fact of the matter. We haven't reached the point where we have any satisfying view of this answer and we can't guarantee that we will ever reach agreement about it, but the debate continues.

Likewise, I don't expect my colleagues, invoking a misplaced toleration, to recoil in dismay or censure me for contesting the beliefs of some believers. Stifling inquiry in this repressive manner functions as a powerful and effective protective strategy. Rather, if they disagree, I expect them to argue in defense of their values and explanatory commitments. Let the positions engage from the standpoint of shared values and see what emerges. In the long run reticence serves no purpose other than insulating ourselves against the possibility of cognitive dissonance, a possibility I believe we should willingly risk in pursuit of human flourishing.