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William Abraham

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THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INNER WITNESS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

William J. Abraham

This paper seeks to explore the significance of a specific kind of religious experience for the rationality of religious belief. The context for this is a gap between what is often allowed as rational and what is embraced as certain in the life of faith. The claim to certainty at issue is related to the work and experience of the Holy Spirit; this experience has a structure which is explored phenomenologically. Thereafter various ways of cashing in the epistemic value of the purported claim to certainty are examined.

I

Standard accounts of the rationality of religious belief have two features which seem odd if one views them from the perspective of the saints of the church or even of the mature Christian believer. First, they tend to focus on the very fundamentals of theistic belief. Thus traditionally they deal most conspicuously with belief in God, with perhaps sideglances at the immortality of the soul, or miracles. Secondly, they proceed to defend the rationality of religious belief by recourse to standard deductive or inductive arguments which, if appropriately articulated and evaluated, are taken as underwriting the cognitive respectability of religious belief.

It may seem strange to construe these features of our intellectual history as odd. After all they have a distinguished intellectual pedigree and they seem immediately plausible to most philosophers. Christians are surely theists in that they believe in God; indeed without the claim that God exists Christian theism is radically incomplete. Hence it is only natural and proper that we should focus on the existence of God as the most pivotal issue in the debate about the rationality of religious belief. Moreover, it is surely only right and proper that the rationality of belief in the existence of God should be cast in forms which have long been established as fundamental to rational discourse generally. How else could one proceed to outline the rationality of religious belief? Surely it would be question-begging not to have recourse to standards of rationality which are generally accepted.

Yet both these features of the traditional debate are extremely odd when we think about them more deeply. First, the beliefs that really shape and



determine Christian intellectual identity and existence are much more precise and specific than belief in God. They are constituted by profound convictions about the person of Christ, about the mysterious reality of the Holy Trinity, about the presence of the Holy Spirit in one's life, about the possibility and reality of forgiveness, about the existence of one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and the like. It is these rather than some minimalist theism which really matters to the vast majority of religious believers. Yet until very recently these have received next to no attention on the part of philosophers interested in the rationality of religious belief. Somehow they are taken as secondary and peripheral. If they are noted at all, the impression is that they are taken care of by some kind of special revelation received on the basis of testimony. That these religious beliefs should matter, say, to a Jonathan Edwards, or a Catherine Booth, or a John Henry Newman, or to the saints and martyrs of the church, or to the ordinary believer is set aside as uninteresting and irrelevant. These matters may well be of interest to the Christian theologian but philosophically they are of psychological or biographical interest; they do not have any cognitive significance.

Moreover, when we probe the question of the rationality of these more specifically Christian beliefs, it is notable that they not only matter enormously to the religious believer, but that they are often held with a high degree of certainty. These are the kind of beliefs for which people will gladly perish or for which they hope they will gladly perish. They constitute deeply held convictions of enormous practical and spiritual significance and are held tenaciously and deeply. Yet the certainty attached to these beliefs appears extraordinary given the restrictions on religious belief imposed by the canons of deductive and inductive rationality. Should someone assert, for example, that they really knew that their sins were forgiven, or that they were sure that there was indeed one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, and that they could identify it with certainty, this would not be taken with great seriousness intellectually. The standard distinction between a *person feeling* certain, understood as a psychological state of no cognitive significance, and a *proposition being* certain, understood as a proper cognitive proposal, will be produced to take care of the issue.

Philosophers and religious thinkers have, to be sure, often recognised, if only implicitly, the tension between what religious people actually believe and what they are permitted to believe given the rigorous application of the standard canons of rationality. Thus various proponents of fideism have fastened on the gap between what is permissible given certain philosophical accounts of rationality and what religious believers actually believe with deep conviction. They tend to resolve the dilemma this precipitates by rejecting the application of standard philosophical criteria of rationality to religious belief. So religious beliefs about one's salvation, or about Jesus Christ, or

about the locus of the true church, and the like, are treated as being matters of faith rather than reason. They stand outside the domain of normal, rational scrutiny, and they are to be believed independently of the application of standard canons of rational judgement. To be sure, one may appeal to divine revelation to support them, but this is not taken very seriously nowadays, or, if it is, it is perceived as an immediate license to believe what is either obscure or arbitrary. Alternatively, one may argue that religious belief is a matter of faith. Rather than provide reasons for religious belief, one develops the claim that religious belief is a matter of grace. A switch is made from an account of the rationality of religious belief to a vision of the causes of believing. In this case the causes are located in the action of God in the human heart.¹

The price to be paid for this is exceedingly high. On the one hand, it appears to rob crucial religious beliefs of rational status, unwittingly demoting them to a position which is secondary and peripheral. At the very best their rational status is ambiguous and uncertain. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is taken as given that one can believe anything in this arena and get by without scrutiny. Indeed at a popular level one often finds a radical form of voluntarism operating: you can literally believe anything you can bring yourself to believe and it will not matter intellectually. On the other hand, this disjunction between rationally accredited religious beliefs and religious beliefs which are not rationally accredited is not reproduced phenomenologically in the mind of the believer. The mature believer appears to hold that her beliefs about the status of her salvation or her claims concerning the locus of the true church are indeed intellectually correct. It is not as if these beliefs are accepted without rational examination and scrutiny; on the contrary, they are often approached with enormous intellectual concern and self-criticism. Biographies of mature believers make this abundantly clear.

It is worth asking, therefore, whether the critical concerns of the mature believer have anything to say to us about the quest for an adequate account of rationality. We should probe the epistemic phenomenology of religious belief more thoroughly before we settle the issue of what canons of rationality to apply to religious belief. What this means is that we begin with the religious believer and her attempt to articulate the rationality of her beliefs. We attempt to ferret out as best we can whatever logic we can decipher in the mind of the believer rather than move too briskly to apply some prior standard of rationality as derived from an analysis of allegedly correct beliefs or allegedly correct believing. This is not to say that the believer is somehow accepted as intellectually innocent without further ado, or that the account of rationality she provides is accepted automatically as the right one. Rather it is an attempt to articulate and explore intuitions about rationality which are much too summarily dismissed by philosophers interested in the rationality of religious belief.

One fruitful way into this whole arena is to look at claims made by some religious believers about their personal salvation. In this paper I want to explore claims to certainty related to sundry experiences of the Holy Spirit. I shall first lay out the contents of such claims by reviewing various first-hand accounts of the work of the Holy Spirit. I shall then attempt to analyse the characteristic features of these alleged experiences of the Holy Spirit. Finally I shall draw attention to various epistemological strategies which might be deployed to make sense of these experiences. I shall not resolve the central issues raised in the opening section of this paper, but I hope it will be clear that what follows is not unrelated to those issues.²

II

A good place to begin our analysis is by taking stock of a set of religious experiences which posit a very close relation between certainty and the work of the Holy Spirit.

A locus classicus of this which has proved extraordinarily influential in certain segments of Christianity is the cryptic remark of Paul. "When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God....³ In various branches of the Christian tradition this text is taken as the charter for a doctrine of Christian assurance. The claim it embodies refers to an experience of the Holy Spirit in which the believer experiences the testimony or witness of the Holy Spirit that he or she is a child of God. It is as if God the Holy Spirit speaks directly and inwardly to the individual in their hearts, or in their spirits, and thereby gives testimony to their forgiveness and their acceptance before God.

For those in search of salvation this is clearly an extremely important claim. Not only does it hold out the promise of certainty about one's standing before God, it appears to speak of an experience of the Holy Spirit which cannot be reduced to some kind of inferential argument, although many in the history of exegesis of this text have tried to force it into such a form. The standard inferential interpretation of this text treats this passage as speaking not about some subjective experience of God but about the testimony of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in one's life made manifest outwardly by love, joy, peace, meekness, and the like. We need not here decide the thorny exegetical question posed by the rival interpretations of the testimony of the Holy Spirit. What matters is that this text has given birth to a claim about certainty and assurance which invokes the possibility of a direct, inward experience of the Holy Spirit.

We can make progress in understanding the claim more fully by attending initially to a typical account of the witness of the Holy Spirit from the diary of an eighteenth century Methodist. Hester Ann Rogers was the daughter of an Anglican clergyman who, while in great distress about the state of her

standing before God, was forbidden to attend Methodist preaching and meetings. After a long period of contention with her mother and family, which came close to persecution at times, she eventually was permitted to visit with the Methodists. After much soul-searching, prayer, conversation, reading, and instruction, she awoke one morning at four o'clock to wrestle with God about her sins and about her salvation. After casting her soul into the hands of God for time and eternity she entered into a deep experience of God.

In that moment my fetters were broken, my bands were loosed, and my soul set at liberty. The love of God was shed abroad in my heart, and I rejoiced with joy unspeakable. ...I felt a thousand promises all my own: more than a thousand scriptures to confirm my evidence... I could now call Jesus, Lord, by the Holy Ghost; and the Father, my Father. My sins were gone; my soul was happy; and I longed to depart and to be with Jesus. I was truly a new creature; and seemed to be in a new world. I could do nothing but love and praise my God; and could not refrain continually repeating, "Thou are my Father! O God, Thou are my God!" while tears of joy ran down my cheeks.⁴

Many Christians in eighteenth century England were very clear that talk like this should be dismissed as pretension and delusion. One remembers Bishop Butler's famous comment on John Wesley that "pretending to personal revelations or inspiration of the Holy Spirit was a horrid thing, a very horrid thing."⁵ Clearly Butler saw no cognitive significance in this kind of material. The reasons which lie behind Butler's dismissal are complex. Although they are fascinating both historically and philosophically, we must leave them aside for the moment. What we must insist on at this point is that what is recorded here may be unusual but it is not aberrant. One thinks immediately of Pascal's experience of God which he described so cryptically and hid in the lining of his coat. Equally one remembers the remarkable experience of Aquinas before he died in which he claimed that what he had written of God seemed so much straw compared to what he had seen. Or perhaps one recalls the remarks of the Quaker Robert Barclay.

For not a few have come to be convinced of the Truth, after this manner, of which I myself in a part am a true witness, who not by the strength of arguments, or by a particular disquisition of each doctrine, and convincement of my understanding thereby, came to receive and bear witness to the Truth, but by being secretly reached by this Life; for, when I came into the silent assemblies of God's people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and, as I gave way unto it, I found evil weakening in me and the good raised up.⁶

There is a host of testimony to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of Christian believers scattered across time and space, and they cannot be dismissed as summarily as Butler and his eighteenth century friends envisaged. Moreover, there is ample evidence in various New Testament writings that belief and faith when seen from a Christian perspective are a matter of grace.

They are intimately related to the activity of the Holy Spirit bringing enlightenment and conviction.

Consider one more example, drawn this time from a saint of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. In this case we are confronted by a dramatic instance of the present indwelling of the Holy Spirit. I have in mind the experience of St. Seraphim of Sarov as recounted by Nicholos Motovilov. Motovilov had gone to St. Seraphim to find out what was the fundamental aim of the Christian life. The answer he got was simple: "The true aim of our Christian life is to acquire the Holy Spirit of God."⁷ The aim, therefore, was not to pray, fast, give alms, and the like; these were only the means of acquiring the Holy Spirit. As the believer pursued the acquisition of the Holy Spirit, much as an ordinary person pursued the acquisition of money, or the nobility pursued the acquisition of honours for government service, he or she would enter a deep experience of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit itself enters our souls, and this entrance into our souls of Him the Almighty and this presence with our Spirit of the Triune Majesty is only granted to us through our own assiduous acquisition of the Holy Spirit, which prepares in our soul and body a throne for the all-creative presence of God with our spirit according to His irrevocable word: I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My People.⁸

Truly in prayer it is vouchsafed to us to converse with our Good and Life-giving God and Saviour, but even here we must pray only until God the Holy Spirit descends on us in measures of His heavenly grace known to Him. When He comes to us, we must cease to pray. How can we pray to Him, Come and abide in us, cleanse us from evil, and save our souls, O Gracious Lord, when He has already come to save us, who trust in Him and call on His Holy name in truth, that humbly and with love we may receive Him, the Comforter, in the chamber of our souls, hungering and thirsting for His coming?⁹

Not surprisingly Motovilov inquires how one can know that one is in the grace of the Holy Spirit. St. Seraphim answers as follows.

It is very simple, my son, wherefore the Lord says: All things are simple to them that get understanding. Being in that understanding, the Apostles perceive whether the Spirit of God abideth in them or not; and, being filled with understanding and seeing the presence of God's Spirit within them, they affirmed that their work was holy and pleasing to God. By this is explained why they wrote in their epistles: It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. Only on these grounds did they offer their epistles as immutable truth for the good of all the faithful. Thus the Holy Apostles were consciously aware of the presence in themselves of God's Spirit. And so you see, my son, how simple it is!¹⁰

Motovilov is not satisfied by this reply, so he asks how he can be firmly assured that he is in the Spirit of God. He wants to know how he himself can recognise the Holy Spirit's true manifestation. St. Seraphim protests that there is nothing more he can really say at this point. The answer to his

question is simple, and he has already given as detailed an answer as is possible. So what more can Motovilov need? His reply is that he wants to understand well. There then follows a remarkable description of what might well be described as a theophany of the Holy Spirit. St. Seraphim prays mentally to the Lord that Motovilov might see with bodily eyes that descent of the Holy Spirit which God gives to his servants when he appears in the light of his marvellous glory. Consequently he and Motovilov are bathed in brightness and light, so much so that Motovilov is struck with fear and awe as St. Seraphim's face is transfigured before him.

Imagine in the centre of the sun, in the dazzling brilliance of his midday rays, the face of the man who talks with you. You see the movement of his lips and the changing expression of his eyes, you hear his voice, you feel someone grasp your shoulders; yet you do not see the hands, you do not even see yourself or his figure, but only a blinding light spreading several yards around and throwing a sparkling radiance across the snow blanket on the glade and into the snowflakes which besprinkled the great elder and me. Can one imagine the state in which I then found myself?¹¹

Motovilov then proceeds to describe the sense of well-being, calm, peace, sweetness, joy, warmth, and pleasure which he experiences, while St. Seraphim provides a running commentary on his experience by relating its texture to scriptural teaching and example. In particular St. Seraphim relates the experience which Motovilov has undergone to the presence of the kingdom of God within the human person, to the indwelling of the grace of God in the human heart, to the seeing of the kingdom of God coming in power, and to the fullness of the Holy Spirit spoken of by St. Macarius of Egypt.

What is especially interesting is that St. Seraphim expects Motovilov's doubts about the presence of the Holy Spirit to be fully answered. There is no more need to ask how a person may be sure that he or she is in the grace of the Holy Spirit. This has been experienced firsthand; Motovilov has experienced the Holy Spirit for himself. So not surprisingly, St. Seraphim draws attention to Paul's famous comment that true faith rests not on persuasive words of human wisdom, but in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power. Moreover, he points out that Motovilov's experience is so vivid that it will always be retained in his memory, that it will confirm him in the work of God, and that it will make him useful to others.

III

Having set before us several accounts of the witness of the Holy Spirit, let us gather together the threads of this material as we seek to determine its cognitive significance. We have here a particular kind of religious experience which has the following features.

1. This is an experience which involves a very definite sense of the presence

of God in one's life. Hence it is accompanied with fear, awe, and reverence on the one hand, and peace, joy, and love on the other. Moreover, those who undergo such an experience are often at a loss to know how to speak of their experience descriptively. Words simply fail to match the uniqueness, the beauty, and the grandeur of that of which they have become aware.

2. This is an experience of God which is described in very specific theological terms as an experience of the indwelling presence and witness of the Holy Spirit. The description is extraordinarily thick and rich. It is couched in terms which are already loaded with ontology and metaphysics, so that one needs access to the resources of a complex conceptual schema in order to bring it into focus. It would appear that the having of the experience at issue here and the learning of the relevant conceptual apparatus go hand in hand. It is not that one has certain experiences and then somehow labels them as an experience of the Holy Spirit. Rather, one is introduced to a rich conceptual tradition that makes reference to an experience of God which has its own unique features, which leads to certain palpable effects in one's life, and which is offered to one as a promise from God. Hence what is at stake here is not some general awareness of the divine in the world, or in nature, or even in the depths of one's soul. It is seen paradigmatically as nothing less than an encounter with and experience of the Holy Spirit. Characteristically it is identified as the internal witness of the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell mysteriously in the depths of the human heart. Technically it has been seen as the *testimonium internum Spiritus Sancti*.

3. The experience of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit is an experience which is seen as available to all believers, that is, to the humble layperson as much as the disciplined monk. There is no predetermined path which one has to follow but characteristically this experience of God occurs in the course of a search for spiritual reality conducted in the context of the practice of the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, searching the scriptures, repentance, fasting, attendance at the eucharist, and the like. It is not something which can be predicted in advance, on a par, say, with one's awareness of the material world. Being an experience of the Holy Spirit, it rests in part on the personal agency of the Holy Spirit, who blows where and when he wills. Hence it is not something which can be coerced into existence or can be presumed upon to happen as a result of human effort. It is received as a gift of divine grace and an expression of divine mercy.

4. Subjects who experience the inner witness of the Holy Spirit are naturally inclined to treat their experience as veridical. Descriptions of their experience which construe it as an encounter with the Holy Spirit appear luminously correct to those who speak of this kind of religious experience. Thus it leads to a deep sense of certainty about the reality of God and his profoundly personal love for human agents. The person who has undergone this kind of

experience emerges from it with a deeper level of commitment and faith than hitherto, due to the conviction that one has encountered God as utterly real and as intimately involved in one's own personal existence.

5. The experience of the witness of the Holy Spirit is thought by its subjects to be confirmed as truly such a witness by other considerations which may accompany it, or which more generally follow it. Thus in Motovilov's case he was confronted with a miracle wherein he was aware, for example, of the bodily transfiguration of both St. Seraphim and himself, and he was also aware of a warmth which did not melt the snow. More generally, the witness or experience of the Holy Spirit leads to the development of sanctity manifested in the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Hence the witness of the Holy Spirit is seen as being accompanied by spiritual transformation and these taken together, that is the witness and the transformation, are seen by those who undergo them as constituting evidence for the reality of the Holy Spirit in one's life.

6. In the light of the foregoing it is extremely important not to confuse this kind of experience with others to which it is often reduced. The history of the appeal to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit is instructive at this point. Both in Reformation and modern religious discourse it is common to appeal to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit as a warrant for underwriting one's favoured canons of theological inquiry. Thus when Calvin and his followers were pressed as to why they believed scripture to be the word of God, they commonly replied that they located the word of God in scripture as opposed, say, to church tradition because this was borne out by the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Roman Catholics in turn when pressed to say why they trusted both scripture and tradition as canonical equally forthrightly appealed to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly the same move has been made by Muslims and by Mormons. The impression one receives from this debate is that the internal witness of the Holy Spirit is a kind of inner sense or feeling that one's chosen canon is the right one.

As Descartes astutely recognised, this reduces the theologian to a sorry state of affairs, for the internal witness of the Holy Spirit which is taken on all sides as the decisive and logically primitive warrant for one's position, is found to be supporting contradictory claims. In the light of the intellectual perplexity this observation elicits, it is surely worth asking whether Descartes' quest for the foundations of rationality is not radically shaped by this strange and misleading reading of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Historians of Cartesianism tend to overlook this question because they generally tear the whole Cartesian project loose from its moorings in the astonishing intellectual crisis precipitated by the Reformation challenge to the authority of the church.¹² It is worth speculating whether Descartes's doctrine of the *cogito* with its quest for a single source of certainty, its radically inward

turn, and its emphasis on self-evidence, may not be a secular reproduction of a reduced and inadequate account of the experience of the Holy Spirit.

This is, of course, pure speculation and nothing turns on whether it can be confirmed or disconfirmed as a reading of the Cartesian project, but it is vital to distinguish the experience of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit I am seeking to capture in this paper from what this has become in the Reformation and post-Reformation debates. Two considerations suffice to make my point. First, on exegetical grounds it is impossible to treat the internal witness of the Holy Spirit as settling the issue of canon in Christian theology. Thus in Pauline theology, a crucial source for the idea of the witness of the Holy Spirit, the internal witness deals with the issue of our personal relationship to and our personal intimacy with God. At best, Calvin and those who follow him are stretching the concept in a radically new direction when they use it to deal with the problem of canonicity; at worst they are ripping the concept from its natural home in the interface between the believer and God. Secondly, this distinction between the witness of the Holy Spirit as bearing on one's salvation rather than on the issue of canon is borne out by looking carefully and systematically at accounts of religious experience which represent paradigm cases of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. These clearly address the quest for intimacy with divine reality; they completely transcend the debates which tackle the question of norms in Christian theology.

IV

Having dwelt on examples of the witness of the Holy Spirit at some length, we can now ask what cognitive sense and epistemological significance we assign to this kind of experience. How are we to describe this experience from a cognitive point of view? It is fruitful to proceed at this point by way of analogy and explore how far the kind of discourse represented by this language is illuminated by discourse which is more familiar to us. I want to look briefly at five ways of construing the cognitive significance of this kind of experience.

1. The first is to construe the inner witness of the Holy Spirit as a form of religious intuition.¹³ The key element in this interpretation is the focus on the non-inferential character of the claim. Awareness of the Holy Spirit, or of the Holy Spirit's activity, is seen as analogous to light stimulating sight, or to consciousness prompting self-consciousness. Just as it is self-evident to us that we see light with our eyes, and just as it is self-evident to us that we are aware of our own consciousness, so too is it self-evident to us that we are aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We are simply immediately aware of the reality of God's gracious presence in the inmost self or in the heart.

The obvious difficulty with this proposal is that the appeal to some kind of religious intuition is vacuous and obscure. Certainly our intuitions should

be taken seriously, but we can do this without committing ourselves to a theory of intuition in the field of epistemology. It is misleading to think that speaking of some kind of inner faculty or special sense gets us anywhere philosophically. It simply redescribes the problem. That said, the chief merit of the appeal to intuition is that it seeks to do justice to the non-inferential character of the appeal to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Learning to speak of the work of the Holy Spirit is not a matter of inferring the causes of one experience from the phenomenological features of that experience; it is more a matter of learning how to apply a rich network of concepts derived from Christian scripture and tradition to one's experience.

2. A second alternative is to see the internal witness of the Holy Spirit as a case of mystical experience. On this analysis the obvious category which comes to mind is that of introvertive mysticism. In this form of mysticism the human agent characteristically enters a state of consciousness which is devoid of its ordinary contents, which involves an experience of oneness with the divine, which appears to have an eminently real object that is perceived as divine, which is accompanied by complete bliss and peace, and in which there is no awareness of the passage of time. Many Christians who have not themselves experienced the internal witness of the Holy Spirit are naturally drawn to read such an experience as mystical; this is how they will naturally speak of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit when they first hear of it.

An obvious objection to this move is to point out that most examples of this experience cannot be treated as cases of introvertive mysticism. Some of the examples of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit may well be accompanied by mystical experiences but it is doubtful that most are. Even Motovilov's case is not clearly mystical in the technical sense of the term. More generally, the experience at issue is one that is common to hosts of ordinary religious believers who would not normally treat it as typically mystical. That some tend to describe their experience as mystical is due to the fact that any experience which is understood as involving an awareness of the divine is simply assumed to be mystical. Deeper and more careful analysis suggests that this is misleading and inaccurate.

A further reason to set against this alternative is that it does not immediately help us to analyse the cognitive status of the experience of the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. This follows from the fact that we have no agreed account of how to read the cognitive value of mystical experience. Had we a clear account of the latter then we could put it to use here, but the cognitive status of mystical experience is itself too obscure at present to be of much assistance.

3. A third way to handle the appeal to the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing certainty would involve appealing to some basic perceptual principle, say, the principle of initial credulity, and applying it to the kind of

experiences cited. According to this principle, things are as they seem to be unless we can give good reason to believe otherwise. Thus, if it appears to me that I see a tree, I actually see a tree, unless I have good reason to think that my senses deceive me, or that my friend has smuggled in a fake tree to replace the real tree, or the like. On this analysis, we would be perfectly within our intellectual rights to take an apparent experience of the Holy Spirit as an experience of the Holy Spirit unless we had good reason to think otherwise. Alternatively we might make use of the notion of basic perceptual capacities. We might say that unless we have good reason to believe otherwise, we should accept the deliverances of our apparent perceptions as veridical. Hence we should hold that we are genuinely hearing the voice of the Holy Spirit, unless we have reason to distrust our capacities in this regard.¹⁴

Two considerations should make one reluctant to accept this analysis. First, apparent experiences of the Holy Spirit are not generally allowed to stand alone in the Christian tradition. It is always appropriate to look for additional confirmation such as we saw in the case of Motovilov. St. Seraphim treated Motovilov's request for further evidence as entirely acceptable. In addition, cases involving self-deceit or involving lack of spiritual discernment are treated differently from our normal perceptual procedures. Appeal is made to moral and spiritual transformation as a further witness to the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. More generally, it is common for the saints to insist that the very capacities needed to perceive the presence of the Holy Spirit have to be drastically overhauled by divine grace or even supplied by God to the human subject. It is only the pure in heart who see God, hence one's experience of God depends crucially on repentance and on waiting on God in the liturgical acts of the church. Hence further ancillary claims of both an ontological and epistemic nature are deployed to flesh out what is at issue. All these elements add dimensions to the experience which suggest that it cannot be dealt with in terms of common perceptual capacities and principles.

Secondly, it is exaggerated to claim that an apparent experience of the Holy Spirit could by itself underwrite the rationality of, say, belief in the existence of the Holy Spirit. What this analysis ignores is the fact that talk about the work of the Holy Spirit is intimately related to a wider tradition which embodies at certain points appeal to special revelation. It is not as if we can know that the Holy Spirit exists and acts simply because we have had certain kinds of religious experiences. Expressed more summarily, we cannot see the Holy Spirit in the way that we can see tables and trees. Yet this is what a simple application of the principle of initial credulity asks of us. They suggest that the existence of the Holy Spirit or the activity of the Holy Spirit can be established by recourse to conventional perceptual capacities and conventions.

4. A fourth alternative is to translate talk of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit into the language of properly basic beliefs. Thus we might take discourse about the inner witness of the Holy Spirit as meaning or implying that it is legitimate to take the sentence "I am forgiven of my sins" as properly basic, that is, we can believe this proposition and be rational in our believing it, even though we do not have any reasons for that belief. Such a belief might, of course be triggered by certain circumstances. Thus such a belief might be formed on the occasion of hearing the gospel, or upon reading a commentary of scripture, or upon confession and repentance. However, the belief itself would be self-evident to us; it would not need, rationally speaking, to be supported in any way by other beliefs, although it might still be confirmed by other beliefs.

This kind of analysis could well hold considerable promise were it to be pursued with care. For one thing it allows for the possibility of exploring the significance of the cognitive status of the appeal to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit unencumbered by the kind of foundationalism which has informed the debate about the rationality of religious belief for so long. Given the enormous difficulty of delineating the criteria of proper basicity, it is certainly going to be possible to treat talk of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit as a theological way of construing the feeling of divine forgiveness as a signal to treat the sentence "I am forgiven by God" as properly basic. It is perhaps no accident that Reformed epistemologists have appealed to a sense of divine forgiveness as the justifying circumstance for forming the belief that God forgives me for what I've done and this in turn, on their view, provides a ground for belief in God.¹⁵ Perhaps the tradition of the appeal to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit is one of the crucial wellsprings for the development of Reformed epistemology in that the appeal to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit has generally been seen as eschewing the formal use of inference. In due course historians of modern philosophy of religion will need to ponder with great care the influence of this crucial aspect of Puritan and Reformed theology on the development of Reformed epistemology.

For the present I venture just two comments on this approach. First, it would be helpful if Reformed epistemologists would spell out more clearly the relation between talk of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit and their epistemological proposals. As it stands we have to supply this connection for ourselves in a rather sketchy fashion. Until this is provided, it will be difficult to assess the full value of this whole approach to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. As it stands we have to rest content with rather vague talk about a feeling of being forgiven or a scattered reference here and there to Calvin and Barth. We need a much richer account of the theological concepts being deployed by the Reformed epistemologists and a much deeper account of their meaning and history.

Secondly, pursuing this option might well be one way of evaluating the adequacy of treating certain religious beliefs as rational even though there is no evidence for them. On the surface it would appear that the kind of certainty which accompanies the experience of salvation is indeed grounded on experience. The claim to know God for oneself is not held without evidence; it is held in part because of certain specific experiences which the believer undergoes. Moreover, the fact that the experience is normally seen as confirmed by other considerations, rather than taken in isolation, suggests that we need an entirely different set of categories than those provided by Reformed epistemologists if we are to do justice to the kind of claim which is at stake here. If this is the case, then the rationality of certain crucial religious beliefs is not adequately captured by treating them as properly basic.

5. A fifth alternative is to see the appeal to the internal witness of the Holy Spirit as helping to render plausible a large scale, integrative system of belief. On this analysis one would construe the claim about the presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer's inner life as intimately related to a wider narrative of the activity of God in creation, in human experience generally, and in history, which in turn would be linked to a web of beliefs about the nature of God, other spiritual experiences, human nature, ethical commitment, life after death, and the like.

The specific experience of the Holy Spirit would not in itself underwrite the rationality of belief in the complex vision from which the very language of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit is derived and gains its meaning. Rather, taken with a host of other considerations, brought together as part of a cumulative case, and integrated into a judgement governed by tacit and largely implicit conventions of explanation, it would lend its own weight to the total evidence adduced.

I find myself very drawn to this analysis of the cognitive value of the appeal to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. One of the obvious merits of this approach is that it recognises the theologically laden character of the description of the experience at issue. It seeks, therefore, to attend to the proposed experience as we find it in the relevant literature. The proposed experience, if it is to be identified, surely requires the kind of specificity enshrined minimally in talk of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. In turn this can only be unpacked by relating it to its place in the wider theological vision of the classical Christian tradition.

Another merit of this position is that it does not claim too much merely on the basis of experience. Hence it does not claim that somehow the believer has proved for himself or herself that the Holy Spirit really exists. This is surely one reason why perceptual or intuitive construals of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit have never gained general acceptance in the Christian community. Moreover, as we have seen, the perceptual model becomes im-

mediately implausible when the details are pressed. Those who have explored its possibilities find themselves in the awkward position of having to develop an elaborate anthropology where the soul has to have senses to match the eyes and ears of our normal perceptual equipment. So the inner witness of the Holy Spirit not only has to underwrite the rationality of belief in the Holy Spirit but also the rationality of an overloaded theological anthropology. Yet it seems plausible to allow experiences of the kind specified as having some weight in the evaluation of the rationality of a religious vision. Apparently direct experience of the Holy Spirit surely deserves to be taken seriously as evidence for the overall vision in which such talk is embedded.

A further merit of this proposal is that it allows corroborative evidence to be used without strain. Thus in the case given above Motovilov is not only within his rights to ask for further evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit, he is also understandably satisfied when the putative evidence appears. The transfiguration of St. Seraphim is something which he can only explain by treating it as a further effect of the activity of the Holy Spirit. He certainly does not have an alternative naturalistic explanation. In the absence of such an explanation he is entitled to accept an explanation which possesses adequate explanatory power. In my judgment he is perfectly correct to rest content for the present with the explanation he has to hand, especially so when he discovers that what happens occurs in response to the prayer of St. Seraphim. More generally, it is not odd for the appearance of moral and spiritual transformation to be construed as further evidence for the presence of the Holy Spirit. In this case we have an appeal to what has felicitously been described as the argument from conspicuous sanctity.¹⁶

The most important merit of this proposal is that it makes adequate sense of the certainty attributed to this kind of experience. It is this that makes this kind of experience so interesting philosophically. In the view currently under consideration this feature is captured in this fashion. Christian theism according to this analysis is an elaborate liturgical, theological, and metaphysical vision whose centre is found in a personal God who has made human agents not only in his own image but with a destiny to love God and enjoy him for ever. Human agents are made to know God in a way analogous to the way they know each other. Knowledge of other persons can clearly be of two sorts. We can know others indirectly, that is, through narratives, biographies, descriptions of their activity and character, and the like. And we can know others directly, that is, we can know them for ourselves by acquaintance, by encountering them and getting to know them intimately. The latter kind of knowledge clearly brings with it much greater certainty than the former. We generally value direct, person-to-person encounter with others over against indirect knowledge of others. Likewise with God. Encountering God, coming into an experience with God where his Holy Spirit comes to dwell in the

depths of our hearts, experiences which embody this element naturally bring with them a sense of certainty analogous to coming to know someone personally, who heretofore was known by description or hearsay. This is why people emerge from this kind of experience so convinced. And so they should, if they have their epistemological wits about them. Taken with the evidence of all the accumulated signs and marks of God's presence in the world, they permit precisely the kind of certainty one finds in the saints and martyrs.

Considerations such as these cannot, of course, suffice to establish this alternative as the best way to construe the cognitive status of this kind of religious experience. In the nature of the case, the argument to this end takes us into a host of areas which cannot be dealt with satisfactorily here. We have too much unfinished business before we can get to that point. We need, for example, an adequate account of the nature of divine activity as represented in claims about the activity of the Holy Spirit in the human heart. We also need an adequate account of the way in which complex metaphysical and religious visions can function as explanations for certain kinds of highly specific yet thoroughly ineffable human experience. It should not surprise us, however, that, if we ever manage to finish such business, we shall be able to accommodate without strain the kind of certainty which one finds associated with apparent experiences of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. This is one of the subtle pieces of data which an adequate epistemology of religious belief must accommodate and explain. Moreover success in this regard might well remove the gap which currently exists between the degree of certainty claimed by the mature believer with respect to the specific religious beliefs he or she holds and the degree of certainty which is allowed in most accounts of the rationality of religious belief.

Southern Methodist University

NOTES

1. It is not sufficiently recognised how obscure this move is in philosophy. It is assumed generally that we really know what it means to say that believing is a matter of divine grace or divine action. There is in fact a very rich body of material in Christianity which attempts to sketch the action of God in believing or in coming to faith in Jesus Christ. A fascinating treatment of the matter appears in St. Symeon's *Discourses*, trans. by C. J. deCatanzaro (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), especially discourses VI, XVI, XXIV, XXVIII, XXIX, XXXII, and XXXIII.

2. An exceptionally thorough account of many of the issues at stake in this paper can be found in Caroline Frank Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

3. Rom. 8:15.

4. Rev. Thomas Coke, *The Experiences and Spiritual Lettres of Mrs. Hester Ann Rogers* (London: T. Nelson and Sons, 1852), pp. 30-31.

5. See Ronald Knox, *Enthusiasm* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 450.

6. Quoted in Elton Trueblood, *Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 154.

7. George P. Fedotov, ed., *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality* (Belmont: Nordland, 1975), p. 267.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 269-70.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 274-75.

12. For a notable exception to this see Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Darwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

13. This is the interpretation suggested by Albert Outler in his comments on John Wesley's sermons on the witness of the Holy Spirit. See Albert Outler, ed., *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 209. See also his comments in Albert Outler, ed., *The works of John Wesley I, Sermons I* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), pp. 267-68.

14. It has not, of course, been common in much of the history of philosophy to allow perceptual beliefs the status of certainty. This coveted position has been reserved for claims which are either incorrigible, like, it appears to me now that I see a tree, or to claims whose contradictories are incoherent. If these are the standards applied, then there is no hope of religious claims of the sort I am considering here ever being certain. Over against this, I am prepared to allow our common sense perceptual claims to be construed as certain. Hence were the strategy just outlined to succeed, we would have an adequate account of certainty as applied to the relevant religious claims.

15. See Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic," *Nous* XV (1981), p. 46.

16. The explanation deployed here is clearly causal but it is not naturalistic in nature. Certain experiences and certain kinds of moral behaviour are seen as brought about by the agency of God. Many modern theologians have shied away from this way of understanding talk about divine action, but I see nothing inherently wrong with such a reading of the tradition.