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# Perceiving God

WILLIAM ALSTON

William Alston is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Syracuse University. He views mystical experience as a form of perception that, assuming God exists, enables us to interact with God. Does such experience offer knowledge of God? Alston concludes that, as in the case of perceptual claims, we should accept them unless we have sufficient reason to the contrary.

I pick out what I am calling "experience of God" by the fact that the subject takes the experience (or would take it if the question arose) to be a direct awareness of God. Here is a clear example cited in William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

(1) . . . all at once I . . . felt the presence of God—I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it—as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether. Then, slowly, the ecstasy left my heart; that is, I felt that God had withdrawn the communion which he had granted. . . . I asked myself if it were possible that Moses on Sinai could have had a more intimate communion with God. I think it well to add that in this ecstasy of mine God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste; moreover, that the feeling of his presence was accompanied by no determinate localization. . . . But the more I seek words to express this intimate intercourse, the more I feel the impossibility of describing the thing by any of our usual images. At bottom the expression most apt to render what I felt is this: God was present, though invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him.

Note that I do not restrict "experience of God" to cases in which it is really God of whom the subject is aware. The term, as I use it, ranges over all experiences that the subject *takes* to have this status. Thus the general category would be more exactly termed "*supposed* experience of God," where calling it "supposed" does not prejudice the question of whether it is genuine or not. However, I will generally omit this qualification. Note too that my category

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of "experience of God" is much narrower than "religious experience," which covers a diverse and ill-defined multitude of experiences.

In restricting myself to *direct* awareness of God I exclude cases in which one takes oneself to be aware of God through the beauties of nature, the words of the Bible or of a sermon, or other natural phenomena. For example:

(2) I feel him [God] in the sunshine or rain; and awe mingled with a delicate restfulness most nearly describes my feelings.

My reason for concentrating on direct experience of God, where there is no other object of experience in or through which God is experienced, is that these experiences are the ones that are most plausibly regarded as *presentations* of God to the individual, in somewhat the way in which physical objects are presented to sense perception, as I will shortly make explicit.

Within this territory I will range over both lay and professional examples, both ordinary people living in the world and monks who more or less devote their lives to attaining union with God. The category also embraces both focal and background experiences; though in order to discern the structure of the phenomenon we are well advised to concentrate on its more intense forms.

There is also the distinction between experiences with and without sensory content. In (1) the subject explicitly denies that the experience was sensory in character. Here is an example that does involve sensory content.

(3) During the night . . . I awoke and looking out of my window saw what I took to be a luminous star which gradually came nearer, and appeared as a soft slightly blurred white light. I was seized with violent trembling, but had no fear. I knew that what I felt was great awe. This was followed by a sense of overwhelming love coming to me, and going out from me, then of great compassion from this Outer Presence. (Cited in T. Beardsworth, *A Sense of Presence*.)

In this discussion I will concentrate on nonsensory experiences. The main reason for this choice is that since God is purely spiritual, a nonsensory experience has a greater chance of presenting Him as He is than any sensory experience. If God appears to us as bearing a certain shape or as speaking in a certain tone of voice, that is a long way from representing Him as He is in Himself. I shall refer to nonsensory experience of God as "mystical experience," and the form of perception of God that involves that experience as "mystical perception." I use these terms with trepidation, for I do not want them to carry connotations of the merging of the individual subject into the One, or any of the other salient features of what we may term "classical mystical experience." (See William James.) They are to be understood simply as shorthand for "supposed nonsensory experience (perception) of God."

Many people find it incredible, unintelligible, or incoherent to suppose that there could be something that counts as *presentation*, that contrasts with abstract thought in the way sense perception does, but is devoid of sensory content. However, so far as I see, this simply evinces lack of speculative imagination or perhaps a mindless parochialism. Why should we suppose that the possibilities of experiential givenness, for human beings or otherwise, are exhausted by the powers of *our* five senses? Surely it is possible, to start with the most obvious point, that other creatures should possess a sensitivity to other physical stimuli that play a role in their functioning analogous to that played by our five senses in our lives. And, to push the matter a bit further, why can't we also envisage presentations that do not stem from the activity of any physical sense organs, as is apparently the case with mystical perception?

## II

As the title indicates, I will be advocating a "perceptual model" of mystical experience. To explain what I mean by that, I must first say something about sense perception, since even if we suppose, as I do, that perception is not restricted to its sensory form, still that is the form with which we are far and away most familiar, and it is by generalizing from sense perception that we acquire a wider concept of perception.

As I see the matter, at the heart of perception (sensory or otherwise) is a phenomenon variously termed *presentation*, *appearance*, or *givenness*. Something is presented to one's experience (awareness) as so-and-so, as blue, as acid, as a house, as Susie's house, or whatever. I take this phenomenon of *presentation*, to be essentially independent of conceptualization, belief, or judgment. It is possible, in principle, for this book to visually present itself to me as blue even if I do not take it to be blue, think of it as blue, *conceptualize* it as blue, *judge* it to be blue, or anything else of the sort. No doubt, in mature human perception presentation is intimately intertwined with conceptualization and belief, but presentation does not consist in anything like that. The best way to see this is to contrast actually seeing the book with thinking about the book, or making judgments about it, in its absence. What is involved in the former case but not in the latter that makes the difference? It can't be anything of a conceptual or judgmental order, for anything of that sort can be present in the latter case when the book is not seen. Reflection on this question leads me to conclude that what makes the difference is that when I see the book it is *presented* to my awareness; it occupies a place in my visual field. This crucial notion of presentation cannot be analyzed; it can be conveyed only by helping another to identify instances of it in experience, as I have just done.

On the view of perception I favor, the "Theory of Appearing," perceiving X simply consists in X's appearing to one, or being presented to one, as

so-and-so. That's all there is to it, as far as what perception is, in contrast to its causes and effects. Where X is an external physical object like a book, to perceive the book is just for the book to appear to one in a certain way.

In saying that a direct awareness that does not essentially involve conceptualization and judgment is at the heart of perception, I am *not* denying that a person's conceptual scheme, beliefs, cognitive readinesses, and so on, can affect the *way* an object presents itself to the subject, what it presents itself *as*. Things do look and sound differently to us after we are familiar with them, have the details sorted out, can smoothly put everything in its place without effort. My house presents a different appearance to me now after long habituation than it did the first time I walked in. Whereas Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* sounded like a formless cacophony the first time I heard it, it now presents itself to me as a complex interweaving of themes. In saying this I am not going back on my assertion that X's presenting itself to one's awareness as P is not the same as S's taking S to be P. The latter involves the application of the concept of P to X, but the former does not, even though the character of the presentation can be influenced by one's conceptual repertoire and one's beliefs. But though my conceptual capacities and tendencies can affect the *way* objects appear to me, they have no power over *what object it is* that looks (sounds . . .) that way. When I look at my living room, the same objects present themselves to my visual awareness as when I first saw it. It is essential not to confuse *what* appears with what it appears *as*.

Even if to perceive X is simply for X to appear to one in a certain way, there can be further necessary conditions for someone to perceive X, for there can be further conditions for X's appearing to one. First, and this is just spelling out one thing that is involved in X's appearing to one, X must exist. I can't (really) perceive a tree unless the tree is there to be perceived. Second, it seems to be necessary for X's appearing to me (for my perceiving X) that X make an important *causal* contribution to my current experience. If there is a thick concrete wall between me and a certain house, thereby preventing light reflected from the house from striking my retina, then it couldn't be that that house is visually presented to me. I will assume such a causal condition in this discussion. Third, I will also assume a doxastic condition, that perceiving X at least tends to give rise to beliefs about X. This is much more questionable than the causal condition, but in any event we are concerned here with cases in which perception does give rise to beliefs about what is perceived.

## III

Now we are ready to turn to the application of the perceptual model to mystical experience. In this essay I will not try to show that mystical experience (even sometimes) constitutes (genuine) perception of God. Remembering the necessary conditions of perception just mentioned, this would

involve showing that God exists and that He makes the right kind of causal contribution to the experiences in question. What I will undertake here is the following. (1) I will argue that mystical experience is the right sort of experience to constitute a genuine perception of God if the other requirements are met. (2) I will argue that there is no bar in principle to these other requirements being satisfied if God does exist. This adds up to a defence of the thesis that it is quite possible that human beings do sometimes perceive God if God is "there" to be perceived. In other words, the thesis defended is that if God exists, then mystical experience is quite properly thought of as mystical perception.

If mystical experience is not construed perceptually, how can it be understood? The most common alternative is to think of it as made up of purely subjective feelings and sensations, to which is added an *explanation* according to which the experience is due to God. A recent example of this approach is the important book, *Religious Experience*, by Wayne Proudfoot. Proudfoot goes so far as to identify the "noetic" quality that James and many others have noted in mystical experience with the supposition by the subject that the experience must be given a theological rather than a naturalistic explanation.

It is not difficult to show that the people I have quoted and countless others take their mystical experiences to be perceptual, to involve what I have been calling a direct presentation of God to their awareness, though they do not typically use this terminology. They take their experience to contrast with thinking about God, calling up mental images, entertaining propositions, reasoning, or remembering something about God, just as seeing a tree contrasts with these other cognitive relations to it. They take it that God has been *presented* or *given* to their consciousness in generically the same way as that in which objects in the environment are *presented* to one's consciousness in sense perception. They emphasize the difference between presence to consciousness and absence. Saint Teresa says that God "presents Himself to the soul by a knowledge brighter than the sun." Again she contrasts a "consciousness of the presence of God" with "spiritual feelings and effects of great love and faith of which we become conscious," and with "the fresh resolutions which we make with such deep emotion." Although she takes it that the latter is a "great favour" that "comes from God," still it does not amount to God's actually being present. Another writer who clearly makes this distinction is Angela of Foligno.

(4) At times God comes into the soul without being called, and He instills into her fire, love, and sometimes sweetness; and the soul believes this comes from God, and delights therein. But she does not yet know, or see, that He dwells in her; she perceives His grace, in which she delights. . . . And beyond this the soul receives the gift of seeing God. God says to her "Behold Me!" and the soul sees Him dwelling within her. She sees Him more clearly than one man sees another. For the eyes of the soul behold a plenitude of

which I cannot speak: a plenitude which is not bodily but spiritual, of which I can say nothing. And the soul rejoices in that sight with an ineffable joy; and this is the manifest and certain sign that God indeed dwells in her.

Thus it is quite clear that the people cited, who are representative of a vast throng, take their experiences to be structured the way, on my view, perception generally is structured. In fact, it may be thought that it is too easy to show this, too much like shooting fish in a barrel. For haven't I chosen my cases on the basis of the subjects' taking themselves to be directly aware of God? They are tailor-made for my purpose. I must plead guilty to picking cases that conform to my construal. But the significant point is that it is so easy to find such cases and that they are so numerous, given the fact that most mystical experiences are not reported at all. As pointed out earlier, I do not wish to deny that there are other forms of "religious experience" and even other forms of experience of God, such as the indirect experiences of God mentioned earlier. My contention is that there is a large body of experiences of God that are perceptual in character, and that they have played a prominent role in Christianity and other religions.

I don't know what could be said against this position except to claim that people who report such experiences are all confused about the character of their experience. Let's consider the following charge.

These people were all having strongly affective experiences that, because of their theological assumptions and preoccupations, they confused with a direct experience of God. Thus (1) was in an unusual state of exaltation that he interpreted as the power and goodness of God penetrating him. In (4) the "ineffable joy" that Angela says to be "the manifest and certain sign that God indeed dwells in her" is simply a state of feeling that her theological convictions lead her to *interpret* as an awareness of the presence of God. Another possibility is that the person is suddenly seized with an extremely strong conviction of the presence of God, together with sensations and feelings that seem to confirm it. Thus Teresa says that she "had a most distinct feeling that He was always on my right hand, a witness of all I did."

It is conceivable that one should suppose that a purely affective experience or a strongly held conviction should involve the experiential presentation of God when it doesn't, especially if there is a strong need or longing for the latter. But, even if an individual's account of the character of his/her own experience is not infallible, it must certainly be taken seriously. Who is in a better position to determine whether S is having an experience as of something's presenting itself to S as divine than S? We would need strong reasons to override the subject's confident report of the character of her experience. And where could we find such reasons? I suspect that most people who put forward these alternative diagnoses do so because they have general philosophical reasons for sup-

posing either that God does not exist or that no human being could perceive Him, and they fail to recognize the difference between a *phenomenological* account of object presentation, and the occurrence of veridical perception. In any event, once we get straight about all this, I cannot see any reason for doubting the subjects' account of the character of their experience, whatever reasons there may be for doubting that God Himself does in fact appear to them.

If these cases are to conform to our account of perceptual consciousness, they must seem to involve God's appearing to the person as being and/or doing so-and-so. And our subjects do tell us this: God is experienced as good, powerful, loving, compassionate, and as exhibiting "plentitude." He is experienced as speaking, forgiving, comforting, and strengthening. And yet how can these be ways in which God presents Himself to experience? Power and goodness are complex dispositional properties or bases thereof, dispositions to act in various ways in various situations. And to forgive or to strengthen someone is to carry out a certain intention. None of this can be read off the phenomenal surface of experience. This is quite different from something's presenting itself to one's sensory consciousness as red, round, sweet, loud, or pungent. Isn't it rather that the subject is *interpreting, or taking*, what she is aware of as being good or powerful, as forgiving or strengthening? But then what is God *experienced* as being or doing? We seem to still lack an answer.

But that charge misconstrues the situation. The basic point is that we have different sorts of concepts for specifying how something looks, sounds, tastes, or otherwise perceptually appears. There are *phenomenal* concepts that specify the felt qualities that objects present themselves as bearing—round, red, acrid, etc. But there are also *comparative* concepts that specify a mode of appearance in terms of the sort of objective thing that typically appears in that way. In reporting sensory appearances we typically use comparative concepts whenever the appearances involve something more complex than one or two basic sensory qualities. Thus we say, "She looks like Susie," "It tastes like a pineapple," "It sounds like Bach." In these cases there undoubtedly is some complex pattern of simple sensory qualities, but it is beyond our powers to analyze the appearance into its simple components. We are thrown back on the use of comparative concepts to report how something looks, sounds, or tastes. And so it is in our religious cases. Our subjects tell us that God presented Himself to their experience as a good, powerful, compassionate, forgiving being could be expected to appear. In reporting modes of divine appearance in this way, they are proceeding just as we typically do in reporting modes of sensory appearance.

#### IV

Now for the task of showing that if God exists there is no bar to the (not infrequent) satisfaction of the causal and doxastic conditions by the subject of mystical experience. First consider the doxastic condition. It is clear that

mystical experience typically gives rise to beliefs about God. To be sure, those who perceive God as loving, powerful, and so on, usually believed that God is that way long before they had that experience. But the same is true of sense perception. My 50,000th look at my house doesn't generate any important new beliefs. I knew just what my house looks like long before that 50,000th look. That is why I put the doxastic condition in terms of a "tendency" to engender beliefs about what is perceived. However, in both sensory and mystical cases some kinds of new beliefs will almost always be produced. Even if I don't see anything new about my house on that umpteenth look, I at least learn that it is blue and tall *today*. When what we perceive is a person the new beliefs will be more interesting. On my 50,000th look at my wife I not only learn that she is still beautiful today, but I learn what she is doing right now. And similarly with God. One who perceives God will thereby come to learn that God is strengthening her or comforting her *then*, or telling her so-and-so *then*. There is, if anything, even less of a problem with the doxastic condition here.

The causal condition calls for a bit more discussion. First, there is no reason to think it impossible that God, if He exists, does causally contribute to the occurrence of mystical experiences. Quite the contrary. If God exists and things are as supposed by classical theism, God causally contributes to everything that occurs. That follows just from the fact that nothing would exist without the creative and sustaining activity of God. And with respect to many things, including mystical experiences, God's causality presumably extends farther than that, though the precise story will vary from one theology to another. To fix our thoughts let us say that it is possible (and remember that we are concerned here only with whether this causal condition *can* be satisfied) that at least some of these experiences occur only because God intentionally presents Himself to the subject's awareness as so-and-so.

If may well be pointed out that not every causal contributor to an experience is perceived via that experience. When I see a house, light waves and goings on in my nervous system form parts of the causal chain leading to the visual experience, but I don't see them. Thus it is not enough that God figures somehow or other in the causes of the experience; He would have to make the right kind of causal contribution. But what is the right kind? There is no one answer to this question for all perceptual modalities. The causal contribution a seen object makes to the production of visual experience (transmitting light to the retina) is different from the causal contribution a felt object makes to tactile experience, and different from the causal contribution a heard object makes to aural experience. And how do we tell, for each modality, what the crucial causal contribution is? We have no a priori insight into this. We cannot abstract from everything we have learned from perception and still ascertain how an object must be causally related to a visual experience in order to be what is seen in that experience. Quite the contrary. We learn this by first determining in many cases what is *seen*, felt, or heard in those cases, and then looking for some causal contribution

that is distinctive of the object perceived. That is, we have first to be able to determine *what is seen*; then on the basis of that we determine how an entity has to be causally related to the visual experience to be seen therein. We have no resources for doing it the other way around, first determining the specific causal requirement and then picking out objects seen on the basis of what satisfies that requirement.

The application of this to divine perception is as follows. We will have a chance of determining how God has to be causally related to an experience in order to be perceived only if we can first determine in a number of cases that it is God who is being perceived. And since that is so, we can't rule out the possibility of perceiving God on the grounds that God can't be related to the relevant experience in the right way. For unless we do sometimes perceive God we are unable to determine what the right way is. Hence, so long as God does make some causal contribution to the relevant experiences, we can't rule out God's being perceived in those experiences on the grounds that He isn't causally related to them in the right way. To be sure, by the same token we cannot show that we do perceive God by showing that God is causally related to the experiences in the right way. But showing that is no part of our purpose here. It will be sufficient to show that, so far as we can see, there is no reason to doubt that it is possible that God should satisfy an appropriate causal requirement for being perceived in at least some of the cases in which people take themselves to be directly aware of Him.

## V

If my arguments have been sound, we are justified in thinking of the experience of God as a mode of perception in the same generic sense of the term as sense perception. And if God exists, there is no reason to suppose that this perception is not sometimes veridical rather than delusory. I will conclude by mentioning a couple of respects in which this conclusion is of importance.

First, the main function of the experience of God in theistic religion is that it constitutes a mode, an avenue of communion between God and us. It makes it possible for us to enter into personal interaction with God. And if it involves our directly perceiving God in a sense generically the same as that in which we perceive each other, this can be personal intercourse in a literal sense, rather than some stripped down, analogical or symbolic reconception thereof. We can have the real thing, not a metaphorical substitute.

Second, there are bearings on the cognitive significance of this mode of experience. If it is perceptual in character, and if it is possible that the other requirements should be satisfied for it to be a genuine perception of God, then the question of whether it is genuine is just a question of whether it is what it seems to its subject to be. Thus the question of genuineness arises here in just the same way as for sense perception, making possible a uniform treatment of the epistemology of the two modes of experience. This is not to beg

the question of the genuineness of mystical perception. It could still be true that sense perception is the real thing, whereas mystical perception is not. And it could still be true that sense perception provides knowledge about its objects, whereas mystical perception yields no such results. The point is only that the *problems*, both as to the status of the perception and as to the epistemic status of perceptual beliefs, arise in the same form for both. This contrasts with the situation on the widespread view that "experience of God" is to be construed as purely subjective feelings and sensations to which supernaturalistic causal hypotheses are added. On that view the issues concerning the two modes of experience will look very different, unless one is misguided enough to treat sense perception in the same fashion. For on this subjectivist construal the subject is faced with the task of justifying a causal hypothesis before he can warrantably claim to be perceiving God. Whereas if the experience is given a perceptual construal from the start, we will at least have to take seriously the view that a claim to be perceiving God is *prima facie* acceptable on its own merits, pending any sufficient reasons to the contrary.<sup>1</sup>

## NOTE

1. See my *Perceiving God* (Cornell University Press, 1991) for a development of this last idea.

## Perceiving God: A Critique

WILLIAM L. ROWE

William Alston contends that we should accept the reports of those who claim to perceive God unless we have sufficient reason to the contrary. William L. Rowe, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Purdue University, disagrees. He argues that we do not know what would count as a sufficient reason for deciding that someone's religious experiences are delusive because God's ways are not understandable. Furthermore, such experiences are embedded in a plurality of religious traditions. How can we accept all these conflicting reports of different divine presences?

From *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, Second Edition, by Rowe, 1993.

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Experiences in which one senses the immediate presence of a divine being may include some visual and auditory content. . . . But other experiences of the divine do not contain sensory content. Here is a report of one such experience.

all at once I . . . felt the presence of God—I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it—as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether. . . . Then, slowly, the ecstasy left my heart; that is, I felt that God had withdrawn the communion which he had granted. . . . I think it well to add that in this ecstasy of mine God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste; moreover, that the feeling of his presence was accompanied with no determinate localization. . . . At bottom the expression most apt to render what I felt is this: God was present, though invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him.<sup>1</sup>

The question before us is whether the existence of such experiences as these provide us (or at least those who have them) with a *good reason* to believe that God (or some sort of divine being) exists. Initially, one might be tempted to think that they do not on the grounds that reports of religious experiences may be nothing more than reports of certain *feelings* (joy, ecstasy, etc.) that now and then come over some people who already believe in God and are perhaps all too eager to feel themselves singled out for a special appearance by the divine. Against such an objection, however, we should note that a number of those who report having ordinary religious experiences are keenly aware of the difference between experiences of one's own feelings (joy, sadness, peacefulness, etc.) and experiences that involve a sense of the presence of some other being. They are also aware of the fact that wanting a certain experience may lead one to mistake some other experience for it. Unless we have some very strong reason not to, we should take their reports as sincere, careful efforts to express the contents of their experiences. And those reports are not primarily reports of subjective psychological states; they are reports of encounters with what is taken to be an independently existing divine being.

But still, even if we acknowledge that the experiences cannot fairly be described as reports of nothing more than one's feelings, why should we think they are veridical perceptions of what they seem to be? Machbeth's experience of a dagger isn't fairly described as Machbeth having a certain feeling; it is an experience which purports to be of some object apart from himself. But the experience was a hallucination. Why shouldn't we think that experiences in which one senses the immediate presence of God (or some divine figure) are all hallucinatory? The answer given by those who think religious experiences constitute a good reason to believe God exists is that we should dismiss them as delusory only if we have some special reason to think that they are delusory. And in the absence of such special reasons, the rational thing to do is to

view them as probably veridical. It will help us to look at this line of argument in some detail.

If a person has an experience which he or she takes to be of some particular object, is the fact that he or she has that experience a *good reason* to think that particular object exists? Our first reaction is to say no. We are inclined to say no because we all can think of experiences which seem to be of some particular object, when in fact no such object exists. Consider two examples. You walk into a room and have a visual experience that you take to be a perception of a red wall. Unknown to you there are red lights shining on the white wall you are looking at, thus making it appear red. Here you are experiencing an actually existing wall that happens to be white, but there is no red wall for you to perceive. How then can the fact that you have an experience which clearly seems to be a perception of a red wall be a good reason for thinking that there actually is a red wall? Again, unknown to you someone puts a powerful hallucinogenic drug in your coffee resulting in your having an experience which you take to be a perception of a large, coiled snake in front of the chair in which you are sitting. Unlike our first example (there is a wall, it's just not red), there is no snake at all that you are seeing. Others in the room who have no reason to deceive you assure you that there is no snake in the room. Your experience of the snake is entirely delusory. So, how can the fact that you have an experience which clearly seems to be a perception of a coiled snake be a good reason for thinking that the coiled snake exists?

For an experience to be a good reason for believing a claim to be true is for that experience to rationally justify you in believing that claim *provided that you have no reasons for thinking otherwise*. Reasons for thinking otherwise are either (a) reasons for thinking that claim to be false or (b) reasons for thinking that, given the circumstances in which it occurs, the experience is not sufficiently indicative of the truth of the claim. Consider again our second example. Since we know that actually existing physical things (including snakes) would be seen by the other people in the room if they are really there, you come to have a Type A reason for thinking otherwise. That is, when others who are in a position to see it say there is no snake, you come to have some reason for thinking that the snake does not actually exist. In our first example, if we suppose that all you come to know is that red lights are shining on the wall and that such lights would make the wall appear red even if it is white, then our reason to think otherwise is not itself a reason to think that there is no red wall. It is a Type B reason. What it tells us is that, whether the wall is red or not, in the circumstances that exist (red lights are shining on the wall) your experience is not sufficiently indicative of its being true that the wall is red. For you now know that you could be having that experience even if the wall is white.

What we've seen is that we must distinguish an experience being a good reason for a claim from that experience justifying that claim *no matter what else we know*. Those who think that having an experience that one takes to be

of some particular object is a *good reason* to think that particular object exists recognize that we may know or come to know Type A or Type B reasons to think otherwise. All they insist is that in the *absence* of such defeating reasons, one who has such an experience is rationally justified in believing that the particular object exists. One prominent philosopher has argued that what is at stake here is a basic principle of rationality, a principle he calls the Principle of Credulity.<sup>2</sup> According to this principle, if a person has an experience which seems to be of *x*, then, unless there is some reason to think otherwise, it is rational to believe that *x* exists. If we grant this principle, it would seem arbitrary to refuse to apply it to religious experiences, experiences in which one senses the immediate presence of the divine. So, unless we have some reason to question these experiences, it would seem rational to believe that God or some divine being exists. . . .

[We should note two difficulties in the view that the Principle of Credulity renders it rational for us to accept ordinary religious experiences as veridical. The first difficulty is that the Principle of Credulity presupposes that we have some understanding of what reasons there might be for questioning our experiences and some way of telling whether or not these reasons are present. Consider again our example of your experience which you take to be a perception of a large, coiled snake. Like other physical objects that make up the world we perceive by our five senses, snakes are public objects that are observable by others who satisfy certain conditions. That is, we can predict that people with good eyesight will see a snake (if one is there) provided there is good light and they look in the right direction. It is because physical objects are subject to such predictions that we can understand what reasons there might be for questioning an experience which seems to be a perception of a snake and can often tell whether such reasons are present. In the case of divine beings, however, matters are quite different. Presumably, it is entirely up to God whether to reveal his presence to some human being. If God does so, he may or may not disclose himself to others who are in a similar situation. What this means is that it is quite difficult to discover reasons for thinking that someone's ordinary religious experience is delusive. But since the Principle of Credulity supposes that we understand what reasons there might be to question an experience, some doubt exists as to whether the principle can be fairly applied to experiences whose subjects take them to be perceptions of the presence of a divine being. Of course, since God is a perfectly good being, we can from that fact alone discover some reason for thinking an experience that purports to be of God is delusive. For suppose someone reports an experience which he takes to be a perception of God commanding him to kill all those who sincerely seek to live a moral and holy life. We can be confident that God did not reveal that message and thus have a reason for thinking the experience to be delusive. Some doubt remains, however, whether there is an adequate range of reasons for questioning religious experiences to warrant much confidence in the application of the Principle of Credulity to

them. Thus, once we come to learn that a presumption of the Principle of Credulity is not adequately satisfied by religious experiences, it is at least doubtful that the principle justifies us in holding religious experiences to be genuine perceptions of reality.

Suppose someone who has not had religious experiences examines various reports of those who have enjoyed them. One salient feature of these experiences is that most of them are embedded in one or another of a plurality of religious traditions, traditions that cannot all be true. For example, Saul's experience on the road to Damascus is embedded in Christianity as an experience of Jesus as a divine being. No such experience is a part of Judaism or Islam. Indeed, within these religious traditions Jesus is not a divine being at all. Experiences of Allah in Islam or God in Judaism are not experiences of a divine being who is a trinity of persons, as is the Christian God. In Hinduism one may have an experience of Krishna, but not Jesus, as a divine being. Moreover, Hinduism also includes a strain in which the divine presence, Brahman, is experienced as something other than a person. It seems unlikely that all of these religious experiences can be veridical perceptions of a divine presence. These experiences are embedded in and support rival religious traditions that contradict one another. Realizing this, what view should be held by a person who has not had any religious experiences? If the Principle of Credulity works for any, it will work equally well for all. But they can hardly all be veridical perceptions of a divine presence. Faced with this situation, it would appear that the rational thing for this person to do is not to accept any one of these religious experiences as veridical. So, even if we agree to continue applying the Principle of Credulity to religious experiences, it may well be that the person who has not had a religious experience is rationally justified in not accepting such experiences as veridical perceptions of reality. For the fact that these experiences are embedded in and support conflicting religious traditions may provide that person with a reason for not accepting any particular religious experience as veridical.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1936), pp. 67-68.
2. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 254.