

Counter-cultural religious experiences

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Abstract: Discussions of the evidential import of religious experiences have tended to focus on the intra-cultural variety: that is, experiences the content of which accord with the religious/cultural background of the experiencer (eg. someone raised in a Buddhist culture might experience the oneness of all, whereas someone from a Christian background might have a vision of Jesus). But what of counter-cultural experiences? That is, experiences which fall outside of the individual's religious/cultural background? Little attention has been paid to these, though such experiences are far from unheard of in the case study literature. In this paper I explore some preliminary questions surrounding the evidential import of counter-cultural religious experiences.

Introduction

The idea that religious experience can provide justification for belief in God or other transcendent realities has been the subject of vigorous debate in contemporary natural theology. This discussion has so far focused on the nature of the experiences themselves and what they can reveal or entail about their apparent objects. The different contexts in which individuals undergo these experiences have received less attention, and the case studies referenced by the various sides in the debate are generally intra-cultural. That is, examples tend to revolve around Buddhists experiencing the oneness of all things, Hindu mystics achieving unity with Brahman or having visions of Krishna, Christians encountering the presence of the Trinitarian God or having visions of the Virgin Mary, etc. The background assumption tends to be that a person raised in a certain cultural context will have experiences in accordance with what one would expect from the religion prevalent in that culture.

My goal in this paper is to make a preliminary exploration of how the debate can be influenced by a recognition of counter-cultural religious experiences: those instances in which a person from a certain religious/cultural background

has a religious experience that does *not* accord with what would be expected in that background, but instead fits with a different cultural context (for instance, a Hindu having a vision of Jesus). Though not as widely known, there are numerous examples of such experiences to be found in the literature, both academic and devotional. What evidential import do they carry, and how do they impact the broader debate over the nature and evidential significance of religious experience?

The structure of this enquiry will be as follows. In the next section I will briefly lay out a basic taxonomy of counter-cultural experiences, and consider some representative examples from the case-study literature. Then, in a further section, I will review some major perspectives in the wider debate over the evidential status of religious experiences, and will discuss ways in which the counter-cultural variety can impact them. It will be argued that these experiences fit in well with the models of justification offered by Swinburne¹ and Wiebe² but cause some difficulty for Alston's³ theory. In the following section I will argue that these experiences also tell against a widely held perspective on religious pluralism, and in the final section will consider two objections against taking them to be veridical.

Before beginning, one quick proviso regarding terminology: 'counter-cultural' is perhaps not the most propitious name to bestow upon this general class of experiences, given that for many it will carry a damaging connotation of hippies and *peyote* (etc.), even for those of us born well after the baby-boom generation. In previous drafts I used 'cross-cultural', or 'inter-cultural', but for those engaged in the relevant literature these would carry misleading connotations of experiences that are common across cultures, which is not what we are concerned with here; indeed, we are concerned with experiences that are very nearly the opposite of the cross-cultural variety, as that term is commonly understood. So instead I adopt 'counter-cultural', with a recognition of its defects and a hope that they are fewer than those of the alternatives.

Taxonomy of cross-cultural religious experiences: some examples

A division into four groups can be made:

- (1) A person is raised in one religion and has very little or no exposure to or awareness of the other religion which is reflected in the content of the experience. For instance, someone born and raised in a Western, broadly Christian culture with no real exposure to Buddhist teachings nevertheless undergoes a spontaneous mystical experience of the absolute oneness of all things.
- (2) A person is raised in one religion and has some exposure to the other, and is neutral toward that other.

- (3) Like the previous, but where the person is hostile rather than neutral.
- (4) Again like the previous, but positive rather than negative or neutral; she might even be contemplating conversion when the experience is undergone.

So we have experience with or without prior knowledge; if with, then prior knowledge with a neutral, negative, or positive attitude. There are examples of all four types in the literature on case studies of religious experience.

Space permits only a small number of examples for each category, but I hope the following will provide the reader with some sense of the nature of these experiences. They are taken from a variety of sources, some academic, some devotional, some polemical. Such piecemeal collection is necessary, as there exists no single academic work focused solely on counter-cultural experiences, and hence no one-stop source for case studies.

Category 1

(1) A visionary experience by a non-Hindu British woman, the content of which included the sight of a Hindu religious leader whom she had, at the time, never heard of, only seeing a photo of him years later.⁴ Brooke⁵ relates that visions associated with this particular guru, Sathya Sai Baba, were at least at one time reported by a number of his Western followers. (Brooke's veracity on this point is supported, I think, by the fact that he writes from the perspective of a bitterly disaffected former follower.)

(2) Frederic Spiegelberg, a professor of comparative religion at Stanford University and, in the late 1940s, one of the co-founders of the American Academy of Asian Studies in San Francisco, began his study of religion as a theology student at the University of Holland. He found these studies were gradually undermining his Christian faith. Then during an outdoor walk in 1917 he had a powerful mystical experience, the content of which revolved around an intuition of the inherent divinity of all things – with the exception of the village church, which he intuited as somehow opposed to this all-suffusing divine presence. He later devoted his academic life to the study of Eastern religions.⁶

(3) Gulshan Esther, a Pakistani former Muslim, originally knew of Christianity only through the references to it in the Koran. She converted after having seen an apparition of Jesus, who then cured her of paralysis.⁷ Such visions have been reported surprisingly often among Christian converts in Pakistan.⁸

(4) Rabindranath Maharaj, at one time a Brahmin who accepted the doctrine of non-dualism (ultimate identity of himself with God) started on a gradual process of conversion from Hinduism to Christianity upon distinctly hearing a voice tell him 'You are not God'. Later, very distinctively Christian experiences followed. He had only a vague knowledge of Christianity prior to this.⁹

Category 2

(1) Wiebe reports:

Hugh Montefiore, now retired, was an instructor in the NT [New Testament] at Cambridge University and later a bishop of the Church of England. He was brought up in the Jewish faith, and as a child never attended Christian worship or read the NT. He credits his conversion to Christianity to a vision he experienced at sixteen years of age. The figure that appeared to him said, 'Follow me,' and 'knowing it to be Jesus' (this is how he described the effect of the experience to me), decided to embrace the Christian faith, although he says he has not ceased to be a Jew. Only later did he discover that the invitation 'Follow me' was in the NT. When I spoke to him in 1993 some fifty-seven years had elapsed since the incident, so he was not able to remember many of the details on which I wanted to query him. He said that the import of the experience still had validity for him. 'For me it has total reality,' he said.¹⁰

(2) One might also place in this category some of those spontaneous experiences of universal oneness that are reported by Westerners, experiences hardly to be expected in a broadly Christian culture.¹¹

(3) Zhang Shi was a prominent Christian convert in the early modern period (he lived from 1604–1622). He had first heard of Christianity from a relative. His own conversion was prompted by a prophetic dream that he experienced at the age of fifteen, a dream which encouraged him to turn to God and which supposedly predicted his death three years from that date.¹²

Category 3

David Chansky converted to Christianity from Judaism after several visions of Jesus. He later became minister to a Messianic Jewish congregation. At the time of his visions he was hostile to Christianity, largely due to the anti-Semitism he had suffered growing up. Even after his experiences he had a difficult time reconciling himself to conversion.¹³

Category 4

(1) The well-known story of Sadhu Sundar Singh, a convert to Christianity from an eclectic Sikh/Hindu background, is a good example here. He became a Christian and itinerant missionary after a vision of Jesus. At one time extremely hostile to Christianity, he had come to have more conflicted attitudes towards the faith.¹⁴

(2) British composer Sir John Tavener turned from Eastern Orthodox Christianity to a sort of New-Age universalist philosophy after having a dream/vision of the deceased Swiss philosopher and poet Frithjof Schuon, whose works had come to have some influence on him.¹⁵

(3) Novelist Henry Miller, famous for works such as *Tropic of Capricorn*, which played a role in the overturning of anti-obscenity laws in the United States, once had a waking vision of Theosophy founder, Helena

Blavatsky. Miller had had a previous interest in the occult and Eastern spirituality.¹⁶

Others

Other experiences are difficult to fit into one of these four categories. Consider the apparitions of the Virgin Mary which took place atop a Coptic Orthodox church in Zeitun, Egypt, between in the late 1960s (with the first occurring on 2 April 1968) and early 1970s. The first witnesses of the apparition were Muslims, and, in a predominantly Muslim nation, continued to form a large proportion of the hundreds of thousands who would view the phenomenon, crowds which would come to include prominent figures like the Egyptian president, Gamal Nasser. Should this count as a counter-cultural experience? After all, Mary figures in the Koran and is revered by Muslims. On the other hand, the apparition was centred around a Christian church. This feature of the experience would presumably not be expected by a Muslim, any more than a Christian would expect to see an apparition of Gabriel atop a minaret. This may be an instance, then, in which an experience can be deemed counter-cultural for at least some experiencers, not because of its content, but because of the situational context.¹⁷

Or consider experiences in which a person from a certain religious/cultural background converts to a religion from a very different culture, and then has an experience in accord with that of the *first* religion. Should this count as counter-cultural? I suspect not.¹⁸ I would also be inclined to reject as counter-cultural the religious experiences of long-time atheists, provided that the content of the experience accords with that of the overall culture in which they were raised. Such experiences may be unexpected by the individual, but are not strictly counter-cultural.¹⁹

Philosophical accounts

It seems natural to take counter-cultural religious experiences, especially those of the first three types, as of *prima facie* greater evidential significance than intra-cultural experiences. Hearing of a Canadian-born-and-raised WASP with barely any exposure to Hinduism having a life-changing vision of Krishna would, I believe, give us greater pause than would hearing of a life-long Hindu, born and raised in India, having such an experience. This assumption is clearly made by J. L. Mackie, when in the course of dismissing St Paul's vision he writes that:

... the detailed content, the intentional objects, of particular experiences often involve or presuppose such special beliefs. When St. Paul, on the road to Damascus, heard the question 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?', he was told, within the vision, who was addressing him But it is obvious that such interpretations depend either on the context of the experiences or on the believer's independently acquired knowledge and

beliefs ... it is all too easy to understand them as having been fed in from the religious tradition by which the experiencer has been influenced.²⁰

Later, Mackie expands on the point:

For any single experience, it is easy to explain these further elements [those having specific religious content] as having been drawn in from a surrounding religious tradition – even a convert like St. Paul or Alphonse Ratisbonne (see James, pp. 225–8) will already be in touch with, although hostile to, the movement to which he is converted, and is likely to have been brought up in some related tradition.²¹

Mackie obviously feels that the apparently counter-cultural nature of some experiences grants them a certain *prima facie* significance, and that in consequence they demand further explanation, which he opts to give by simply re-asserting their contextual fit with pre-existing religious beliefs. That is, he attempts to downplay their status as genuinely counter-cultural.²² Whatever one thinks of St Paul's vision, clearly there are cases which cannot be dismissed in this manner. But we still need to ask: Is the natural assumption here, the assumption Mackie adopts, correct? Are counter-cultural religious experiences of greater evidential significance?

To answer this question, it would be helpful to refer to some of the more prominent accounts of the evidential force of religious experience. It is common on these accounts to adopt a broadly perceptual model, according to which veridical religious experiences are a kind of perception in which the percipient is aware of an external reality.²³ From this starting point, different justifications of the evidential significance of these experiences have been developed. Swinburne adopts the 'principle of credulity', according to which 'it is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations), if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that *x* is present (and has some characteristic), then probably *x* is present (and has that characteristic); what one seems to perceive is probably so'.²⁴ He considers this to be a basic principle of rationality, the abandonment of which leads to a particularly virulent scepticism. Consequently, all perceptual experiences, including those of a religious nature, are to be trusted unless positive reasons can be found for viewing them as non-veridical.

Swinburne also recognizes a closely related principle, that of testimony. According to this principle, one should believe another person's account of an experience, even if one has not shared it, in the absence of any overriding evidence to reject that testimony. This too is needed to avoid scepticism, given that so much of our everyday knowledge is reliant on testimony.

If one adopts this general perspective on the justification of religious experiences, what should one think of the counter-cultural varieties? It might seem as if they would carry no extra weight. When I look out of my window and see a magpie, I can trust that there is probably a magpie there, in accordance with the principle of credulity. But prior to taking up residence in Alberta, I had never

seen a magpie before. Thinking back to my first viewing of the bird, it would seem odd to claim that my lack of previous exposure to or awareness of magpies, my lack of expectation of seeing such a bird, rendered my first viewing of greater evidential weight with respect to the existence of magpies when compared with my current daily viewings. Perception is perception, and what we seem to perceive is probably there. Context, cultural or otherwise, would seem to count for little.

However, this is too quick an assessment. Context would make a difference – at least with respect to the acceptance of testimony – if we were talking not about a magpie but about an entity whose very existence was a matter of controversy. Consider, as another zoological example, the species *thylacine*, also known as the Tasmanian Tiger. This animal, which looked like a large striped dog, officially became extinct in 1936 when the last known specimen died in the Hobart Zoo in Tasmania. Yet still today, nearly seventy-five years later, periodic sightings are reported in the remote outback, and the animal has achieved something like the status of a poor man's Bigfoot. Now suppose an Australian wildlife official receives two separate sighting reports. One is from a native Australian familiar with the modern lore of the Tasmanian Tiger. The other is from a Canadian tourist who had never heard of the animal previously, and did not discover that it was supposedly extinct until asking a local about the oddly striped animal she saw in the outback. Comparing these two reports, and assuming that both witnesses seem basically credible (honest, sober, not seeking to profit from the experience, etc.), would the wildlife official be justified in taking the second one as being of at least marginally greater evidential significance? It seems reasonable to suppose that he would.

The general idea here seems to be this: if it is controversial whether some entity really exists, and people who have had little or no cultural exposure to the idea of that entity nonetheless claim experience of it, such testimony speaks in favour of that entity's reality, to an extent at least marginally beyond the testimony of those whose cultural background might predispose them towards it. And why exactly is that? Presumably because (1) it is highly unlikely that one could have a hallucination of a controverted entity (whether a Tasmanian Tiger or a particular Hindu god) that one had never heard of before the experience; and (2) even in cases where there was some previous exposure, a controverted entity that had little purchase in the individual's culture would be unlikely to figure in a hallucination (naturalistic explanations based on wish-fulfilment etc. would be rendered implausible), or in a perceptual error.

Does this show that there is something wrong with the principle of credulity? Not necessarily. It simply shows that with respect to the evaluation of testimony to the existence of controverted entities, cultural context can count in favour of the experience's veridicality.

I believe this is also the case on Wiebe's account.²⁵ He opts against using the principle of credulity, holding instead that the veridicality of religious experience is best evaluated on a standard model of abductive reasoning, i.e. inference to the best explanation. To adjust to his viewpoint, one could simply claim that since counter-cultural experiences are less prone to dismissal on certain naturalistic grounds, they have a greater likelihood of being veridical than do intra-cultural experiences.

When we turn to Alston's²⁶ model of justification, however, we run into more problematic territory. Alston is committed to a reliabilist model of epistemic justification, where a belief is justified if brought about by a doxastic practice that normally results in true beliefs, such as perception or induction. Alston further argues that such doxastic practices cannot be justified in a non-circular manner. *Contra* Descartes, we cannot justify our use of sense perception without making reference to the success of perception, a success we know of at least partly by perceptual means. Alston extends the point to any doxastic practice: such practices cannot be justified without relying on the practices themselves. Yet he maintains that we are still rational in trusting them, a trust that is buttressed by their general acceptance by a community of knowers. Alston takes it that Christian mystical practice (CMP) is a doxastic practice, a mode of perception typically associated with engagement in certain activities (prayer, fasting, right-living, etc.). And it is a doxastic practice that meets with approval within an established community, namely the Church. Consequently it is rational for members of that community to trust in the veridicality of experiences arising from it, since it meets the reliabilist criteria for rational acceptance.

One point that has been raised against Alston's account is that different religious communities will have different doxastic practices and different beliefs resulting therefrom.²⁷ Alston's reply is that:

... the epistemic situation of practitioners of CMP holds, *pari passu*, for practitioners of other internally validated forms of MP. In each case the person ... will be able to rationally engage in his/her own religious doxastic practice despite the inability to show that it is epistemically superior to the competition.²⁸

That is, the Buddhist monk will be rational in accepting the beliefs formed by experiences arising from his meditation practices, and the Christian will be rational in accepting the beliefs formed by experiences arising from CMP. Other factors might in theory render one of these belief systems more rational than the other (such as plausible arguments for or against the existence of the Christian God), but,

... in the absence of any external reason for supposing that one of the competing practices is more accurate than my own, the only rational course for me is to sit tight with the practice of which I am master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world.²⁹

A difficulty with Alston's response becomes apparent when we take counter-cultural experiences into account. Consider what would happen if a member of the Christian community, with little exposure to Buddhism, had a mystical experience the nature of which accorded more with Buddhist doctrine. Alston's account seems to imply that the rational course for the Christian community – and presumably the experiencer herself – would be to discount the experience, since its content did not accord with the expectations of that community. And the same would hold vice versa: for instance, for a Buddhist having a vision of the Virgin Mary. Yet this conflicts with our intuition that counter-cultural experiences carry *greater* evidential weight.

Alston might reply that while the Buddhist's vision of Mary could carry greater weight from the perspective of a Christian who hears about it, it must carry lesser weight for a Buddhist, since it conflicts with the doxastic practices of the Buddhist community. But surely the fact that it conflicts with the Buddhist's accepted practices and expected results entails that it should be taken *all the more seriously* by the Buddhist. This does not, of course, mean that she must give up Buddhism at the first hearing of such an experience (or even the first having of it); but the rational course of action is to listen to the experiencer and try to figure out what really happened. And if it turns out, upon investigation, that the experience really occurred and cannot be fitted within the Buddhist doxastic practice, then the rationality of accepting doctrines associated with that practice may be lessened. The upshot of this is that if we are correct in thinking that counter-cultural experiences carry some greater evidential weight over against the intra-cultural variety (*ceteris paribus*), then this fact constitutes an objection to Alston's account of the justification of religious experience.

Pluralism

I would like now to consider another implication of such experiences. Among certain scholars working on questions of religious pluralism, there is a tendency to try to render divergent religious experiences compatible by suggesting that there is but one divine principle which manifests itself differently depending on a person's religious/cultural background.³⁰ So when the one divine principle manifests itself to a person from a Christian background, it manifests itself as Jesus or the Blessed Virgin. If manifesting itself to someone of a Hindu background, it manifests itself as Ganesha or Krishna. I believe counter-cultural experiences of the sort we have been considering speak against this idea. For on this pluralist perspective it seems *prima facie* unlikely that there would be cases in which the divine principle would manifest itself in a fashion *contrary* to the experiencer's pre-existing beliefs, especially when those beliefs are ingrained in an established faith tradition that was, on this perspective, established by that same divine principle.

The pluralist might counter by arguing that in these cases the person in question happens to be constitutionally ill-suited to the religion in which he was born, and that the divine principle prompts him by a religious experience to join a religion he would find more conducive, whether intellectually, emotionally, aesthetically, or in some other fashion. The divine principle's concern here is with the individual's spiritual development, and if someone would develop better as a Muslim than as a Christian, then an experience can be arranged to bring about a conversion.

Leaving aside worries that might arise over what seems like duplicity on the part of the supposed divine principle, this reply runs into the following problem: What if there are instances where a person has such a conversion-prompting experience, but where he had been quite content in his previous religion? That is, a happy and intellectually fulfilled Hindu has a vision of Jesus and converts to Christianity, a religion to which he may be (at least at first) ill-suited. In such a case as this, it is *prima facie* implausible to explain away the conversion, and hence the experience that prompted it, in the way just suggested.

These last points suggest that we might be well-advised to add to the fourfold taxonomy laid out earlier. To each of the four categories one might include a further variable of 'attitude towards original faith'. So in category 2, for instance, rather than listing just the attitude towards the religion with which the new experience accords (neutrality), we would include the person's attitude towards the original religion. This would give a more complete picture of the personal context within which the experience takes place.

Objections

I would like to consider briefly two objections against the evidential force of these experiences. The first is analogous to the one levelled against Alston: namely, are we not left with a chaos of competing and incompatible claims, with Muslims becoming Christians because of visions of Jesus, and Christians becoming Buddhists after mystical experiences of universal oneness, and so on? And would not such a chaotic state of affairs properly be seen as a mark against all of them? Potentially, yes. But it seems to me that this issue rests on an empirical question: Are we actually dealing with a chaos, or are patterns discernible? If it were the case that most such experiences were uni-directional, if most of them ended up pointing towards a certain religion, then the risk of having to admit a chaos would be lessened. That is, if Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, etc., tend generally to have visions of Jesus in their counter-cultural experiences, then that would speak in favour of Christianity. On the other hand, if the prevalent counter-cultural experience was that of the mystical unity of all things, that would speak in favour of Buddhism. And at present, there may not be enough empirical data to judge this question.

My own reading of case studies in various sources has indicated a pattern. But I must confess that this reading has not been sufficiently wide to judge reliably; and the limitations of my own research are exacerbated by the fact that while there are enough counter-cultural experiences in the literature to indicate that their occurrence should not be denied, case studies are still few in number when compared with the material available on intra-cultural experiences. Sociologists of religion have built up a large store of survey data on religious experience in general, and the detailed case studies available to researchers number in the thousands.³¹ Yet specifically counter-cultural experiences are largely ignored by social scientists. In short, a proper reply to this last objection would require detailed empirical data of a kind that has not been collected.

Another potential method of avoiding a conclusion of chaos would be for one religion to develop a plausible explanation as to why its followers sometimes undergo experiences contrary to those one would expect from that faith tradition, and for that explanation to be superior to explanations offered by other religions. (Indeed, some such explanation will be needed even if a clear uni-directional pattern is discernible.) There are a number of strategies that might be pursued here, but they will vary a good deal from one faith tradition to another, and I am afraid that a pursuit of this issue would take us somewhat far afield.

The second objection is more foundational, and I expect it has been in the mind of some readers from the opening paragraphs of this paper: Why believe any of these people? From the perspective of a secular naturalist, the very fact that *if* counter-cultural experiences occurred, they would be of greater evidential significance than the intra-cultural (all else being equal), indicates that in fact they probably do not really occur. Those who claim such experiences are either lying or have badly misinterpreted the phenomenology of those experiences. Is such a reaction justifiable?

Obviously, no-one would take such a reaction seriously if it were in response to standard intra-cultural experiences, for the simple fact that they are known to be so common across the population. Studies in the sociology of religion consistently show that more than one-third of the population will have a religious experience at some point in the course of a lifetime, and a significant percentage will have more than one.³² No serious scholar would condemn as liars so large a segment of the populace; consequently, sceptical reactions with respect to intra-cultural experiences focus on developing naturalistic explanations of them, rather than on doomed attempts to claim that they do not really occur. Admittedly, counter-cultural experiences cannot claim this kind of cross-population commonality, and so inevitably people claiming them will open themselves to accusations of fraud by those whose background beliefs render problematic a recognition of such experiences. Rightly or wrongly, this is only to be expected; people inevitably assess testimony at least partly in terms of previously held beliefs which bear on the acceptance or rejection of that

testimony.³³ If someone is convinced that materialism is almost certainly true, then reports of religious experiences which more strongly challenge the truth of materialism must be more suspect in her eyes than those which are less challenging.

Consequently, it is certainly open to a materialist reader to dismiss all of the case studies mentioned above, and any others that she may encounter (or at least to dismiss those that would be particularly evidentially impressive if true). I would not presume to call such a practice strictly irrational or improper.³⁴ However, I believe that it would be uncontroversial to claim that dismissal would be on more solid grounds if such reports were first examined with some care, prior to rejection. Dismissal absent investigation may not be strictly irrational, but it is not exactly in conformity with what many would view as ‘best epistemic practice’, as it were. Consequently, there is some justification for asking even a (mostly) settled materialist to take a careful look at such cases. Moreover, as more and more counter-cultural reports are collected, outright dismissal will become progressively more problematic. One might even envision a point at which researchers assemble a sort of critical mass of such experiences, to the point where curt dismissal becomes clearly unjustified.

We are far from having reached that point yet. In the meantime then, thoroughgoing materialists may be minimally rationally justified (though not optimally so) in ignoring the questions discussed here, while those of us with different background assumptions may, equally rationally, continue to collect case studies and debate their import.

Conclusion

In this paper I have considered a taxonomy of counter-cultural experiences, possible justifications for taking them to be of greater evidential value than the intra-cultural variety, and have looked at problems they cause for Alston’s model of justification and for a certain pluralistic interpretation of religious experience. I have also examined objections that should leave us with a degree of pessimism about what exactly we are justified in concluding from these experiences, and a recognition that further progress will require a good deal more empirical data, and consequently the help of our colleagues in the social sciences.³⁵

Notes

1. Richard Swinburne *The Existence of God*, 2nd rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
2. Phillip Wiebe *God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
3. William Alston *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

4. See Meg Maxwell and Verena Tschudin (eds) *Seeing the Invisible: Modern Religious and Other Transcendent Experiences* (London: Penguin, 1990), 86–87.
5. Tal Brooke *Avatar of Night* (Berkeley CA: End Run Publishing, 1999).
6. Jeffrey Kripal *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 48–61.
7. Gulshan Esther and Thelma Sangster, with Noble Din (interpreter) *The Torn Veil: The Story of Sister Gulshan Esther* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1984).
8. See Seppo Syrjänen *In Search of Meaning and Identity: Conversion to Christianity in Pakistani Muslim Culture* (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Missiology and Ecumenics, 1984). For a recent and more general discussion of visionary experiences of Jesus among Muslims, see Christine Darg *Miracles Among Muslims: The Jesus Visions* (Pescara: Destiny Image Europe, 2007).
9. See Rabindranath Maharaj & Dave Hunt *The Death of a Guru* (New York NY: A. J. Holman Company, 1977).
10. Phillip Wiebe *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82.
11. Several examples of these can be found in Maxwell and Tschudin *Seeing the Invisible*; see for instance the account on 48.
12. For a discussion of Shi's life and impact on the Jesuit mission effort in early modern China see Po-Chia Hsia 'Dreams and conversions: a comparative analysis of Catholic and Buddhist dreams in Ming and Qing China: Part I', *Journal of Religious History*, 29 (2005), 223–240.
13. He recounts his story in Ruth Rosen (ed.) *Jesus for Jews* (San Francisco CA: A Messianic Jewish Perspective, 1987), 242–276.
14. For a description of the experience in his own words see B. H. Streeter and A. J. Appasamy *The Message of Sadhu Sundar Singh: A Study in Mysticism on Practical Religion* (New York NY: Macmillan, 1922).
15. He discusses this experience and religious conversion in an audio interview in his *John Tavener: A Portrait* [audio interview, in the second of a 2-CD set] (Naxos Rights International Ltd., 2004). My thanks to Joseph Novak for drawing my attention to this source.
16. See Jeffrey Kripal, *Esalen*, 42–43.
17. For a sceptical treatment of the Zeitun apparitions, see Joe Nickell *Looking for a Miracle* (Amherst NY: Prometheus, 1998), 185–187. He dismisses them as 'earthquake lights', supposedly a rare form of light disturbance caused by seismic activity. For more sympathetic discussions, see for instance D. Scott Rogo *Miracles: A Parascientific Inquiry into Wondrous Phenomena* (New York NY: Dial Press, 1982), 252–257; Roy Abraham Varghese *God-Sent: A History of the Accredited Apparitions of Mary* (New York NY: Crossroad, 2000), 85–86; and Randall Sullivan *The Miracle Detective* (New York NY: Grove Press, 2004), 305–306. Further apparitions of the Virgin Mary have since occurred at other Coptic churches in Egypt. The most recent of these began in December 2009 and has been widely reported. See, for instance, Mona Salem 'Virgin Mary sightings a sign of hope for Egypt's Christians', *The Ottawa Citizen*, 26 December 2009. Once again, the first witness was a Muslim.
18. For an example of such an experience, see Frederica Mathewes-Green *At the Corner of East and Now: A Modern Life in Ancient Christian Orthodoxy* (New York NY: Penguin Putnam, 1999). Raised in a nominally Christian home, Mathewes-Green later became hostile to Christianity and turned to Hinduism. Then, as a Hindu, she had a powerful and distinctively Christian religious experience in front of a sculpture of Jesus in a Dublin church (where she and her husband had stopped for a look during their honeymoon tour of Europe). She subsequently returned to Christianity.
19. Examples of such experiences abound in the literature. A famous case study is that of Larry Flynt, the American pornographer. A longtime atheist, he temporarily came under the influence of evangelist Ruth Carter Stapleton (sister of former US President, Jimmy Carter). During this time he had an experience in which 'not only did a figure that he took to be God come to him visually and acknowledge Flynt's being, he also saw himself in a wheelchair – an incredible foretelling of events that were just months away from becoming a reality in Flynt's life'; Ted Dracos *Ungodly: The Passions, Torments, and Murder of Atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair* (New York NY: Berkley Books, 2003), 133. Flynt would soon be shot by a sniper and crippled for life. Later, a friend, prominent atheist Madalyn Murray O'Hair, would convince him that the vision had been a hallucination, and Flynt returned to atheism.
20. J. L. Mackie *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 181.

21. *Ibid.*, 187. The latter reference is to one of William James's case studies. The edition Mackie cites is William James *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Collins, 1960). Ratisbonne was a secularist of Jewish heritage who converted to Catholicism (and later became a priest) after a vision of the Virgin Mary.
22. Others, apparently unaware of the relevant case study literature, simply assume that there are no examples of genuinely counter-cultural experiences. Thus Pojman writes that 'the religious person is already predisposed to have theistic-type religious experiences, whereas the nonreligious person is not usually so disposed (in the literature, Christians have visions of Jesus, Hindus, of Krishna, Buddhists, of Buddha; ancient Greeks, of Athene or Apollo; etc.)'; Louis Pojman 'A critique of the argument from religious experience', in *idem* and Michael Rea (eds) *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology* (New York NY: Thomson Wadsworth, 2008), 132–133.
23. Though note that it need not involve sense perception. As Swinburne puts it: 'I talk of such awareness of God as a perception without implying that the awareness is necessarily mediated via the normal senses. "Perceive" is the general verb for awareness of something apart from oneself'; Swinburne *Existence of God*, 296.
24. *Ibid.*, 303.
25. Wiebe *God and Other Spirits*, ch. 3.
26. Alston *Perceiving God*.
27. See William Hasker 'On justifying the Christian practice', *New Scholasticism*, 60 (1986), 139–140.
28. Alston *Perceiving God*, 274–275.
29. *Ibid.*, 274.
30. For such a view see John Hick *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1989).
31. The Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales alone houses more than 6,000 accounts collected from the general public. For information on the centre and its work see www.alisterhardytrust.org.uk
32. For a decent summary of survey data collected over the past 45 years see Bernard Spilka, Ralph W. Hood, Jr, & Richard L. Gorsuch. *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, 3rd edn (New York NY: Guilford Press, 2003), 299–312. A representative example: in a 1978 study David Hay and Ann Morisy sampled 1,865 people in Britain; 36 per cent responded affirmatively to the question 'Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?'
33. Though the rationality of this practice, and its acceptable limits, are hotly debated topics in epistemology. For a good entry point to these issues as they pertain to religious epistemology, see David Owen 'Hume versus Price on miracles and prior probabilities: testimony and the Bayesian calculation', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 37 (1987), 187–202.
34. At least, improper for a reader *qua* individual materialist; it would be improper for a reader *qua* objective scholar of religion, though I will not attempt to press the point here.
35. A version of this paper was presented at the 2009 meeting of the Canadian Society of Christian Philosophers, and I would like to thank those in attendance for their input, and especially my commentator, Robert Larmer. My sincere thanks also to Evan Fales and Phillip Wiebe for their comments on earlier drafts, and to Peter Byrne and an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies* for comments and corrections.