

Editorial

# Introduction to the Special Issue *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*

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In this Special Issue of *Religions*, we have tried to bring together new research that can shed light on epistemological problems faced by accounts of religious experiences together with empirical research about its nature and qualities. We are happy to present the resulting collection of new and original papers.

The ‘Cognitive Science of Religion’ is a relatively new movement that aims to use recent work in neuroscience and related fields to elaborate a naturalistic explanation for religious experience, belief, and practice. The resulting scientific model is often invoked as an argument against religion; if a completely naturalistic explanation is available, then we need not appeal to any supernatural things to account for religions. Walter Scott Stepanenko’s “The Epistemic Parity of Religious Apologetic and Religion-Debunking Responses to the Cognitive Science of Religion” takes on the Cognitive Science of Religion as a challenge to religious belief, arguing that the explanations posited by CSR, even if they do explain the phenomena, rely on a presupposition of naturalism. He argues that a similar scientific project, with theistic presuppositions, would be epistemically on a par with it.

Religious diversity provides fodder for another set of arguments against religious belief. Stated in a broad outline, the argument is that since different religions make claims that are inconsistent with one another, they cannot all be true. But they are also all epistemically on comparable footing, so there is no good reason to believe one of them over the others. It is therefore epistemically bad to accept the claims of one religion over the others. Answers to this argument must either play down the diversity or show that there is good epistemic reason to accept one religion over the others. One way to take the sting out of religious diversity is to deny the inconsistency of the different views. Miguel Rincon’s “Diversity and Interpretation: Toward a Pluralist Realist Description of Religious Experience” argues that there is room for a pluralism about religious experience, while maintaining realism about the object of religious experience. He argues that the way to do this is to move from ‘religion’, which is about beliefs, to ‘spirituality’, which is about lived experience. The fact of one person’s spiritual experience thereby does not conflict with other people’s spiritual experience.

Juan Morales’s “The Ecology of Religious Knowledge” offers another account of the epistemology of religious experience which respects the plurality of accounts of religious experiences, while maintaining their epistemic value. This approach, invoking the ecology of knowledges, involves as integral to the experiences the particularities and environments of the experiencers, which allows for diverse accounts of a multifaceted and inexhaustible ultimate reality. While Rincon focuses on what is the same among religious experiences from different traditions, Morales focuses on the multifaceted nature of the ultimate reality, such that the different experiences can all be of the same thing, even in all their diversity.

Perhaps the most exciting take on the diversity problem in this collection is Haeyoung Seong’s “The Unique Concept of God in Donghak: an Emanation of the Religious Experiences of Suun Choe Jeu.” Some religions present the ultimate reality as a being separate from the world, which we could call ‘dualistic’ because they divide the world into two categories: the ultimate reality and everything else. Other religions think of reality as consisting ultimately of only one thing, so experiences of the ultimate reality are



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experiences of something monistic. The dualistic and monistic pictures are often thought to be irreconcilable. Seong presents the mystical experiences of Suun Choe Jeu, the founder of Donghak, as an example of how experiences may be both dualistic and monistic, and the resulting conception of God may actually be both monistic and dualistic.

A more modest approach to the diversity argument is to admit that the different religious views really are mutually inconsistent, and it is impossible for any single reality to answer to the multifarious descriptions of the objects of religious experience, but that reports of religious experiences should be extended the same presumptive trust that we extend to other kinds of testimony. Kirk Loughheed's "Religious Disagreement, Mystical Experience, and Doxastic Minimalism: A Critical Notice of John Pittard's *Disagreement, Deference, and Religious Commitment*" gives a detailed review of Pittard's recent book, in which he argues against giving religious experiences 'presumptive trust' (which is akin to *prima facie* justification). Loughheed, in defense of presumptive trust, argues that Pittard has not shown we should not extend presumptive trust to religious beliefs.

On the empirical side, Ron Cole-Turner's "Psychedelic Epistemology: William James and the 'Noetic Quality' of Mystical Experience" defends the therapeutic value of psychedelic drugs, in light of the fact that they frequently produce mystical experiences, and those experiences have what William James called a 'noetic quality', that is, a sense that what you are experiencing is objectively real. He starts from William James's analysis of mystical experience, and then shows that psychedelic drug experiences share many of those features. He then argues that it is precisely the 'noetic quality', the quality of seeming to be of objective reality, is what give psychedelic drugs their therapeutic value.

Near-death experiences are practically universally dismissed as illusory, precisely because naturalistic explanations seem to be available, and more than adequate to explain the experiences. Jonathan Kopel and I, in our "Near-Death Experiences and Religious Experience: and Exploration of Spirituality in Medicine" argue that near-death experiences, while usually treated separately from religious experience generally, should be handled in the same way as other religious experiences, and that, in spite of naturalistic explanations offered by medicine, they should be extended the same epistemic status as other religious experiences. The result will be of benefit to philosophy and medicine alike.

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