

1-1-1997

## Book Review: Religious Experience And Religious Belief

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### Recommended Citation

Kellenberger, J. (1997) "Book Review: Religious Experience And Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol14/iss1/12>

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gives *prima facie* plausibility to established social practices. In cases of massive and persistent conflict between two such practices, Alston proposes that we give preference to the one that is more firmly established. Brown argues that in the case of religious belief systems, we can fall into a relativistic bog in attempting to determine which is more established—e.g., which is more compatible with the contemporary scientific enterprise. Unfortunately, this leads Brown to focus on the plausibility of the miracle stories in Christianity compared with those in an imagined rival religion. It may be that there is not much to choose from if we take such claims in isolation and ask which is the more “bizarre.” But that project distracts us from Alston’s larger insight that we might judge which practices are established by looking at historical and other evidence, including their fit with other things we already believe, the cultural institutions and practices they have given rise to, and so on.

*Religious Experience and Religious Belief.* **George Wall.** Lanham, New York, and London: University Press of America, 1995. Pp. vii and 340. \$51.50 cloth, \$39.50 paper.

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There are, some say, two kinds of people in the world: those who like noise and those who do not, or those who chew gum and those who do not. In the same vein, we might observe, there are two kinds of religious philosophers: those who ground their philosophical reflections in religious sensibility (some strain of religious sensibility) and proceed to philosophical issues concerning religion, and those who ground their philosophical reflections in philosophical theory and proceed to philosophical issues concerning religion. My dichotomous comment is on *religious* philosophers, *religious* philosophers of religion, not on all philosophers of religion. That is, my comment is on philosophers of religion who have religious sensibilities and, being religious, have some sympathy for religion. Though they all have religious sensibilities, not all start with those sensibilities in their philosophical reflections. Some do, but some start with philosophical theory.

George Wall starts with theory. Early on (p. 12) he states his acceptance of the innocent-until-proven-guilty or reliable-until-defeated epistemology of William Alston, Alvin Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne. But at the same time Wall, via an appreciation of the approach of William James, draws deeply upon religious phenomena. In this respect he is unlike most analytic philosophers. Like James’s *Varieties*, Wall’s book contains a collection of actual reported cases of religious experience. Most of Wall’s cases, he tells us, were obtained from the Alister Hardy Research Centre in Oxford, England, but many he has gathered himself through personal interviews. Although Wall is not presenting the cases he considers for their own sake, but rather to argue for his pri-

mary thesis, the panoply of cases he gives us with an unstinting richness of detail provides a phenomenological dimension to his book.

Wall's main objective is to "consider some proposed general objections to ([that is, some] proposed general defeaters of) religious experience as *prima facie* justification for religious belief" (p. 31). His effort is to show that these proposed defeaters, which often take the form of naturalistic explanations of religious experience, do not stand up as general defeaters of religious experience as such. The first naturalistic defeater he considers is background religious teaching. Wall distinguishes three separable theses involved in the claim that religious background accounts for religious experience and so defeats it as justification for belief: (1) Thesis C, that the content of religious experience, what one perceives God to be, is explicitly present in one's previous religious teaching; (2) Thesis O, that a necessary condition for one's having a religious experience is one's having been taught that religious experience of that sort is valuable; and (3) Thesis P, that a necessary condition for one's having a religious experience is one's having a positive attitude toward religion. By appealing to an array of actual occurrences of religious experiences, Wall is able to present counterexamples to each of these three theses and so to argue that religious background does not stand up as a general defeater.

He goes on to argue similarly — via counterexamples — against other proposed naturalistic defeaters: conscious desire and unconscious desire and motivation. In addition he considers and argues against several proposed defeaters that do not fall under the heading of naturalistic explanations of religious experience. One such is embodied in the claim that religious experience does not have the effect it should if it were an encounter with the Divine. Again Wall presents concrete cases from which he concludes that while people respond in a variety of ways to religious experience, in the majority of these representative cases there were positive immediate or long-term effects (e.g., joy, peace, and increased sensitivity to others). Another proposed defeater is that there is no "overrider system" regarding religious experience: that is, religious experience is defeated *generally* as justification for religious belief because there are no *specific* defeaters of religious experience — no criteria for genuine religious experience. But, Wall argues, there are such criteria (e.g., consistency with authoritative teaching, and doxastic moral practice), and, he argues, these are not criteria for Christian Doxastic Practice (CMP) alone, but for Universal Religious Doxastic Practice (URP).

The last proposed defeater that he considers is that if there is URP then we will end up with conflicting religious beliefs justified on the basis of religious experiences that will qualify as genuine religious experiences. Wall considers two conflicts: the first is over whether God, or Ultimate Reality, is personal or impersonal, and the second is over the superiority of a particular religion over other religions. Regarding the first, he argues that religious experiences of God as *essentially* personal or impersonal are rare, and as long as such cases are limited, even though they are irresolvable, they no more constitute a general defeater

of religious experience than irresolvable conflicts in reports of sense perception constitute a general defeater of sense experience as justification for belief. Regarding the second, he argues that it is rare for *religious experience* to give rise to claims to religious superiority, and, in any case, such a conflict may be resolvable.

There is much in the details of Wall's discussion and argument that invites criticism or praise, but I shall limit myself to a few general comments.

I think that Wall may be underestimating the subtlety of the unconscious and the ways it can precipitate belief and experience and can color experience. He argues that "we should not suppose unconscious desire for God to be different from conscious desire, unless we have specific evidence to the contrary" (p. 97). But proponents of the view that religious belief is created by unconscious desires, like Nietzsche and others, believe there is an abundance of such evidence. Wall asks why, if there is an unconscious desire for forgiveness, the unconscious would not be more direct in conveying a sense of forgiveness — why would it bother to project a sense of the Presence of God? Why indeed! To borrow and redirect some lines of Emerson's: "They reckon ill who leave me out" — "They know not well the subtle ways / I keep, and pass, and turn again." It is Brahman speaking in Emerson's poem, but we may pay the same courtesy to the unconscious. If unconscious desire is working behind the scenes to produce the kinds of religious experiences Wall considers, or just the sense of God's presence, it may well be shrouded in self-deception — a category that Wall does not really deal with. And the same thing can be said for a desire that there not be a God. It is perhaps because Wall starts with a theory of justification for religious belief that is analogous to a theory of justification for perceptual beliefs that he, at one point, looks for defeaters of religious experience that are analogous to specific defeaters of sensory perception. With a different starting point he might have given more importance to self-deception and its hidden, unconscious motivation.

Nevertheless, within the domain of its working space, Wall's book is effective. It is a strength of Wall's book that he considers in detail a number of actual cases of religious experience, and, as well, the background of the subject and the expectations, hopes, and beliefs of the subject before the experience, and, sometimes, the subsequent change or lack of change in the subjects' life. This makes his treatment noteworthy and valuable if for no other reason than that it provides some useful data for philosophical reflection. I say "useful" for I think that Wall, like James, is right that reflection on actual cases of religious experience should not be an embarrassment to philosophical reflection on the character of, or the epistemological credentials of, religious experience. It is on the basis of the concrete cases he presents that he is able to argue against Theses C, O, and P.

In addition, drawing upon these concrete cases, Wall can substantiate further points of religious and philosophical significance about the character of religious experience. For instance, he is able to show that, as a matter of fact, religious experience of different sorts can occur in a par-

ticular culture. He presents experiences of several subjects who stand in the Western theistic — specifically Christian — tradition, who nevertheless had experiences of the Divine in a more Eastern impersonal form, and he presents some cases of subjects who had experiences of the Divine as personal and at other times as impersonal. Pretty clearly, as Wall appreciates, these phenomena have implications for the kind of view of religious experience that Steven Katz has defended (not that Wall argues Katz is altogether wrong).

Wall's book is the fruit of both reflection and collection, and is personal in the sense that all sensitive philosophical treatments of religious phenomena are personal (in Wall's case he cites as one among many his own religious experience). Despite the lack of an index, this book makes a nice contribution to the literature on religious experience and belief.

*At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II.* **Kenneth L. Schmitz.** Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994. Pp. x and 170. \$24.95 (Cloth), \$11.95 (Paper).

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Whatever one might think of the policies and pronouncements of Karol Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II, there can be no doubt that he is an important public figure and an extraordinary individual. The most traveled pope in the history of the church, his gifts as a linguist have enabled him to communicate directly with an astonishing range of audiences in a wide variety of native tongues. At the same time as he has cultivated a global presence, his deep commitment to his own homeland has drawn him into secular politics at a crucial moment in Polish history, making him a key player in the dismantling of communism in Eastern Europe. In addition, Wojtyla is a man of letters whose output as a writer has been enormous. His recent book, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, has become an international best seller, and his encyclicals have sparked passionate debate both within the church and without. Many of his most controversial teachings have to do with issues of personal and specifically sexual morality, but, as he made clear in his most recent encyclical, "Evangelium Vitae," these teachings are not isolated policy statements but flow from an overarching vision of a "culture of life" that is the church's alternative to what he describes as the currently prevailing "culture of death."

Kenneth L. Schmitz, in *At the Center of the Human Drama: The Philosophical Anthropology of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II*, is more interested in tracing the origins of the philosophical vision underlying Wojtyla's papal teachings than he is with controversial aspects of the teachings themselves. At the heart of his book is a carefully considered interpretation of *The Acting Person*, a text Schmitz takes to be the most