Religious Studies (2012) **48**, 101–117 © Cambridge University Press 2011
doi:10.1017/S0034412511000102

Concepts and religious experiences: Wayne Proudfoot on the cultural construction of experiences

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Abstract: The constructivist position, that mystical experiences are determined by the experiencer's cultural context, is now more prevalent among scholars of religion than the perennialist position, which maintains that mystical experiences have a common core that is cross-culturally universal. In large part, this is due to the efforts of Wayne Proudfoot in his widely accepted book, *Religious Experience*. In this article, I identify some significant unresolved issues in Proudfoot's defence of constructivism. My aim is not to defend perennialism, but to specify some objections to the constructivist thesis that constructivists need to address more adequately.

Introduction

Over the past decades the general consensus among scholars of religion has shifted from the perennialist position on mysticism to the constructivist one. Perennialists maintain that religious experiences have a common core that is the same across religious tradition, time, and place. According to the constructivist view, on the other hand, the experiencer's cultural context determines the nature of the experience to such an extent that no such common, cross-cultural core is possible. No one has done more to turn the tide to the constructivist position than Wayne Proudfoot and Steven Katz.[1] For both Proudfoot and Katz, the way to show that religious experiences are determined by the experiencer's culture is to show that religious experiences are essentially conceptual in nature; that is, they necessarily involve the experiencer's concepts and beliefs, and since concepts and beliefs are products of culture, the experiences are necessarily cultural in nature.[2] This debate has wide-ranging implications in the philosophy and theory of religion. For one thing, perennialists can appeal to the common core to

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buttress the case for religious unity: the world's religions appear diverse and mutually exclusive on the level of ritual, doctrine, and belief, but underlying the supposed diversity is a fundamental commonality to all religions, located in the core of the mystical experience. Perennialists' endorsement of this underlying unity counters any view that one particular religion has exclusive access to religious truth and is superior to other religions, and also counters the view that all religions are thoroughly illusory and misguided. For another thing, religious experience has played an important apologetic role in justifying belief in God or some other religious reality. Many religious scholars, theistic and non-theistic, have claimed that mystical and religious experiences serve as evidence for the reality of whatever is experienced, whether God, nirvana, or some extra-ordinary and religiously significant form of consciousness.[3] If perennialists are right that mystical experiences have a common core, then they can appeal to a wide variety of experiences from various traditions as rational justification for belief in the existence of whatever reality they think the mystical experiences indicate.

Notwithstanding the fact that Proudfoot's and Katz's views have won widespread acceptance, in my view, their defences of constructivism have deficiencies at key points. In this essay, I will examine Proudfoot's arguments for constructivism, posing critical questions. My intent in doing so is not to defend perennialism. My own sense is that any attempt at a defence of perennialism faces major challenges. Katz and Proudfoot have highlighted problems with the perennialist thesis, especially in the tendency of perennialists to assume too quickly, without careful attention to historical and linguistic context, that reports of religious experiences in mystical texts from across time and culture are referring to the same sort of phenomenal state of consciousness. However, my aim in this article is not to score points for either perennialism or constructivism, but to specify some objections to the constructivist thesis that constructivists need to address more adequately.

I focus on Proudfoot in this essay, in large part because the main problem with Katz's account has already been identified by others. As Donald Rothberg points out, Katz sees fit merely to posit the constructivist position as an assumption, apparently in need of no defence.[4] Katz tells us early in his essay, 'Language, epistemology, and mysticism', that he subscribes to the 'epistemological assumption' that 'there are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences'. He continues, 'The experience itself … is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to … his experience'.[5] Despite his professed agnosticism on metaphysical matters,[6] he in fact employs all manner of controversial beliefs regarding the relationship between mind and reality. The foremost such assumption is that 'the mind is active in constructing [some experienced object] *x* as experienced', and, 'The object of experience … is regulated by structures of consciousness and experience'.[7] Katz seems to be promoting some variety of Kantianism here (I won't burden us with

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interpretative questions about Kant's own views on these matters), which sees the mind's concepts as something like filters, processing sense data into intelligible entities. If Katz's readers are already attracted to this sort of view, then they will find that all is well and good with Katz's position. However, what Katz does not acknowledge is that there are alternatives to this Kantian view. Donald Davidson has criticized the notion of a conceptual scheme that supposedly configures indeterminate sense data into determinate things,[8] and W. V. Quine, Wilfrid Sellars, and Robert Brandom think of perception on a model of stimulus and response (physical stimulus and linguistic/conceptual observation report) instead of mental filter and raw data.[9] In philosophy of religion, Nicholas Wolterstorff has proposed Thomas Reid as a better source for religious epistemology than Kant.[10] Since Katz states his own views on these matters with no supporting argumentation, he gives us no reason to prefer his account to these or any other alternative ones. And since his claim that experiences are conceptual in nature depends on his asserted but unargued views on the nature of concepts, his constructive project in this essay stands on shaky ground.

Proudfoot on intentionality

Proudfoot, to his credit, sees the view that concepts are constituents of religious experiences as something for which one must argue and not merely state. Proudfoot's book is a seminal work in both philosophy of religion and theory and methods in religion, and his discussions of mysticism, religious language, interpretation, and explanation have all rightfully exercised enormous influence. His arguments in support of constructivism deserve careful attention. I find three primary arguments that Proudfoot makes to support his claim that beliefs and concepts, and thus the culture from which they spring, are constituents of experiences. These arguments are interwoven and oftentimes not clearly distinguishable, but nevertheless, they do involve distinct lines of thought. I will treat each in turn.

The first argument has to do with intentionality. To put it in the simplest terms, an intentional attitude, such as a belief or an emotion, is one that is about something or directed toward something. If I believe that a dog is on the hearth, then my belief is about a dog. An intentional object does not have to be a real object: my belief may be mistaken – it is but a shadow on the hearth, it turns out – but still a dog is what my mistaken belief is about. Proudfoot writes, in a criticism of the person he thinks is a primary champion of non-conceptual religious experiences, 'Schleiermacher's account requires that religious consciousness be intentional and that it be independent of all concepts and beliefs, and … these two claims are contradictory.'[11] The claims are contradictory because the person having an intentional religious experience must possess and be exercising the concept corresponding to the object of the religious experience.

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'An intentional object', Proudfoot writes, 'must always be specified under a certain description, and that description must be one that is available to the person to whom the emotion, attitude or belief is ascribed.'[12] In other words, if I'm angry that my bus is late, my anger is about the late bus, and I must possess and be exercising the concepts 'bus' and 'late' and the belief 'my bus is late' in order to be in the mental state.

Proudfoot focuses his remarks about intentionality on Schleiermacher, but he has a broader target in mind, given that Schleiermacher's programme has influenced so many. So we can ask about Proudfoot's general point about intentionality, concepts, and experience, without belabouring the interpretative questions about the accuracy of his reading of Schleiermacher. The first thing to say is that Proudfoot is surely correct that in many cases religious experiences are intentional and do involve concepts. If I am having a vision of St Francis, which I understand as such, I must possess and be exercising the concept 'St. Francis'.[13] However, the perennialists could respond that two types of experiences do not succumb to Proudfoot's claims about intentionality and conceptuality: complex experiences and so-called 'pure consciousness' experiences. I'll look at each of these in turn.

In a complex experience, the perennialist could say, the phenomenology of the experience could be complex, involving an aspect that is culturally determined as well as an acultural aspect.[14] As Evelyn Underhill puts it, 'The dies which the mystics have used are many … But the gold from which this diverse coinage is struck is always the same precious metal: always the same Beatific Vision of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty which is one.'[15] Beneath the particular differences among experiences of Krishna, Mary, and nirvana lies a deeper, more fundamental aspect of the experience: a sense of the sacred, according to some, or of the numinous, or something along those lines.[16]

Consider the case of a boy in the schoolyard who is hit in the back of the head by a bully's baseball. His experience at that moment would be complex indeed: the unexpected physical pain whose source is initially unknown, the gradual realization of what had occurred, followed by anger at the bully and the jeering onlookers, and then humiliation. The anger and humiliation are clearly intentional, the former is directed at the bully and the latter is about the fact that the boy has been embarrassed in front of his peers. The pain, however, as a sensation, is not intentional. Not all mental states are intentional, and pain is a prime example of one that is not.[17] So the boy's complex experience at that moment has intentional aspects and non-intentional ones. In identifying these as different aspects of the experience, I don't mean to imply that they are compartmentalized or clearly phenomenally distinct to the boy, I just want to note that it is possible to undergo distinct emotions and sensations at the same time.

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Proudfoot comes closest to considering the view I am discussing when he warns against any attempt to distinguish between a (non-conceptual) experience and the (conceptual) interpretation of the experience, writing,

> Attempts to differentiate a core from its interpretations may cause the theorist to lose the very experience he is trying to analyze. … It might indeed be possible to produce cross-cultural documentation of some common physiological states or mental images in the experiences of mystics. But to focus on these, as some theorists have done, is not to delineate a core but to attend to something other than the experience. A decelerated heart rate may be common to some mystics and to all athletes at the height of training, and it may be a natural endowment of some individuals in contrast to others. Deautomatization … may occur as a consequence of a psychotic break, of finding oneself in a completely unfamiliar and possibly threatening environment, or of preparation through spiritual exercises. But to attend to such phenomena while disregarding the content of the mystic's beliefs and the expectations he or she brings to the experience is to err in one's priorities. What others have dismissed as interpretative overlay may be the distinguishing mark of the experience.[18]

It is not clear, though, why focusing on 'common physiological states or mental images' would be to 'attend to something other than the experience' as opposed to attending to one (among other) aspects of the experience. If experiences are complex, then disregarding the mystic's beliefs to examine some common physiological occurrence (that registers in the mystic's awareness) is not necessarily an error in priority, since students of mysticism could have different priorities for different sorts of inquiries, and the perennialist project of seeking commonalities would naturally prioritize any aspect of complex experiences that is possibly common across cultures.

What the perennialist can maintain, then, is that, sure enough, an intentional aspect is present in religious experiences, but that does not mean that the intentional element exhausts the experience. There could be non-intentional aspects as well, more akin to a sensation than an emotion, and those non-intentional aspects are what serve as the common core across religious traditions and historical eras. The perennialist admits that religious experiences involve intentionality, but insists that their intentional element does not exhaust the experience. The importance to the perennialist of the appeal to a non-intentional aspect to experiences that is cross-culturally universal is that the intentional objects that mystics of different religious traditions report experiencing vary so much. But if in addition to these varying intentional objects there is some unvarying non-intentional aspect to the experiences, then this aspect could serve

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the two purposes to which perennialism is so often put: to propose a fundamental unity to all the world's religions and to supply a basis for rational belief in whatever reality the perennialist thinks the mystical experience reflects.

The second type of experience perennialists could cite in response to Proudfoot's argument about intentionality is an experience of nothing but consciousness itself (pure consciousness).[19] In addition to the world religions' accounts of experiences of gods, saints, ancestors, angels, and the like, we find reports of experiences that do not involve such objects, but rather a special type of consciousness that is devoid of objects. These types of experiences are universal, the perennialist could say, even if the experiences that have more discrete objects are not.

Pure consciousness experiences are considerably more controversial than complex experiences, and it is not at all clear that it is possible to have an experience with no object. For now, though, I'll just point out that Proudfoot does not take steps to rule out the possibility of this sort of experience, and so his arguments are incomplete. The fact that Proudfoot doesn't sufficiently treat complex experiences or pure consciousness experiences detracts from his attempts to show that experiences are necessarily conceptual, and hence necessarily cultural.

Concepts as necessary preconditions for experiences

Proudfoot's second main argument in defence of constructivism is closely related to his argument from intentionality. He thinks that the fact that it takes concepts to identify a religious experience means that concepts are a part of the experience. He makes this claim a number of times, but he presses it most strongly in his criticism of Schleiermacher. He writes: 'In *The Christian Faith* as in *On Religion*, Schleiermacher defends the incoherent thesis that the religious consciousness is both independent of thought and can be identified only by reference to concepts and beliefs.'[20] Further, Proudfoot criticizes Schleiermacher's notion of the feeling of absolute dependence, which is central to *The Christian Faith*, with these remarks: 'If reference to the concept of dependence and to an intentional object or codeterminant is required in order to identify the distinctive moment of religious experience, then it cannot be independent of language or thought.'[21] When Proudfoot makes these sorts of claims, it seems at first glance that he is confusing what is involved in the act of identifying something with the nature of the thing identified. This is precisely William Alston's objection to Proudfoot, when he says, 'From the fact that we use a concept to pick out cabbages as vegetables, it does not follow that cabbages are, have, or use concepts or judgments.'[22] Although Proudfoot's language often suggests that he is making the mistake that Alston attributes to him, I do not think he is. Rather, if I understand Proudfoot correctly, the point he is trying to make is that for a subject to

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have a religious experience, it is a necessary precondition that she or he have certain concepts. In the case of Schleiermacher, one must have the concept of 'dependence' in order to have a feeling of absolute dependence, just as one must have the concept of 'airplane' in order to have a fear of flying. Proudfoot writes:

> In the absence of the concepts of cause and dependence, or of the thought that the entire causal nexus we call the world might depend on some more comprehensive power distinct from it, the consciousness of absolute dependence Schleiermacher describes would not be available … The attribution of emotions to a person presupposes the ascription to that person of certain concepts, beliefs, and attitudes. Fear of flying assumes the belief that airplanes, or other vehicles for air travel, are dangerous. The feeling of absolute dependence assumes the belief that my activity and the world in which I am situated and with which I interact owe their origin and sustenance to some other power.[23]

It helps to clarify Proudfoot's position to realize that in his view of what it takes to identify an experience, we must identify an experience in the terms in which the subject of the experience understands it. The subject of the experience must believe that, for example, God exists and that what she is experiencing is God in order to have her experience, and so, Proudfoot says, these beliefs and their conceptual contents are necessary conditions of the experience.[24] The problem here is that we have to be careful not to confuse preconditions for constituents. The use of concepts is a necessary precondition for baking a cake, but that does not mean that concepts are constituents, along with milk, eggs, sugar, and the rest, of the cake. It is also worth noting that the fact that two things are necessarily concurrent does not mean that either is a constituent of the other. That wet pavements always accompany wet streets while it is raining does not mean that wet pavements are constituents of wet streets. Proudfoot may very well be right that concepts necessarily are preconditions for and accompaniments to religious experiences, but that doesn't establish them as constituents of the experiences.

Experience reports as inferences to the best explanation

The third main argument Proudfoot has to support his view that concepts are constituents of experiences is that people who are having religious experiences are involved in a form of reasoning commonly called inference to the best explanation. He says, 'A person identifies an experience as religious when he comes to believe that the best explanation of what has happened to him is a religious one'.[25] As Proudfoot sees it, people who believe that an experience they are having is due to supernatural causes infer that belief from other beliefs they

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hold. So for example, a man senses his accelerated heart rate and infers that the activity of the Holy Spirit is the best explanation for that phenomenon.[26] Proudfoot thinks inference to the best explanation is involved not just in religious experience, but in one's identification of one's own emotions and in sensory perception as well. This sort of inference to the best explanation is part of what makes the experience what it is, and since inference involves concepts and beliefs, experiences are necessarily conceptual.

Proudfoot occasionally moderates his general tendency of appearing to deny that non-inferential knowledge of perceived objects and first-person mental states is possible, as when he says, 'Our ''knowledge'' of our own attitudes, beliefs, emotions, and desires is *often* arrived at by inference from observation of our own behavior as well as of our bodily states.'[27] But he leaves us wondering how he thinks we achieve self-knowledge in the other cases. Further, he denies that first-person knowledge is in principle different from third-person knowledge.[28]

Now even if we were to grant that inferential practices are necessarily involved in perception, emotion, and religious experience, we still would have the question whether they are involved as a necessary condition of or accompaniment to an experience or, more intimately, as a constituent of the experience. But I'll set this question aside since we have good reason to reject Proudfoot's claim that inference to the best explanation is necessarily involved in our emotional, sensory, and religious experiences.

One of the clearest places where Proudfoot outlines his position that immediate (in the sense of non-inferential) belief about ourselves or the world is impossible is in his discussion of C. S. Peirce. In this discussion, he contrasts Peirce's views on the possibility of non-inferential knowledge with Schleiermacher's. He writes: 'Schleiermacher thought it possible to achieve an immediate and intuitive consciousness of something that cannot be known as the result of inference.' However, Schleiermacher is wrong: 'A moment of consciousness may seem to be immediate and noninferential, but that in itself provides no assurance that it is not the result of inference or that it does not assume antecedent concepts.'[29] In fact, according to Peirce, even our judgements about our self-consciousness are arrived at through inference. Proudfoot writes,

> Self-consciousness is not immediately given but is the product of inference … Our knowledge of ourselves is not privileged … The manner of reasoning by which we learn about ourselves is in principle no different from that which others can and do employ when they attribute to us certain emotions, intentions, and belief … Peirce concludes that the only way to investigate a psychological question is by inference from external facts, and that all ascriptions to ourselves of internal states must be construed as hypotheses to explain those facts.[30]

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In his review of Alston's *Perceiving God*, Proudfoot makes the same claim:

> Direct perception of God, [Alston] claims, is different from experiencing something and then inferring that it was caused by God. In fact, however, these are not so clearly separable, either in the religious case or in other cases. Momentary doubt that what I see is a tree leads me to change my position slightly in order to look again from a different angle. [Jonathan] Edwards's saint examines her life to ascertain whether her awareness of the presence of the Spirit is genuine.[31]

If Proudfoot means to say in these passages that all beliefs are inferences from other beliefs, then he faces a considerable objection: the problem of infinite regress. If my belief that I see a tree is an inference from a prior belief, from what belief is that prior belief inferred? And that one? It seems that at some point we have to start with a belief not inferred from any other.

Proudfoot relies heavily on two serial essays, 'Questions concerning certain faculties claimed for man' and 'Some consequences of four incapacities', by C. S. Peirce for his claim that our knowledge of that of which we are aware, perceptually or introspectively, is inferential. But Peirce's essays display several confusions. Peirce's claim is that all of our cognitions are 'determined by a previous cognition'.[32] A cognition here can be either a judgement or some other mental state. When Peirce speaks of the determination of a cognition by a previous cognition, his use of the term determination is ambiguous between determinations by causal precursors to a cognition and inferential precursors. He is primarily concerned to show that our awareness of any object is itself the product of prior cognitive information-processing, not all of which must be conscious. That much is correct, but this process is a matter of the causal sequence by which information is transmitted from an object to the brain and then processed by the brain. This causal sequence is different from inference. Peirce wants to construe all cognitive activity, whether or not it involves explicit, conscious judgements, as inferential. He instructs us to 'reduce all mental action to the formula of valid reasoning' and claims, 'Every sort of modification of consciousness – Attention, Sensation, and Understanding – is an inference.'[33] But this cannot be. Many of the cognitive processes that Peirce discusses are strictly causal, the stimulation by light of cells in the retina or the action of sound waves upon the eardrum, for example. But the causal processes involved in perception and awareness, as causal processes, are not subject to norms that assess them as right or wrong: they just happen, one event following the next. Inference, on the other hand, is an inherently normative activity, that is, our inferences can be correct or incorrect. Causation cannot be reduced to inference, nor vice versa. Peirce rightly notes that the issuance of a judgement and the formation of the habits and dispositions by which we issue judgements *presuppose* facility with

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language and inference, and this is a crucial point, developed by Wilfrid Sellars and Robert Brandom.[34] But that is not to say that every judgement is a conclusion inferred from a premise.

In the passage above, when Proudfoot speaks of doubting that he sees a tree and moving to get a better look, he confuses non-inferentiality with indubitability. If the presence of a plant in our visual range causes us to issue the non-inferential judgement, 'That is a tree', the fact that the judgement is non-inferential does not mean we cannot surrender the judgement, or place it under question, if we acquire reason to think we may have been mistaken in judging the plant to be a tree. Proudfoot is correct to note that issuing any such judgement in an observation presupposes that we have a whole host of concepts and beliefs. Moreover, issuing such a judgement presupposes that we understand the inferential relationships in which that judgement stands. We could not, for instance, issue the judgement that a particular object is a tree unless we believed that trees (typically) have branches and leaves, have a stem with no branches at the bottom, do not have wings, are not mechanical, etc. To say and comprehend, 'That is a tree', we must be able to infer from that statement to the statement, 'That is a woody plant with branches'. It takes a lot of concepts to master any one concept. But to say that we must master a host of concepts and beliefs and their inferential relationships in order to judge a plant to be a tree is not to say that we infer that the plant is a tree from these other beliefs. Of course, there are cases in which we do arrive at belief about our mental states and about perceived objects by inference (albeit from prior judgements that are non-inferentially generated). ('I didn't think I was jealous, but when I consider how I make rude remarks every time I see the two of them together, I realize that I am'. 'I can't see that woman clearly, but I can tell she is wearing a Denver Broncos hat, I know June has a hat just like that, and I doubt anyone else around here does, so I believe that person is June'.) But these cases are the exception, not the rule.

All this talk of inferential and non-inferential judgements is not just a frivolous excursion into the subtleties of technical philosophy. A great deal is at stake here for the philosopher and theorist of religion. If Proudfoot is right, then judgements such as 'I am now experiencing God' are inferences, presumably from some premise such as 'I am now feeling a sense of awe and wonder'. The religious believer is resorting to a form of inference to the best explanation in concluding that God is involved in the experience. This could very well put the experiencer in the position of relying, at least implicitly, on some or another argument for the existence of God.[35] Many philosophers feel that such arguments are less than compelling, though, so it seems the religious believers are at risk to be deemed irrational in their beliefs. We can see now that whether or not religious believers are irrational, they are not so on the grounds that their experience reports are necessarily inferences to the best explanation. Proudfoot's argument that our

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beliefs about our religious, emotional, and sensory experiences are always or even usually inferred from prior beliefs falls short.

Do concepts exclusively or partially constitute experiences?

Having now examined critically the three primary defences of constructivism Proudfoot supplies, I turn now to a more fundamental issue in Proudfoot's discussion of the role of concepts in determining the nature of experiences. Whereas Proudfoot makes it clear that he thinks concepts constitute experiences, it is not as clear whether he thinks concepts exhaustively constitute experiences, and if not, what other elements do. In *Religious Experience*, Proudfoot makes claims like, 'The experience is shaped by a complex pattern of concepts, commitments, and expectations which the mystic brings to it',[36] and, 'Beliefs about the causes of one's experience are themselves constitutive of the experience. This is especially true in the case of religious experience'.[37] But these sorts of remarks are unclear whether concepts, beliefs, and expectations entirely constitute the experience or whether they are some constituents among others.[38] It seems possible that Proudfoot thinks that some aspect of an experience is non-conceptual, thus endorsing a view of experiences as complex things. He speaks of a 'felt quality' of an experience, even when he denies that such a quality is itself sufficient to identify the experience.[39] Elsewhere he speaks of an 'image in the mind' of the scenery as one is mountain climbing and the 'picture' one has while skiing, seemingly distinct from the conceptual judgements about the causes of the image or picture.[40] In a later text, Proudfoot suggests that experiences may have non-conceptual constituents when he says, 'My experience is, in part, constituted by my beliefs about what it is that I have seen'.[41] But if Proudfoot admits that experiences have non-conceptual constituents, whether mental images, felt qualities, or something else, then this is a significant aspect of his theory that goes undeveloped. It is also a significant concession to the perennialists. Many perennialists, including W. T. Stace, are happy to admit that concepts may very well always be present in an experience; they just want an acknowledgment that something besides concepts is also present. As Stace says, 'Although we may never be able to find sense experience completely free of interpretation, it can hardly be doubted that a sensation is one thing and its conceptual interpretation is another thing. That is to say, they are distinguishable though not completely separable'.[42] It is in the non-conceptual aspect of experiences that perennialists could seek the basis for a universal, common core to mystical experiences and so promote their interests in religious unity and/or the rational justification of their religious beliefs. If Proudfoot admits something non-conceptual, then this element may itself serve as a basis for an acultural, common core to the experience, even if every experience includes concepts as constituents too. Proudfoot owes us more detail here if he is to resist this version of perennialism.

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This brings us to questions about the causes of an experience. The processes and conditions that bring about the experience are a separate matter from the concepts that we use to classify the experience. Even when an experience is induced by concepts, as when one puts oneself into a state of fear by reciting to oneself that a murderer is lurking nearby or into a state of awe by thinking about God's grandeur, the emotional state involves physiological happenings that are not themselves concepts, as Proudfoot acknowledges in his discussion on emotion.[43]

Proudfoot has quite a bit to say about the causes of an experience. His attention to causes of experiences is one of his major and lasting contributions to the study of religious experience. Especially significant is his claim that when an experiencer reports having a religious experience, implicit in the report is a judgement on the experiencer's part about the cause of the experience.[44] When Buddhists say they have had a vision of nirvana, they endorse the reality of a condition of existence defined as nirvana in Buddhist teaching, and when Muslims say they have experienced Allah, they endorse the existence of Allah and judge that Allah has caused the experience. Proudfoot also discusses the physiological contributions to emotional states in his discussion of the famous psychological experiments conducted by Stanley Schachter and Jerome Singer, in which subjects were given a low-level stimulant, exposed to different sets of cues, and then asked to report their emotional states. Despite their exposure to the same physiological stimulation, they identified their emotional state differently on the basis of the different cues.[45] Proudfoot's suggestion is that when individuals claim to have experienced the Holy Spirit, for example, they are similarly identifying their heightened physiological state with the help of cues drawn from their religious context.[46] In Proudfoot's view, the heightened state is in actuality produced through thoroughly naturalistic means by the emotional and physiological stimulation that results from engaging in spiritual practices.

Despite Proudfoot's attention to the causal factors involved in religious experience, I still find that he underplays the causal element in significant ways that cast confusion on his views regarding the constituents of religious experiences and render his overall position on the relation between concepts and experiences unsatisfactory. One way in which he underplays causes is subtle, but still significant. This is that he chooses to construe religious experiences primarily on the model of emotional self-awareness, and further, he chooses examples of low-level physiological stimulation, underwhelming enough to permit a wide range of interpretation. In these sorts of situations, it is easy to highlight the conceptual interpretative process as supreme and downplay the causal process in accounting for the nature of the experience. Schachter and Singer administered a small dose of adrenaline to their subjects to induce 'a general and diffuse pattern of arousal in the sympathetic nervous system'. Consider instead the unwitting ingestion of a sturdy dose of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), such as occurred in the cold war

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412511000102 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experiments MI6 and the CIA conducted as their governments attempted to produce truth drugs and mind-control substances. One subject of these experiments, who had been told he was undergoing experimental research for treatment of the common cold, reported 'walls melting, cracks appearing in people's faces … eyes would run down cheeks, Salvador Dali-type faces … a flower would turn into a slug'.[47] Whatever conceptual interpretation this man tried to supply, here the primary factor determining the nature of the experience was the neurological state brought about by the LSD. The non-conceptual, physiological causes clearly take pride of place over the conceptual interpretation, even if the latter is not absent. Similarly, in those religious experiences that are not adequately characterized as involving 'a general and diffuse pattern of arousal in the sympathetic nervous system', but rather something more distinct, like a vision, audition, or overwhelming sense of euphoria or fear, it is not clear that the experiencer's conceptualization is the primary element in the experience. Proudfoot acknowledges that these sorts of experiences occur, but he focuses his theoretical attention on the cases involving self-awareness of a relatively indistinct sort, thus allowing him to give to beliefs and concepts the prominent place in determining the experience. So Proudfoot can say things like, 'The common element in religious experience is likely to be found, not in a particular physiological or even mental state, but in the beliefs held by the subject about the causes of that state'.[48] Further, whereas Proudfoot mentions two examples from the life of Stephen Bradley, culled from William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, he focuses on the one in which Bradley is trying to figure out why his heart rate is elevated after a religious service and gives less attention to the incident in which Bradley says he has a vision of Jesus standing before him with outstretched arms.[49]

In addition to these subtle ways of privileging the influence of beliefs and concepts over the influence of the non-conceptual causal conditions, we also find in *Religious Experience* some puzzling remarks about the relation between concepts and beliefs and mental images. Proudfoot writes:

> The force of my experience of climbing Mount Rainier, as compared with merely imagining the climb, derives from the judgments I make about the connections between myself, the mountain, and the rest of the world. My judgment about how the image in my mind is caused affects the experience, making it more vivid and gripping than if I believe I am just entertaining the possibility of the climb.[50]

Proudfoot seems to indicate here that one has the same mental image whether one is actually climbing the mountain or just thinking about doing so from the comfort of one's living room, and that the difference between the two experiences is one's beliefs about the cause of the mental image. So feeling the cold wind whip across my nose and imagining the same are indistinguishable, apart from beliefs

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412511000102 Published online by Cambridge University Press

about the cause in the one case being wind, in the other being my imagination? This strikes me as implausible. It is not just our beliefs about what is causing the experience that matters. On the mountainside, the cold air, cold rock, and ropes contact my skin and sunlight reflects off the mountainside and the surrounding terrain. All this excites my sensory organs, which in turn transmit signals to my central nervous system. The causal interactions between my environment and my body are quite different in my easy chair as I imagine the climb. When we are climbing, our beliefs about the veridicality of the perceptions and the existence of the mountain to which we cling and the valley far below are no doubt relevant, but the causal processes themselves are indispensable both to the determination of the nature of the experience and to our ability to distinguish between actually undergoing events and merely imagining events. If this is so, then beliefs and concepts do not play as much of a role in determining the nature of experiences as Proudfoot indicates.

Some remarks about the future of the debate

The debate between perennialism and constructivism has dragged on for so long now that some have suggested it is time to lay the debate aside and turn attention to other matters.[51] I hope that in this essay I have shed new light on the status of the debate, by highlighting three unresolved issues in Proudfoot's *Religious Experience*: the significance of non-intentional aspects of experience, the distinction between concepts as required for experience and concepts as constituents of experience; and the problematic place Proudfoot gives to inference to the best explanation in accounting for experiences. It follows that the debate is far from being exhausted; several philosophical and empirical avenues remain that have promise for advancing the discussion significantly. Specifically, two issues need further attention. First, if concepts and beliefs do not exhaustively constitute experiences, could there be some non-conceptual aspect of experiences that is common across cultures? The burgeoning neuroscientific study of mysticism could have something to say about this, though it is still too early to say.[52] Second, is it plausible to think that there are experiences that have no object, as proponents of the pure consciousness even think? My own sympathies lie with the constructivist camp, but if my assessment of Proudfoot is correct, it is premature to think that the debate has been decisively settled.[53]

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Notes

1. Katz (1978); Proudfoot (1985).
2. One difficulty in interpreting Katz and Proudfoot is that they never specify exactly what they think concepts are. However it seems that for Proudfoot at least, concepts are constituents of beliefs, in the same way in which the words 'dog' and 'hearth' are constituents of the statement 'there is a dog on your hearth'.
3. Prominent examples include Alston (1991); Swinburne (2004), ch. 13; Forman (1999).
4. Rothberg (1990), 167.
5. Katz (1978), 26.

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6. *Ibid*., 66.
7. Katz (1978), 64–65.
8. Davidson (2001).
9. More precisely, in the account Brandom (1994) develops from Sellars (1997), the sensed object stimulates our sensory organs and we have a socially acquired disposition to respond to the object by reporting its presence. See also Quine (1960).
10. Wolterstorff (1998).
11. Proudfoot (1985), 35–36.
12. *Ibid*., 33.
13. I leave aside for simplicity cases where the experiencer thinks that he/she is experiencing some religious object but doesn't know what it is and cases where the third-party interpreter, but not the experiencer, thinks that the experiencer is experiencing a religious object.
14. Stace (1960), 31.
15. Underhill (1949), 96.
16. Eliade (1959); Otto (1958).
17. Philosophers often suggest that moods and sensations are also not intentional. A mood of depression is a longer-lasting state that may not have any particular object(s). And sensations, like pain or warmth, also seemingly have no object.
18. Proudfoot (1985), 121–122.
19. On pure consciousness, see Forman (1990).
20. Proudfoot (1985), 18, 13–15, 217–218. These passages are cited and discussed in Alston (1991), 40–41.
21. Proudfoot (1985), 32.
22. Alston (1991), 41.
23. Proudfoot (1985), 32.
24. 'Religious experience … must … be identified under a description that is available to and can plausibly be ascribed to the subject of that experience … To identify an experience from a perspective other than that of the subject is to misidentify it' (Proudfoot (1985), 233–234).
25. *Ibid*., 223. He also writes, 'Religious beliefs and practices are interpretations of experience in that they are attempts to make sense of and to account for the phenomena and events with which one is confronted, including one's own behavior. They are attempts to understand, where understanding can be construed as seeking the best explanation' (43).
26. *Ibid*., 173.
27. *Ibid*., 114, emphasis added.
28. *Ibid*., 92. For an opposing argument, which holds that first-person self-knowledge is different from third-person knowledge, see Moran (2001).
29. Proudfoot (1985), 62.
30. *Ibid*., 64–65.
31. Proudfoot (1995), 590–591.
32. Peirce (1931), V, 214.
33. *Ibid*., 267, 214. Cf. V, 268, 279–280.
34. Sellars (1997); Brandom (1994).
35. While I cannot here delve into the complexities of the matter, it is worth noting that these topics are central to the discussions surrounding Reformed epistemology. See, for example, Plantinga (1983).
36. Proudfoot (1985), 121.
37. *Ibid*., 114.
38. G. William Barnard (1992), 808, presses Proudfoot on just this point.
39. 'Neither the felt quality of an experience nor its intentional object is sufficient to identify it as religious. Often such an experience depends on beliefs about the cause of the experience' (Proudfoot (1985), 114).
40. *Ibid*., 213, 139–40. In the skiing example, the 'picture' seems to be immune from the effects of the skier's judgements, whereas the 'felt quality' is not.
41. Proudfoot (1992), 808.
42. Stace (1960), 31.
43. Proudfoot (1985), ch. 3.
44. *Ibid*., 14, 234.

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45. Singer's and Schachter's hypotheses have received stringent criticism in the decades since their experiments, and Proudfoot (1992) insists that his use of their experiments is to illustrate his claim that emotions necessarily involve concepts and not to serve as the basis for that claim.
46. Proudfoot (1985), 102–105.
47. Evans (2006).
48. Proudfoot (1985), 107.
49. *Ibid.*, 193–194.
50. *Ibid.*, 213.
51. Andresen & Forman (2000), 7–8.
52. For helpful overviews, see Lutz, Dunne, & Davidson (2007); Taves (2009).
53. I thank Jeffrey Stout for his feedback on a version of this article. I also received valuable suggestions from Robin Le Poidevin and Peter Byrne. I delivered an early version of this to audiences at Princeton University, Columbia University, and Brown University, and I am grateful for feedback I received on those occasions.

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