

Phenomenology of Religious Experience IV: Religious Experience and Description

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Religious Experience, Pragmatic Encroachment, and Justified Belief in God

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Abstract: The secondary literature on religious epistemology has focused extensively on whether religious experience can provide evidence for God's existence. In this article, I suppose that religious experience can do this, but I consider whether it can provide adequate evidence for justified belief in God. I argue that it can. This requires a couple of moves. First, I consider the threshold problem for evidentialism and explain pragmatic encroachment (PE) as a solution to it. Second, I argue that religious experience can justify belief in God if one adopts PE, but this poses a dilemma for the defender of the veridicality of religious experience. If PE is true, then whether S has a justified belief in God on the basis of religious experience depends on how high the stakes are for having an experience with God. This requires one to determine whether the stakes are high or low for experiencing God, which puts the experient of God in an awkward position. If the stakes are not high, then justified belief in God on the basis of religious experience will be easier to come by, but this requires conceding that experiencing God is not that important. If the stakes are high, then the experient can maintain the importance of experience with God but must concede that justified belief in God on the basis of experience with God is less likely to happen, perhaps impossible.

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In his 2015 article “A Phenomenal Conservative Perspective on Religious Experience,” Aaron Burns argues that religious experience can give its subjects justification for believing that there is a kind of God that they experience.¹ This requires a few moves. First, Burns endorses a version of phenomenal conservatism (PC#), which says that if it seems to S that P, then in the absence of defeaters, S has some degree of (noninferential) justification for believing that P.² From PC#, it follows that anyone to whom it seems that God is present has justification for believing that there is a God, absent defeaters.³ Second, Burns accepts testimonial conservatism (TC), which says that if it seems to S that P because of the testimony of others, then absent defeaters S thereby has at least some justification for believing that P.⁴ From TC, it follows that “anyone who has testimony that others have experienced God and to whom it thereby seems that there is a God has evidence that there is a God, absent defeaters.”⁵ Burns concludes that religious experience can justify belief in God for those with such experiences and for those with testimony that others have them, absent defeaters.

1 Burns, “A Phenomenal Conservative Perspective on Religious Experience,” 247–61.

2 Huemer, “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,” 30–55.

3 Burns, “A Phenomenal Conservative Perspective on Religious Experience,” 257.

4 *Ibid.*, 258.

5 *Ibid.*, 259.

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I have four aims in this article. First, I consider whether Burns' use of PC# and TC puts a subject with religious experience in a position to have a justified belief in God. I concede that although Burns' strategy might fare better than Swinburne's use of the principle of credulity (PC), more work is needed to determine whether PC# and TC entail that religious experience can justify belief in God. For even if PC# and TC can enable us to have some justification for belief in God, it remains unclear whether they can enable us to have a justified belief in God. This leads me to the second aim of this article, which is to show that the following inference is fallacious: religious experience can provide justification that God exists, so if I have a religious experience then I am justified in believing that God exists. My point here is rather simple: having justification for P does not entail having a justified belief that P. This brings to light a threshold problem facing the evidentialist: how strong does my epistemic position need to be in order for me to have a justified belief that P?

To answer, I come now to the third aim of this article: to consider whether one solution to the threshold problem, pragmatic encroachment (PE), can enable religious experience to justify belief in God.⁶ PE holds that the strength of one's epistemic position required for justified belief is a function of how high the stakes are for the belief in question. Put roughly, if the stakes for believing P are high, then stronger evidence is required in order to have a justified belief that P. If the stakes are low, then weaker evidence is required in order to have a justified belief that P. I argue that PE can solve the threshold problem in a way that enables religious experience to be used as evidence for justified belief in God, although this poses a dilemma for the subject of such experience. In the fourth and final part of this article, I explore this dilemma. If PE is true, then whether S has a justified belief in God on the basis of religious experience depends on how high the stakes are for having an experience with God. This requires one to determine whether the stakes are high or low for experiencing God, which puts the experient of God in an awkward position. If the stakes are not high, then justified belief in God on the basis of religious experience will be easier to come by, but this requires conceding that experiencing God is not that important. If the stakes are high, then the experient can maintain the importance of experience with God but must concede that justified belief in God on the basis of experience with God is less likely to happen, perhaps impossible.

Burns' argument in his "A Phenomenal Conservative Perspective on Religious Experience" begins by explaining (1) a few versions of Swinburne's PC and (2) how others have responded to it. The version of PC that has the best chance of being able to provide evidence for the existence of God says that if it seems to S that P, then S has an amount of noninferential justification for believing that P which is proportional to the strength with which it seems to S that P, absent defeaters.⁷ According to Burns, what Swinburne means is that "the degree to which P is rendered probable is proportional to the strength with which S believes that P or is inclined to believe that P."⁸ What follows from this formulation of PC is that if it seems to S very strongly that P or that S is very inclined to believe that P, then P is rendered very probable, and S is justified in believing it. In application to religious experience, PC says that if it seems to me very strongly that I am experiencing God, or if I am very inclined to believe so, then it is rendered probable that I am experiencing God, and I am justified in believing that I am experiencing God.

Burns highlights a number of problems with this formulation of PC. The first is that it seems circular because it appears to suppose that belief or inclination to believe that P can justify belief that P.⁹ The second is that it overstates the evidential capacity of the inclination to believe that P. According to PC, I could convert myself from an unjustified to a justified believer that P merely by believing it very strongly.¹⁰ The third problem with this formulation of PC is similar. Burns claims that PC has a hard time dealing with obvious counterexamples, such as the following. If someone were so utterly convinced of

⁶ Rizzieri considers the implications of PE for religious epistemology more broadly in his 2013 *Pragmatic Encroachment, Religious Belief, and Practice*, but he does not focus much on whether religious experience, given PE, can do enough to justify belief in God. The aim of this article is to address this issue.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁸ Swinburne, *The Existence of God*.

⁹ Huemer develops this problem originally in Huemer, *Phenomenal Conservatism Uber Alles*, 328.

¹⁰ Foley, "Epistemic Conservatism," 174.

something such that she were more certain of it than anything else, then she would be justified in believing it, even if this were the sort of belief that we typically want to count as unjustified, e.g., that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween.¹¹ Burns admits that defenders of Swinburne offer compelling replies to the second and third objections, but Burns concludes that no such reply does enough to save PC from the problems that he explores.

In light of these problems, Burns suggests that it would be better to endorse PC# in order to argue that religious experience can justify belief in God. For this reason, he borrows the following principle (PC#) from Michael Huemer: if it seems to S that P, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has at least some degree of (noninferential justification) for believing that P.¹² At first glance, it is hard to see how PC and PC# are different. Burns suggests that whereas PC takes seemings to be beliefs or inclinations to believe, PC# instead takes seemings to be experience with propositional content. Since this is unclear, he offers an example: when it seems to us that an alarm clock is ringing, the proposition “an alarm clock is ringing” has a certain feel of truth. Propositions have degrees of assertiveness and we accept them when their assertiveness is adequate.¹³ As Tollhurst puts it, PC# takes seeming to, “have the feel of truth, the feel of a state whose content reveals how things really are.”¹⁴ Burns takes PC# to have several advantages over PC. First, PC# avoids circularity. Whereas PC says that beliefs that P can justify beliefs that P, PC# says that appearances justify belief that P.¹⁵ PC# also avoids counterexamples to which PC is liable. Whereas PC enables me to convert from an unjustified to a justified believer merely by deciding to believe, PC# does not allow this. On PC#, S has justification for believing that P only if it seems to S that P, i.e., it appears that P to S. Consequently, S only has justification for believing in the Great Pumpkin if it were to appear to S, which is unlikely to happen.¹⁶ In the context of religious experience, Burns takes it to follow from PC# that anyone to whom it seems that God is present has justification for believing that there is a God, in the absence of defeaters.¹⁷

It is probably true that PC# is less susceptible to the objections explained above than PC, and that it therefore does more work to allow religious experience to justify belief in God.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the problem with Burns’ application of PC# to the debate about the veridicality of religious experience is that he does not seem to acknowledge the distinction between my having some justification for belief that P and my being justified in my belief that P, where having some justification requires only having evidence but being justified requires having evidence that is strong enough. Let us cash this out in terms of the strength of one’s epistemic position. It is sufficient for having some justification for my believing P that my epistemic position has any degree of strength. Nonetheless, being justified in believing P requires my epistemic position to be stronger than this. This is the point that Burns seems to miss. Having any evidence at all is insufficient for the justified belief that P because this requires evidence of a certain strength. Suppose that I am listening to the radio on my drive to campus. When I change to the next channel, I hear an instant of a string section’s playing what sounds like Beethoven’s 7th and then the channel gives out. Here I have some evidence that Beethoven’s 7th is playing, and so I am in an epistemic position to entertain the belief that Beethoven’s 7th is playing. Of course, it is difficult to imagine that this epistemic position could be any weaker; I have minimal evidence. It seems plausible that we would need to be in a stronger epistemic position to conclude that Beethoven’s 7th was just playing. This is because having a justified belief either way requires stronger evidence.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹² Huemer, “Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism,” 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁴ Tollhurst, “Seemings,” 289.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 256.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

¹⁸ The aim of this article is not to argue for the superiority of PC# over PC. My argument goes through even if this is false. Whether we adopt PC# or PC, the evidentialist needs to offer an account of what constitutes adequate justification; my aim is to offer an account that enables religious experience to justify belief in God.

A similar problem holds for religious experience. Even if we grant that PC# entails that experience of God can do work to justify belief in God, it remains unclear whether it can do enough work. Experience of God might put S in an epistemic position of some strength, but this does not entail that it puts S in an epistemic position strong enough to be justified in believing that God exists. This problem is made worse by the rarity of religious experience. If religious experience were common, then believing in God on the basis of religious experience would not be analogous to believing that Beethoven's 7th was playing on my drive to campus. I cannot flip back to the given station to see what was playing, but if religious experience is common, then one could have several religious experiences, in which case one might be in a strong enough epistemic position to be justified in believing that God exists. Unfortunately, few of us are lucky enough to have religious experiences at all, and even fewer of us have them repeatedly. This points to something that has gone largely unnoticed in the debate about the veridicality of religious experience. The focus has been on whether religious experience can provide evidence that God exists. It has not been adequately considered whether religious experience can provide sufficient evidence that God exists. Put otherwise, the literature has focused on whether religious experience can put S in an epistemic position to believe that God exists but not on whether this epistemic position can be strong enough to ground justified belief. Here I stipulate that religious experience can provide such evidence and consider whether it can put us in an epistemic position that is strong enough for justified belief.

To be fair, Burns anticipates this objection. He seems to understand that even if religious experience can do some work to justify belief in God, it might not do enough, especially given the infrequency of religious experience for most. Perhaps this is why he argues for TC, which says that if it seems to S that P, because of the testimony of others, then absent defeaters S thereby has at least some justification for believing that P.¹⁹ If we can count the testimony of others who take themselves to have experienced God as evidence for our own belief that God exists, our epistemic position would be much stronger than it would be if we could only rely on our own experiences for evidence. It remains unclear whether this would put us in a strong enough epistemic position for justified belief in the existence of God. Even if it would, there are reasons to be skeptical of TC because of its entailments. One is that there would be considerable justification for the belief that the Miracle of the Sun occurred in 1917, since there is considerable testimony that it did occur. Similarly, there would have been considerable justification for the belief that the earth was flat since there was much testimony for this. For these reasons, I am skeptical of TC.²⁰ Without it, we cannot rely on the testimony of others who claim to have experienced God in order to justify our belief that God exists. If we cannot use such testimony, then could our own religious experiences do enough to make us adequately justified believers in God's existence?

Answering this question with respect to religious experience and belief in God requires solving a more fundamental problem for evidentialism in epistemology: the threshold problem. Put roughly, evidentialism is the view that S is justified in believing P if and only if S has evidence that P is true.²¹ In other words, evidentialists claim that having a justified belief requires having evidence that supports adopting the belief in question. However, for reasons explored earlier in the article, this does not appear to say enough; for it is insufficient for justified belief that P that I have some evidence. Otherwise I would have justification for believing anything for which there is some evidence, e.g., that the railroad tracks converge in the faraway distance when I look down them. On the contrary, the evidentialist must take a position when it comes to what counts as sufficient evidence for having a justified belief. In other words, although it is true that justified belief requires evidence, it is not

¹⁹ Burns, "A Phenomenal Conservative Perspective on Religious Experience," 258. Burns borrows this notion of testimony from Tucker. See Tucker, "Phenomenal Conservatism and Evidentialism in Religious Philosophy," 15.

²⁰ Regardless, the argument for the main thesis of this article would be even stronger if TC were true. If we could use the testimony of others about their own religious experiences, then there is more evidence available for God's existence, and so our epistemic position could be even stronger about this. For a helpful survey of the problems associated with whether the testimony of others about their own religious experience can justify our own belief in God, see Alston, *Experiencing God*, 279–84.

²¹ For an excellent overview of evidentialism, see Feldman, "Having Evidence," 83–104.

evidence of any strength that suffices. To have a justified belief, the evidentialist needs to occupy an epistemic position that is strong enough to support endorsing the given belief.

The problem is that it is notoriously difficult to account for what constitutes a sufficiently strong epistemic position. This is the threshold problem for evidentialism. Smith describes the threshold problem as follows: “A problem that confronts anyone who accepts the evidentialist thesis is that of specifying just how strongly one’s evidence must support a proposition in order for that support to be regarded as adequate for justification.”²² Some evidentialists agree that one’s evidence must be such that it renders the truth of the belief more probable than not.²³ I could not justifiably believe that P, for example, if my evidence only showed P to be 49% probable. For this reason, some evidentialists believe that the threshold is above 50%. However, any proposal for a specific figure above 50% seems *ad hoc*. If the evidentialist says that one’s evidence must render the belief 90% probable, it becomes difficult to say why evidence rendering the belief 89% would be inadequate, and so on. In other words, any solution to the threshold problem setting the evidential threshold somewhere above 50% but below 100% seems arbitrary.²⁴ There is no principled reason why any degree of probability above 50% is required. In the face of this arbitrariness, though, one solution to the threshold problem has earned some popularity: PE.

PE comes in many forms, but all of them reject purist epistemology. According to purist epistemology, “epistemic concepts are characterized to be pure and free from practical concerns.”²⁵ What the purist takes knowledge to be, for example, does not depend on what we happen to care about. Put otherwise, purism is the view that the practical and epistemic are independent of one another; our caring about the truth of a proposition does not affect what it takes to know that proposition. Proponents of PE reject this; they argue that the practical encroaches upon the epistemic, so that a difference in pragmatic circumstances can constitute a difference in knowledge.²⁶ Defenders of PE develop this view in myriad ways. One way argues that the higher the stakes are for P being true, the higher the evidential threshold is for having a justified belief that P.²⁷ This is a version of what Kim calls justification encroachment, the view that practical factors are relevant in determining whether or not the strength of a subject’s epistemic state is strong enough to meet the epistemic standards required for knowledge.²⁸ For example, suppose Jones and Smith want to know if a particular pharmacy is open. Each knows that it was open at this time last week, that there is no holiday today, that this particular pharmacy keeps regular hours, etc. Jones needs a medication without which he will die, whereas Smith needs Band-Aid for no immediate purpose. Since much more is at stake for Jones than Smith in knowing whether this pharmacy is open, Jones requires more evidence than Smith does. A consequence of PE is that Smith could have a justified belief that the pharmacy is open whereas Smith might not, even though they both have the exact same evidence: that it was open at this time last week and it keeps regular hours. The evidential threshold for adequate justification is higher for Jones because so much more is at stake. As Stanley roughly puts the view: the more important the question of whether P, the harder it is to know that P.²⁹

PE has a number of attractions. First, it offers a nonarbitrary solution to the threshold problem. The evidentialist needs to set the evidential threshold somewhere, but there seems to be no satisfying reason for choosing some degree of probability over any other. PE offers a nonarbitrary way out of this problem by claiming that where the threshold is set depends on the importance of the belief in question. Thus, PE

²² Smith, “The Epistemology of Religion,” 143.

²³ Mittag, “Evidentialism.”

²⁴ In fact, a similar arbitrariness results if one denies that the evidence must render the belief more probable than not. Even if we set the evidential threshold below 50%, it is unclear why evidence rendering the belief 48% rather than 49% probable should not count as adequate justification, for example.

²⁵ Kim, “Pragmatic Encroachment in Epistemology,” 1.

²⁶ Ichikawa Jenkins & Steup, “The Analysis of Knowledge.”

²⁷ Fantl & McGrath, “Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification,” 67–94.

²⁸ Kim, “Pragmatic Encroachment,” 2. For more on Justification Encroachment, see Fantl & McGrath, “Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification;” Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*; Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*; Fantl & McGrath, *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*; Weatherson, “Defending Interest-Relative Invariantism;” and Weatherson, *Knowledge, Bets, and Interests*.

²⁹ Stanley, *Knowledge and Practical Interests*.

can not only say where the threshold is set but also explain why it is set there. This highlights a second attraction of PE: it allows for flexibility when it comes to how strong one's epistemic position must be in order to have a justified belief. In very low stakes cases, it could be enough that my evidence renders my belief 55% probable, although this evidence might not be strong enough to justify belief in very high stakes cases. This brings me to the final attraction of PE, which is that it can accommodate for the intuition that very important beliefs require greater justification than unimportant ones. Precisely this intuition gets pumped in the case of Jones and Smith from earlier on. If one shares the intuition that Smith's justified belief requires considerably less evidence than Jones', PE has a ready explanation for this. Jones requires greater evidence because he will die if the pharmacy is closed, whereas Smith stands to lose very little: he cannot buy his Band-Aid today, but he has no immediate need for them.³⁰

Given these attractions, one might have compelling reasons to adopt PE in order to respond to the threshold problem that some evidentialists face. Let us now consider what implications this would have for whether religious experience can justify belief in God for its experiencers. Having a justified belief in God on the basis of religious experience will depend on how high the stakes are for the belief in question. In the case of religious experience, it is not immediately clear just what the belief in question is. The belief in need of justification could be either the belief that God exists or the belief that one is experiencing God. I leave it up to the defender of the veridicality of religious experience to choose which of these two beliefs require justification. Ultimately, I think that this makes little difference for whether PE allows for justified belief in God on the basis of religious experience. I do, however, think that the better belief to focus on is the latter: that one is experiencing God. This is because it seems plausible that if someone is experiencing God, then God exists. In other words, if I can have a justified belief that I am experiencing God, then this entails that God exists, since it follows from my justified belief that I am experiencing G that G exists. The entailment does not go the other way, however. If I can have a justified belief that God exists, this does not entail that I am experiencing God, since it does not follow from my justified belief that G is that I am experiencing G. For this reason, I focus on the belief that one has experienced God. The question is thus whether PE allows us to have a justified belief that we have done this.

If PE is true, then whether we have a justified belief that we have experienced God depends on how high the stakes are for experiencing God. If the stakes for experiencing God are high, then the evidential threshold for justified belief is higher, and stronger evidence will be required in order to have such a justified belief. If the stakes for experiencing God are low, then the evidential threshold for justified belief is lower, and weaker evidence will suffice for having such a justified belief. Again, whether the stakes are high or low, some evidentialists agree that one's evidence must be strong enough to render the truth of belief more probable than not. If this is so, then in order to have a justified belief that I have experienced God, my evidence must render the probability of my belief that I have experienced God greater than 50%, even if barely. Suppose, however, that the stakes for experiencing God are incredibly high, as high as the stakes possibly can be. Then, on PE, we might require evidence rendering it near certain that we have experienced God. Alternatively, suppose that the stakes are incredibly low, as low as the stakes can be. Then, on PE, we might require evidence rendering it simply more probable than not that we have experienced God.

As such, whether PE allows for justified belief in God depends (1) on how high the stakes are for experiencing God and (2) whether religious experience can put us in a sufficiently strong epistemic position to meet the demands of the evidential threshold, given those stakes. So, how high are the stakes for experiencing God, and can the experience of God put us in a sufficiently strong epistemic position to meet the evidential threshold? Let us consider each of these questions individually. One problem with PE is that its defenders have offered no thorough treatment of what constitute high stakes versus low stakes beliefs. However, it seems plausible to suppose that the stakes for believing P are high when, if P were true, then the truth of P would make a significant difference to me. The greater the difference that P being true would make,

³⁰ Although I focus here on the attractions of PE, commentators have developed strong objections against it. For an overview of challenges against PE, see Coss, "The Case Against Interest-Relative Invariantism," 25–48 and Kim, "Pragmatic Encroachment," 6–7.

the higher the stakes are. For example, the stakes for the belief that I have cancer would be incredibly high, since if it is true that I have cancer, this makes a great difference to me. Conversely, the stakes for believing P are low when, if P were false, then the falsity of P would not make a significant difference to me. The lesser the difference that P being true would make, the lower the stakes are. For example, the stakes for the belief that there is an even number of blades of grass in my yard would be incredibly low, since if it is false that the number of blades of grass in my yard is even, this makes little difference to me. The question thus becomes: how significant would experiencing God be, if I were really doing it?

Suppose that experiencing God is incredibly significant. Perhaps experiencing God confers unique spiritual or moral benefits that change our lives significantly.³¹ Paul's experience on the Damascus Road comes to mind. It led Paul to convert to Christianity and bring an end to his persecution of Christians. In this respect, Paul's experience conferred rather significant spiritual and moral benefits upon him. It is because of the experience that Paul develops a relationship with the divine and becomes a more moral person. Here we seem to have a very high stakes case. If Paul really did experience God on the road to Damascus, then this experience made a big difference in his life. As such, the stakes for whether Paul did experience God were incredibly high, and so is the evidential threshold. Indeed, Paul's experience points to an intuition that many share about religious experience: it is difficult to imagine what could be more significant than experiencing God. For those sharing this intuition, PE entails that the stakes for experiencing God are incredibly high. If this is so, then the evidential threshold is also incredibly high, and our epistemic position might need to be nearly as strong as possible in order to have a justified belief that we are experiencing God. In other words, if the stakes really are this high, then our evidence might need to render it nearly certain that we are in fact experiencing God in order to have a justified belief that this is so.

Even if the stakes are so high that the evidential threshold requires near certainty, religious experience could put subjects in a sufficiently strong epistemic position for justified belief. There are three ways in which this could happen. First, having a high number of religious experiences might put us in a sufficiently strong epistemic position for justified belief that we have experienced God. If I were to have 1,000 experiences of God, for example, this might provide adequate justification for the belief that I have experienced God. Unfortunately, religious experience is scarcely so common. Few of us are lucky to have any religious experiences, let alone this many. Nevertheless, the point stands that those with many religious experiences could be in a sufficiently strong epistemic position for such justified belief, even if the stakes for experiencing God are incredibly high. Second, one might come by justified belief through having one very strong experience of God. According to PC#, the strength of appearances varies by degree.³² Consider the following propositions: (1) the shortest distance between two points is a straight line and (2) Caesar was a great strategist. Both seem very strongly to me, but (1) much more so, for (1) has a degree of assertiveness that (2) does not. Seemings differ in their intensities. As such, whether religious experience can justify belief about experiencing God depends on whether it could seem strongly enough to someone that she is experiencing God, even if this requires certainty. This seems entirely possible. In fact, religious experiences are often described as intense episodes. Indeed, if the experient is truly experiencing God, it would be difficult to imagine having a seeming that could be more intense than this.³³ The phenomenological force of an experience with God might be so great that it would put one in a strong enough epistemic position for justified belief, even if this requires incredibly strong evidence. Third, even if the evidential threshold is so high that near certainty is required for justified belief, one might use other kinds of evidence (the ontological argument, the argument from design, etc.) to approach the threshold, at which point religious experience might finish the job, putting one at or beyond the threshold. In this way, religious experience might furnish a subject with the remaining evidence that is

³¹ Adams, for example, argues that believing in a moral order helps individuals greatly to act morally, and that believing in God furnishes such a moral order. Adams, *Moral Arguments for the Existence of God*, 144–63.

³² Tucker, "Evidentialism," 17.

³³ James, for example, describes his experience of God in this way, calling it his "supreme experience." See James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 66–7.

required for justified belief that one has experienced God even if the stakes are incredibly high.³⁴ In these three ways, religious experience could justify the belief that one has experienced God, even if this requires near certainty.

If this is the case, it should come as no surprise that religious experience could also justify the belief that one has experienced God in lower stakes cases, ones in which considerably weaker evidence is required. This is because if evidence *e* can put *S* in a sufficiently strong epistemic position for justified belief when the evidence required must render *S*'s belief near certain, then evidence *e* can put *S* in a sufficiently strong epistemic position for justified belief when the evidence required must render *S*'s belief less probable than nearly certain. In other words, if religious experience can justify belief that one has experienced God in high stakes cases, then it stands to reason that religious experience can also do so in low stakes cases. Since I argued above that there are three ways in which this might happen even in high stakes cases, it is reasonable that this is also true in low stakes cases. As such, it appears that religious experience could put us in a sufficiently strong epistemic position for the justified belief that we have experienced God regardless of whether the stakes are high or low. Wherever the evidential threshold is, religious experience might meet it.

The more difficult question to answer asks whether the stakes for experiencing God are in fact high or low. Earlier I considered reasons that the stakes might be rather high: experiencing God could confer significant spiritual and moral benefits. Indeed, it might seem obvious to some that nothing is more important than experiencing God. In this case, the stakes for experiencing God are incredibly high, and so is the evidential threshold. However, there are two reasons that this is not so obvious. First, it might be the case that the spiritual and moral benefits that experiencing God would confer upon us are multiply realizable. If this is so, then one could obtain them elsewhere, and the stakes for experiencing God are not really that high. Paul might have converted and therefore enjoyed a relationship with the divine without his vision on the Damascus Road, for example. There is a logically possible world in which Paul ends his persecution of Christians for different reasons. Second, it might be the case that the stakes for experiencing God are low because everyone does it eventually. If the afterlife involves everyone coming face to face with God, then everyone who dies will do so at some point, and it makes no meaningful difference whether they do it now or years from now when they die. One might worry that for some, experience with God now would lead them to believe in God, which might help them be joined with God for eternity. If this were true, then the stakes would indeed be high. But it seems implausible that experiencing God during one's finite life is a necessary condition for believing in or being joined with God for all eternity. This is especially so because whether we experience God might be somewhat out of our control. The bigger problem is that it appears difficult for someone who will be joined with God for all eternity to claim that the stakes for experiencing God are very high during one's life.³⁵ If it turns out that I will experience God in the afterlife for all eternity, it seems strange that the stakes for experiencing God before then can be very high. After all, what we experience in time cannot compare to what we experience in eternity. Ultimately, I remain agnostic as to whether the stakes for experiencing God are high or low. I leave this for others with more refined theological commitments to determine.

I do want to draw attention to a dilemma that this raises for those who want to solve the threshold problem with recourse to PE and maintain that religious experience can justify the belief that one has experienced God, and thus that God exists. If the stakes for experiencing God are high, then so is the evidential threshold, and religious experience stands a worse chance of justifying the belief that we have experienced God, and thus that God exists. If the stakes for experiencing God are low, then so is the

³⁴ I do not mean to claim that such traditional arguments might justify the belief that one has experienced God, since God's existing does not entail that one has experienced God, although it might if God is omnipresent. My point is that non-experiential evidence might put one closer to the justified belief that God exists, at which point religious experience might do enough to justify the belief that one has experienced God.

³⁵ This would be the case if universalism were true, for example. If everyone goes to Heaven eventually, and thus experiences God for all eternity, then it perhaps makes little difference whether they do so during their lives. See Kronen & Reitan, *God's Final Victory: A Comparative Philosophical Case for Universalism*.

evidential threshold, and religious experience stands a better chance of justifying the belief that we have experienced God, and thus that God exists. Hence, the defender of PE and the veridicality of religious experience must make one of two moves: she must either render justified belief more attainable by conceding that experience with God is not that important or maintain the supreme importance of experiencing God and concede that justified belief about this will be incredibly hard to attain. One might simply reject PE, but this would mean being armed with one fewer solution to the threshold problem, enabling religious experience to justify belief in God.

I have argued in this article that evidentialists who want to defend the veridicality of religious experience ought to offer a solution to the threshold problem; they should say how strong our epistemic position needs to be to have a justified belief that God exists on the basis of religious experience. This has gone somewhat underexplored by the religious epistemology literature. Even if religious experience can provide evidence that God exists, can it provide enough evidence for justified belief that God exists? PE offers a solution to this problem that is attractive for several reasons. The most relevant is that it allows religious experience to ground justified belief. If PE is true, the strength of the epistemic position required for justified belief depends on how high or low the stakes are for the truth of the belief in question. If the stakes are high, then the evidential threshold rises. If the stakes are low, then the evidential threshold goes down. I argued here that whether the stakes are incredibly high or comparatively low for whether we have experienced God, religious experience can provide enough evidence to put us in a sufficiently strong epistemic position for a justified belief about this. As a result, I conclude that religious experience could justify belief in God. However, the argument for this conclusion comes with a price because of the dilemma it poses for evidentialists aiming to defend the veridicality of religious experience. If PE is true, one must say whether the stakes for experiencing God are high or low. If they are high, one can maintain the importance of religious experience but must concede that justified belief will be hard to come by. If they are low, one can maintain that justified belief is comparatively easy to come by but must concede that the stakes for experiencing God are not that high. Either way, though, my argument should appeal to anyone intent to claim that religious experience can provide adequate evidence for justified belief in God. Whether it is very difficult or somewhat easier to come by, it could happen.

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