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IS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE A SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT?

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Abstract: Many religious believers do not appear to take the existence of epistemic peer disagreement as a serious challenge to the rationality of their religious beliefs. They seem to think they have different evidence for their religious beliefs and hence aren't really epistemic peers with their opponents. One underexplored potential evidential asymmetry in religious disagreements is based on investigations of religious experience studies attempting to offer relevant evidence for religious claims in objective and public terms. I conclude that private religious experience can provide a relevant evidential asymmetry between opponents in cases of religious disagreement. I further conclude that if a religious believer reports a private experience to a religious sceptic, the latter is pressured to conciliate in the direction of the believer, at least if they were epistemic peers prior to the experience.

KEYWORDS: Epistemology of Disagreement, Religious Disagreement, Peer Disagreement, Conciliationism

1. Introduction

The contemporary literature on the epistemology of disagreement helps to refine the challenge disagreement poses to the rationality of religious belief. The literature generally confines itself to the following problem: Suppose that after an agent comes to believe proposition *P* she finds out that there is an epistemic peer – someone of equal intelligence and ability – who has evaluated the same body of evidence and come to believe *not-P*. What should her reaction be upon discovering peer disagreement? Does the existence of peer disagreement constitute a (partial) defeater to her original belief that *P*? Or is she rationally permitted to maintain her belief that *P* even in the face of peer disagreement? *Conciliationism* (revisionism, conformism) holds that when an agent encounters peer disagreement, a certain amount of weight must be given to both views and hence the agent should revise her belief that *P*.¹ This could require lowering her confidence in *P* or

¹ See Nathan Ballantyne, “Counterfactual Philosophers,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 88 (2014): 368–387; David Christensen “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News,” *Philosophical Review* 116 (2007): 187–217; Adam Elga, “Reflection and Disagreement,” *Noûs* (2007): 41: 478–502. Richard Feldman “Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement,” in *Epistemology Futures*, ed. Stephen Hetherington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 216–236. Jonathan Matheson, *The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

withholding belief in *P*. *Non-Conciliationism* (anti-revisionism, non-conformism, steadfast views) claims that there are cases in which an agent's awareness of her peer's belief that *not-P* does not require changing her belief that *P*.² Thus, the conciliationist denies that there can be rational disagreement between epistemic peers, whereas the non-conciliationist claims that epistemic peers can rationally disagree.³ There is a recent large and technical literature on disagreement that I do not have space to outline here. But with respect to disagreement about religious belief this much seems clear: if conciliationism is true then a serious challenge is levelled against the rationality of religious belief. When faced with epistemic peer disagreement over her religious beliefs the religious believer is forced to revise them in order for those beliefs to remain rational. The problem can be standardized as the following:

The Problem

1. Agent A and agent B are epistemic peers with respect to whether proposition P if they share the same evidence E (with respect to P) and are equally reliable with respect to accurately evaluating relevantly similar propositions to P (on the basis of relevantly similar evidence to E). [Approximate statement of epistemic peerhood]
2. If agent A believes any proposition P and agent B believes not-P and they are epistemic peers with respect to whether P, then both A and B must revise their beliefs that P and not-P, respectively. [Approximate statement of conciliationism]
3. Agent A believes religious proposition R and agent B believes not-R (and they are epistemic peers with respect to whether R).

Therefore,

4. A and B both must revise their belief that R and not-R, respectively. [The Problem]

Admittedly, there are many different ways to understand epistemic peerhood, evidence, and hence the rational requirements for belief revision in the face of disagreement. But the problem I focus on here is that on most, if not all, conceptions of conciliationism a serious sceptical threat has been posed to religious belief.

² See Peter van Inwagen, "It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality: Philosophy of Religion Today*, eds. J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder. (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, eds. John Hawthorne and Tamar Szabó Gendler. (Oxford University Press, 2005), 167–196; Michael Bergmann, "Rational Disagreement after Full Disclosure," *Episteme* 6 (2009): 336–353.

³ Conciliationism and non-conciliationism are the two main positions in the literature. But there are hybrid views which recommend sometimes revising and sometimes remaining steadfast in the face of disagreement. See Thomas Kelly, (2010) "Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence," in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford University Press, 2010), 111-174; Jennifer Lackey, "What Should We Do When We Disagree?" in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, eds. Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford University Press, 2010): 274-293; Jennifer Lackey, "A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance," in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Adrian Haddock, Alan Millar, and Duncan Pritchard, Oxford University Press 2010).

Many religious believers, however, do not appear to take the existence of religious disagreement as a serious threat to the rationality of their beliefs.⁴ Bryan Frances notes that “in an enormous number of cases people think, at least implicitly, that their [religious] group is in a better position to judge [the truth about religious claims]. I will think my group knows something the critics have missed” (Frances 2014, 165). Perhaps, at least implicitly, religious believers tend to dismiss worries based on peer disagreement by appealing to the fact that they have different evidence that their opponents do not possess. This evidence constitutes a relevant epistemic asymmetry between the two opponents who would otherwise be epistemic peers. The religious believer can remain steadfast in the face of disagreement, then, because she enjoys additional evidence that her opponent does not also enjoy, implying that they aren’t really epistemic peers about religious matters. Notice that employing this strategy does not deny the existence of a genuine disagreement.⁵ Rather, it denies that the religious believer and her opponent are genuinely epistemic peers because they have different evidence. So with respect to the Problem outlined above, the religious believer would simply deny that A and B are epistemic peers with respect to whether R. In such a case the problem of religious disagreement evaporates before getting off the ground.

There are a number of different strategies that could be used to explain epistemic asymmetries in cases of religious disagreement. Specifically, potential candidates to explain the evidential asymmetry include self-trust, immediacy, and introspection. But there are at least two worries with appealing to these in cases of religious disagreement: (i) in many cases these explanations will be equally available to both opponents in the dispute. So they won’t be able to be used to justify an evidential asymmetry; (ii) these don’t appear to be what the religious believer has in mind when denying that her opponents are genuine epistemic peers. Nothing about these two worries precludes self-trust, immediacy, and introspection from being the basis of an evidential asymmetry in disputes, including religious disputes. It’s just that we’re looking for an explanation that appears to be a more likely candidate in cases of religious disagreements.

Religious believers who don’t want to appeal to self-trust, immediacy, or introspection need to do more work to explain the relevant evidential difference between themselves and their non-religious opponents. I suggest that potential explanation may lie in investigations of religious experience that attempt to explain such experiences in objective and public terms. However, in his work on religious experience Phillip H. Wiebe speculates that while certain religious experiences might be objective, they are private rather than public. This differs significantly from scientific evidence which is both objective and public.

My examination of Wiebe’s work will culminate in a defense of the following thesis:

The Private Religious Experience Thesis: Private religious experience can provide a relevant evidential asymmetry in cases of religious disagreement.

After that, I will show that in certain scenarios reports of private religious experiences should cause the sceptic to doubt. So to conclude I will defend the following:

⁴ This is ultimately an empirical sociological fact that could be checked, at least in principle.

⁵ For more on verbal disagreement see: Nathan Ballantyne, “Verbal Disagreements and Philosophical Scepticism,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94 (2016): 752-7765; David J. Chalmers, “Verbal Disputes,” *The Philosophical Review*, 120 (2011): 515-566; Andrew Graham, “On the Very Idea of a Verbal Dispute,” *Dialogue*, 53 (2014): 299-314; Brendan Balcerak Jackson, “Verbal Disputes and Substantiveness,” *Erkenntnis*, 79 (2014): 31-54; Carrie Jenkins, “Merely Verbal Disputes,” *Erkenntnis*, 49 (2014): 11-30.

The Religious Experience Peer Pressure Thesis: If a religious believer reports a private experience to a religious sceptic, the latter is pressured to conciliate in the direction of the believer (if they were peers prior to the experience).

The former does not entail the latter and vice versa. However, the first thesis does entail the second in cases where two opponents are peers up until the point at which one of them has a religious experience (on the assumption that testimony is reliable and the religious experience is subsequently reported to the other person).

2. Three Possible Explanations of Special Insight

Before examining religious experience as a possible evidential asymmetry in disputes I want to first examine a number of other different ways to explain it and show why the religious believer may often not be entitled to them. Peter van Inwagen's provocative essay titled after W.K. Clifford's "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence" is one of the earliest non-conciliationist responses to peer disagreement (1996). van Inwagen insists that in the face of disagreement he is reasonable to remain steadfast in his beliefs. The most plausible asymmetry that van Inwagen can identify between himself and any of his opponents is simply that he must enjoy a special kind of insight that his opponents necessarily lack. Regarding his disagreement about the incompatibility of free will and determinism with David Lewis van Inwagen explains that:

[M]y best guess is that I enjoy some sort of philosophical insight... that, for all his merits, is somehow denied to Lewis. And this would have to be an insight that is incommunicable – at least *I* don't know how to communicate it – for I have done all I can to communicate it to Lewis, and he has understood perfectly everything I have said, and he has not come to share my conclusions... not only do my beliefs about these question seem to me to be undeniably *true*, but (quite independent of any consideration of which theses it is that seem to me to be true), I don't want to be forced into a position in which I can't see my way clear to accepting any philosophical thesis of any consequence.⁶

van Inwagen's response often seems echoed by religious believers when they encounter disagreement. Many religious believers fail to give *any* epistemic significance to the fact of widespread religious disagreement, even though they are aware of such disagreement.⁷ The most plausible way to understand the special insight is that it creates an evidential asymmetry between opponents in cases of disagreement. So special insight somehow constitutes additional evidence. Three ways special insight could be explicated are in terms of self-trust, immediacy, and from the reliability of introspection.

2.1. Self-Trust

⁶ van Inwagen, "It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence," 139.

⁷ Bryan Frances, *Disagreement* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 165.

From a third-person perspective to a peer disagreement perhaps there is no reason to prefer one agent's belief to her opponent's belief. But considerations about self-trust may justify an agent in the dispute herself remaining steadfast in the face of peer disagreement. According to Richard Foley, self-trust is reliable inasmuch as the agent is unable to offer a successful critique of the belief she holds which is under dispute.⁸ She must also be unable to offer a critique of the reliability of the process which produced the disputed belief. On this view that "[o]ne does not privilege one's own opinion merely because it is one's own; indeed, in general, one does not privilege one's own opinion. But one can privilege one's own opinion when one has self-trust in it."⁹

However, Foley's account of self-trust is supposed to undermine more general worries about scepticism, for example, regarding the veracity of perception. But Foley's account can apply to sceptical worries about perception without necessarily applying to scepticism formulated on the basis of disagreement.¹⁰ This is because disagreement involves the existence of another mind. The existence of disagreement must be understood as distinct from the first-person perspective otherwise it is not a disagreement at all. Importantly, the disagreement is not only based on another mind, but on the *judgments* formed by another mind.¹¹

Finally, this strategy is potentially equally available to both opponents in a disagreement. If in a case of religious disagreement self-trust is appealed to only by one opponent in the dispute, then it could constitute an evidential asymmetry in those cases. But it's far from clear that self-trust is very often what the religious believer has in mind when appealing to additional evidence. Likewise, there's nothing uniquely religious about self-trust such that one would think it constitutes additional positive evidence for religious beliefs as opposed to evidence against it. If that's right, then this is a response which is equally available to both opponents in any given dispute, even ones about religious matters.

2.2. Immediacy

Another way of explaining why the first-person perspective constitutes additional evidence in disputes is based on the idea that an agent's first-person beliefs are immediate while her beliefs about others are mediated. Ralph Wedgwood argues for non-conciliationism based on an egocentric bias which justifies an agent preferring her own intuitions. Without a special reason to do otherwise, an agent ought to hold that her intuitions are *prima facie* justified. Wedgwood calls this type of justification *primitive trust* (Rattan 2014, 41-42). He argues that there is a "general requirement of rationality" that one minimize the sources in which one has primitive trust and for this reason, primitive trust is reserved for one's own, and not extended to other's intuitions. This is [a justified] egocentric epistemic bias" (Rattan 2014, 42).¹² The immediacy of such intuitions can therefore serve as the basis for a relevant epistemic asymmetry between two parties who are otherwise epistemic peers.¹³

Disagreement, however, is supposed to be a relevant reason that causes an agent to lose confidence in her intuitions, even if those intuitions enjoy *prima facie* justification. Wedgwood

⁸ Gurpreet Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," *Analytic Philosophy*, 55 (2014): 39.

⁹ Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," 39.

¹⁰ Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," 40.

¹¹ Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," 41. See also Richard Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹² See also Rattan, "Disagreement and the First-Person Perspective," 42 and Ralph Wedgwood, "The Moral Evil Demons," in eds. *Disagreement*, Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford University Press, 2010), 216-246.

¹³ See also Ralph Wedgwood, "The Moral Evil Demons."

fails to show why primitive trust wouldn't be defeated once one became aware of peer disagreement (Rattan 2014, 43). In cases of religious disagreement where primitive trust constitutes part of one's total evidence for one's religious beliefs it could constitute additional evidence which explains an evidential asymmetry. But this is only the case if one's opponent doesn't also have primitive self-trust. And it seems that on Wedgwood's account *everyone* should have (prima facie) primitive self-trust. So it's not clear how this could constitute a relevant asymmetry in cases of disagreement in general, let alone in cases of religious disagreement. Plus, it's doubtful that this is what many, if any, religious believers have in mind when they claim there's an evidential difference between themselves and their opponents.

3.3. Introspection

Finally, introspection might constitute additional evidence that a religious believer possesses and her opponent does not. For an agent cannot introspect her opponent's phenomenological experience. Since she is only able to introspect her own phenomenological experiences, she has a reason – all else being equal – to favour her own beliefs.

Brie Gertler explains:

The term 'introspection' – literally, 'looking within' – captures a traditional way of conceiving how we grasp our own mental states. This term expresses, in spatial language, a divide between an 'inner' world and an 'outer' or 'external' world. For most philosophers, the spatial connotations of this language are purely metaphorical: to say that a state or entity is internal to the mind is not to say that it falls within a given spatial boundary. The term 'introspection' is standardly used to denote a method of knowing unique to self-knowledge, one that differs from the method we use to grasp the 'outer' world, namely, perception.¹⁴

Eric Schwitzgebel provocatively argues that while “current conscious experience is... possible, important, necessary for a full life, and central to the development of a full scientific understanding of the mind... [that it is also] highly untrustworthy.”¹⁵

Many are tempted to construe doubts about introspection in terms of an agent's (in)ability to identify nonconscious mental states such as motivations, hidden beliefs and desires, the basis for decisions, etc. Thus, many assume that thoughtful and careful introspection is generally reliable. Schwitzgebel argues that even this slightly weaker version of fallibilism about introspection is not nearly weak enough.¹⁶

Consider that emotions – whatever they may be – can at least sometimes involve or be accompanied by conscious experience. Think of an emotion such as joy or anger. Is it a short or long experience? Is it a feeling throughout the body, or is it located in the brain? Does being angry involve literally seeing red? Or “is joy sometimes in the head, sometimes more visceral, sometimes a thrill, sometimes an expansiveness – or, instead, does joy have a single, consistent core, a distinctive, identifiable, unique experiential character?”¹⁷ The inconsistency in descriptions does not amount to a deficiency in the language available to describe phenomenological experience.

¹⁴ Brie Gertler (Winter 2014 Edition) “Self-Knowledge,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2014).

¹⁵ Eric Schwitzgebel, “The Unreliability of Naive Introspection,” *The Philosophical Review* 117 (2008): 246.

¹⁶ Eric Schwitzgebel, “The Unreliability of Naive Introspection,” 247-248.

¹⁷ Eric Schwitzgebel, “The Unreliability of Naive Introspection,” 249.

Schwitzgebel suggests that it is the very phenomenology itself that is incredibly difficult to accurately describe. That is, either “[r]eflection doesn’t remove our ignorance, or it delivers haphazard results.”¹⁸

Assessing Schwitzgebel’s scepticism towards introspection is not my focus here. His critique of introspection is controversial and there is a body of literature on it that I will refrain from exploring here.¹⁹ My point here is that a lot of work needs to be done by anyone, including the religious believer, who wants to appeal to introspection as part of the evidential basis for her belief(s). It’s an open question whether introspection is reliable. If it is reliable, then it could be used to establish an evidential asymmetry in cases where one opponent has it and the other does not. But it’s not obvious that this will be a strategy frequently available to the religious believer. It’s again also doubtful that introspection is what religious believers typically have in mind when claiming that there’s an evidential difference between herself and her opponents.²⁰

3. Religious Experience as Evidence

Thus far I have examined self-trust, immediacy, and the reliability of introspection as potential explanations of epistemic asymmetry view in cases of religious disagreements. I argued that in many cases it seems that they are equally available to both opponents in a dispute. There’s nothing uniquely religious about them. Likewise it’s doubtful that they are what the religious believer has in mind when claiming she has an evidential advantage over her opponent. In what follows, I argue that religious experience is a better explanation of this alleged asymmetry, at least for those religious believers who (partially) base their religious beliefs on such experiences. That is, religious experience provides additional evidence for religious beliefs. Such evidence could serve to create an evidential asymmetry between a religious believer and her opponent who would otherwise be her epistemic peer (or are in fact peers up until the experience occurs). To begin this section I’m going to show why externalist understandings of religious experience cannot provide the relevant evidential asymmetry in religious disputes that we’re attempting to uncover. After

¹⁸ Eric Schwitzgebel, “The Unreliability of Naive Introspection,” 250.

¹⁹ For an excellent introductory resource on introspection see Eric Schwitzgebel, “Introspection”, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Edward N. Zalta ed (Summer 2014). For a very informative introduction to self-knowledge see Brie Gertler, “Self-Knowledge.”

²⁰ Michael Thune argues that van Inwagen’s argument is best understood as an argument against widespread scepticism. Since there is widespread disagreement on many topics, if revisionism is true it implies widespread scepticism (See also Hilary Kornblith, “Belief in the Face of Controversy,” in *Disagreement*, Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford University Press, 2010), 29-52.). Thune argues that van Inwagen implicitly endorses a distinction between internal and external parity with respect to peers. Internal parity is about the evidence, arguments, judgments, and perhaps even the felt attractiveness that two peers cite as relevant to forming the belief under dispute. External parity concerns facts that they might not be aware of such as the subjects overall epistemic situation (e.g. whether the belief was formed by a reliable process) (Michael Thune, “Religious Belief and Epistemology of Disagreement,” *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010): 715). Thune claims that “[d]isagreements that involve internal parity but not external parity obviously do not admit of parity *all things considered* and thus, van Inwagen seems to say, need not result in a defeater” (Michael Thune, “Religious Belief and Epistemology of Disagreement,” 715). The external asymmetry can plausibly be explained by the fact that one agent enjoys a special insight that her opponent lacks. But the very fact that van Inwagen felt compelled to write a response about disagreement suggests that the correct conclusions are far from obvious. There are two points worth considering. First, as noted earlier this response is equally available to van Inwagen’s opponents. Second, it does not offer an explanation of what constitutes special insight that I have been searching for so far. It simply maintains that such an insight exists, but at the cost of begging-the-question against conciliationism.

that, I explain why understanding religious experience as intuitive knowing is a better candidate than externalist options. I conclude by defending the idea that if a religious believer reports a private experience to a religious sceptic, the latter is pressured to conciliate in the direction of the believer (if they were peers prior to the experience).

3.1. Externalist or Reformed Approaches to Religious Experience

Externalists about justification, particularly those sympathetic to reformed epistemology, might wonder whether the problem of religious disagreement is as significant as I suggest. For instance, following Alvin Plantinga it's possible that a religious believer holds that if her religious experience: (1) has been produced in [an agent] by cognitive faculties that are working properly (functioning as they ought to, subject to no cognitive dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for [her] kinds of cognitive faculties; (2) the segment of the design plan governing the production of that belief is aimed at the production of true beliefs; (3) there is a high statistical probability that a belief produced under those conditions will be true;²¹ and (4) that she has thought sufficiently about objections and the nature of religious disagreement, then she's internally rational and hence requires no (subjective) defeater based on disagreement. For instance, in explicitly addressing the question of whether reasonable disagreement is possible, Michael Bergmann writes that "[i]n a case where two people of roughly equal intellectual virtue... continue knowingly to disagree even after full disclosure, it is possible that both parties are externally rational in continuing to disagree and in thinking that the other may well be externally rational in continuing to disagree" (Bergmann 2009, 341).²²

The problem with this response to religious disagreement is that (i) it is equally available to both parties in a dispute and; (ii) it fails to establish an epistemic asymmetry which is independent of the dispute itself. The great pumpkin objection is a well-worn objection to Plantinga's reformed epistemology. The objection is that any belief can be well-justified, and in particular, any belief can be properly basic. If the appropriate external conditions have been met, then almost *any* belief could turn out to be justified, even beliefs that are obviously absurd.

In the context of disagreement, the great pumpkin objection highlights the fact that an externalist or reformed approach is equally available to both parties in a dispute. Two opponents could have *the same* justification (i.e. internal rationality) that supports contradictory religious claims. The pressure from conciliationism comes from the fact that there needs to be a way of establishing an epistemic asymmetry that is independent of the dispute itself in order for the agent in question to be rational in remaining steadfast. Otherwise both parties need to conciliate in the face of disagreement. The reformed approach doesn't offer any such independent reason and hence isn't helpful, at least not in the context disagreement.²³

²¹ This is modified from Richard Feldman, *Epistemology* (USA: Pearson. 2002), 100. See also Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous* 15 (1981): 41-51 and Alvin Plantinga, "Epistemic Justification," *Nous* 2 (1986): 3-18 See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) for a detailed development of an externalist religious epistemology.

²² Michael Bergmann, "Rational Disagreement after Full Disclosure," *Episteme* 6 (2009): 336-353. The literature on reformed epistemology is enormous and the literature on externalism simpliciter is even larger. But I take this statement to be representative of what an externalist might say about religious disagreement. See Michael Bergmann, *Justification Without Awareness: A Defense of Epistemic Externalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) for more on the externalist/internalist debate.

²³ The disagreement literature typically remains neutral between the internalist/externalist debate about justification (or knowledge). I don't believe that my rejection of externalist solutions to religious disagreement constitutes a

Another way of understanding the problem with this solution is that it's difficult to see how two opponents could be properly functioning and yet arrive at competing, or even logically contradictory positions. This is especially so if as Bergmann contends, there has been full disclosure of the evidence, and hence both opponents have identical evidence. For instance, it's difficult to understand how one body of evidence could support the conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead, while that very same body of evidence supports the opposite conclusion that Jesus did not rise from the dead.²⁴ Externalist understandings of religious experience therefore do not help us identify an evidential asymmetry in cases of religious disagreement.

3.2. *Intuitive Knowing as Spiritual Experience*

The nature of religious experience is highly contentious, and includes questions about what constitutes religious experience and how much epistemic weight should be accorded such experiences. Additional questions include what evidential status hearers of testimony of such experiences should accord them. In this section I explore a recent study of religious experience by Phillip H. Wiebe found in his 2015 book *Intuitive Knowing as Spiritual Experience*. Referring to Wiebe's project will help offer potential answers regarding the nature and epistemic significance of religious experience. While there are different ways of construing religious experience, the conception I will focus on is what Wiebe calls *intuitive knowing*. He explains that the concept of intuitive knowing can be found in ancient Greek thought.²⁵ He says that "[t]he power of the intellect to grasp concepts and truths intuitively that are neither derivable from sense perception, such as the concept of infinity, nor justifiable by empirical evidence, such as inviolable principles of ethics, has been widely considered a characteristic that sets humans apart from all other earthly creatures."²⁶

Plato and Aristotle both held that intuitive knowing was knowledge pertaining to matters that are eternal. That is, "[t]he intellect came to be seen as capable not only of intuiting the reality of natural laws, a moral order, and an ontological order that includes God, but also of proving our immortality."²⁷ Augustine thought that intuitive knowing existed in intellectual visions; these are the visions that Wiebe examines in his study.²⁸ These are distinct from corporeal visions (apparitions or ghost sightings).²⁹ My reasons for focusing on intellectual visions are threefold. First, religious experience is such a large field that it is impossible to survey every type here. Second, historically it has been held that intellectual visions are superior to other types of visions.³⁰ Third, intuitive knowledge provides a unique solution to the problem of religious disagreement that might not be available to other types of religious experience.

rejection of externalism simpliciter. But if it does, then what follows can be understood as a response to religious disagreement for internalists.

²⁴ I don't think this response needs to assume something as strong as the Uniqueness Thesis, though maybe it needs it needs a similar weaker principle to be true. See Roger White, "Epistemic Permissiveness." *Philosophical Perspectives* 19 (2005): 445–459 for more on Uniqueness.

²⁵ Phillip H. Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1.

²⁶ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 1.

²⁷ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 2-3.

²⁸ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 2-3.

²⁹ For a study of corporeal visions see Phillip H. Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). I will say more about this later.

³⁰ Phillip H. Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 5.

Perhaps the best way to understand intuitive knowing is by exploring specific examples. Wiebe gathers many of his examples from the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Center. By way of contrast, the first example is an intersubjective sensory experience previously studied by Emma Heathcote-James, and hence *not* one an example of intuitive knowing:

Example 1:

“Suddenly there was a man in white standing in front of the [baptismal] font about eighteen inches away. He was a man but he was totally, utterly different from the rest of us. He was wearing something long, like a robe, but it was so white it was almost transparent... He was just looking at us. It was the most wondering feeling. Not a word was spoken; various people began to touch their arms because it felt like having warm oiled poured over you. The children came forward with their mouths wide open. Then all of a sudden – I suppose it was a few seconds, but time seemed to stop – the angel was gone. Everyone who was there was quite convinced that an angel came to encourage us.”³¹

This example is a sensory experience of an apparition, not of intuitive knowing. The following two cases are examples of intuitive knowing:

Example 2:

Amelia: “It all began one spring morning when, as a little girl, I ran out of the house before breakfast and to the end of the garden which led to the orchard. In the night a miracle had been wrought, and the grass was carpeted with golden celandines. I stood still and looked, and clasped my hands and in wonder at the beauty I said ‘God’. I knew from that moment that everything that existed was just part of ‘that sustaining life which burns bright or dim as each are mirrors of the fire for which all things thirst’. Of course, I didn’t put it in those words, but I did know that I and everything were one in the life. When I grew older and read philosophy I thought of all creation as the Shadow of Beauty unbeheld, and felt that Beauty was God.” Amelia remarks that even in the inevitable changes that life brings, she has felt certain that “God is there, and in it all, and part of it all. So I could rest in Him.”³²

Example 3:

Carol: “I looked up at the snows, but immediately lost all normal consciousness and became engulfed as it were in a great cloud of light and ecstasy of knowing and understanding all the secrets of the universe, and sense of goodness of the Being in whom it seemed all were finally enclosed, and yet in that enclosure utterly liberated. I ‘saw’ nothing in the physical sense... it was as if I were blinded by an internal light. And yet I was ‘looking outward’. It was *not* a ‘dream’, but utterly different, in that the content was of the utmost significance to me and in universal terms. Gradually this

³¹ Phillip H. Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 47. See also Emma Heathcote-James, *Seeing Angels: True Contemporary Accounts of Hundreds of Angelic Experiences* (London: John Blake, 2002), 46-47.

³² Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 66.

sense of ecstasy faded and slowly I came to my ordinary sense and perceived I was sitting as usual and the mountains were as usual in daily beauty.” Carol says that the aftermath of the experience was in the form of a wonderful mental and spiritual glow, and then adds: “I became convinced later that a spiritual Reality underlay all earthly reality, and the ultimate ground of the universe was benevolent in a positive way, surpassing our temporal understanding. This conviction has remained with me, but in an intellectual form; it has not, however, prevented me from feeling acute personal depression and disappointment time and again, throughout my life.” She also relates that later in life she developed a strong interest in Buddhism, but after that felt that it was founded on a negative premise, whereas the universe seemed to her to be positive.³³

3.3. *Public Knowledge versus Private Knowledge*

The distinction between experiential and experimental is significant since I am considering whether intuitive knowing can be used as a potential asymmetry in religious disagreements. Wiebe speculates that possibly “a central difference between science and spirituality is that scientific knowledge is objective and public, whereas spiritual knowledge is also of an ‘objective reality’, but not generally public.”³⁴ In this context the best way to understand the distinction between public knowledge and private knowledge is that the former is testable and repeatable (i.e. subject to the scrutiny of the scientific method), whereas the latter is not.³⁵ Wiebe suggests that:

If I am accurate in thinking that science and spirituality differ in the degree to which they are public, the justificatory stance adopted by science will not generally apply to spirituality. Only those features of spirituality that are public will satisfy the criteria for evidence articulated in the sciences. Science, by its very nature, advances claims that many people are able to corroborate or verify. If spirituality fails to exhibit this public face, we should not wonder that communities that are committed to scientific inquiry find spiritual claims problematic.³⁶

On this view intuitive knowledge might be a plausible explanation of a relevant asymmetry in religious disputes, since such experiences constitute an additional piece of evidence for those who have had such experiences.³⁷ But since they are private any evidence they provide for a religious believer will not be able to be conveyed to an opponent who has not had the experience herself. The private nature of religious experiences explains why appealing to them in disputes will often not be satisfying to opponents since unlike scientific knowledge they will have no access to the justification they purport to offer.³⁸ But without a principled reason to exclude private knowledge,

³³ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 71.

³⁴ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 8.

³⁵ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 138.

³⁶ Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual Experience*, 151.

³⁷ It is worth mentioning that in discussing the epistemic significance of such experiences I am not committing to the veracity of such experiences. I am simply giving an account of what I take to be the best description of an epistemic asymmetry which is by appealing to religious experience. I make no claims about whether such experiences are veridical.

³⁸ Wiebe says that “[d]etailed accounts of spiritual experience show that it is too complex and variable to justify the blanket generalization that it has significance only for those who undergo it” (Wiebe, *Intuitive Knowing As Spiritual*

religious experience can thus constitute an explanation of the special insight view, and thus serve to justify reasonable religious disagreement.³⁹ The solution to religious disagreement I propose here can be standardized as the following:

The Solution

5. Religious experiences of intuitive knowing are perceptually or phenomenologically unique.
6. Agent A experiences intuitive knowing K and it constitutes additional evidence for R.

Therefore,

7. A and B are no longer epistemic peers with respect to whether R.

Therefore,

8. (4) is false. A need not revise her belief that R [The Solution]

Intuitive knowing constitutes a relevant asymmetry in the disagreement because it constitutes additional evidence. Hence A and B are no longer epistemic peers. So the problem of religious disagreement evaporates, at least for believers who (partially) base their religious beliefs on intuitive knowledge. At this point the following thesis has been defended:

The Private Religious Experience Thesis: Private religious experience can provide a relevant evidential asymmetry in cases of religious disagreement.

The thesis is qualified by ‘can’ because it only applies to cases where the religious believer in question basis her religious beliefs (at least in part) on what she takes to be evidence from religious experience. Also, if the religious experience is not perceptually or phenomenally unique it couldn’t be used to create an asymmetry. I make no claims about whether or how often the Private Religious Experience Thesis obtains in the real world.⁴⁰

4. Religious Experience and the Religious Sceptic

4.1. The Pressure of Intuitive Knowing for the Sceptic

Experience, 8). I do not contest this claim. However, in a disagreement between two peers where one has had an experience of intuitive knowing and other has not, intuitive knowing will only count as evidence for the peer who has had the specific experience. This is the sort of case I have in view in this project. Whether or not enough reports of intuitive knowing (and other religious experiences) taken together could be begin to constitute public evidence is an open question. For more on this see Travis Dumsday, “Evidentially Compelling Religious Experiences and the Moral Status of Naturalism,” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 8 (2016): 123-144.

³⁹ Perhaps it could be argued that disagreements are only meaningful if the evidence is public and can be shared. But it is an open question whether evidence can ever be fully shared. See Ernest Sosa, “The Epistemology of Disagreement,” in *Social Epistemology*, eds. Alan Haddock, Adrian Millar, and Duncan Pritchard [eds], Oxford University Press, 2010): 278-297.

⁴⁰ My suspicion is that it occurs quite frequently, but nothing in my argument depends upon this being true.

Thus far I have framed this debate as a solution to disagreement *for the religious believer*. But the underlying reason the arguments for revisionism do not apply in such cases is because epistemic peerhood does not obtain in cases of religious disagreement where one party's evidence is (at least partly) private religious experience.⁴¹ Sceptical worries based on the existence of disagreement only get under way when two opponents are epistemic peers. If they have different bodies of evidence or their accuracy in assessing the evidence varies, then it is possible to identify a relevant epistemic difference that can justify reasonable disagreement. The disagreement literature focuses on cases where such differences do not exist. This fact raises interesting questions to the degree to which epistemic peerhood ever obtains in real-life cases of disagreement on *any topic*.⁴² With respect to the religious beliefs (partly) based on private religious experience it has been observed that:

[I]n very many cases, parties to a religious disagreement do not form their judgments on a shared body of evidence. I'm thinking especially of religious believers who based their beliefs at least in part on private religious experiences they've had. The Equal-Weight View glides silently over the vast ocean of cases. So, for all the View says, it's reasonable to maintain one's religious beliefs in such cases of disagreement.⁴³

But at this point it might be objected that religious experiences can be *reported* and thus made public and objective (even if they are not repeatable like experiments in science). If such reports are trustworthy, then the testimony is sufficient to bring the opponents in a religious dispute to evidential parity. This implies that (i) religious experiences are not necessarily private in way describe in Section III, 2 and; (ii) religious experience cannot be used to explain the alleged asymmetry since opponents could gain the same insights via testimony.⁴⁴ Thus, it is possible to envisage a situation of epistemic peer disagreement over religious belief where religious experience is indeed part of the shared evidence. Once epistemic parity re-emerges due to testimony of the experience, the problem of disagreement for the religious believer also re-emerges.

In reply, it is true that perhaps apparitions and auditions had through normal sensory perceptions can be reported and hence made public. But intuitive knowing would not fall into this category since there is something uniquely *felt* about such experiences that is often described as being had through a faculty entirely distinct from normal sense perception.⁴⁵ Stefan Reining explains that “[o]bviously this difference between the two cases [normal perception and intuitive knowing] is due to the fact that in the second case, the experience in question is being had through a perceptual channel allegedly foreign to those who did not have experiences of the same peculiar kind.”⁴⁶ Such experiences are perceptually or phenomenological unique. So a relevant epistemic asymmetry can be maintained in cases where the religious experience is one of intuitive knowing.

⁴¹ Stefan Reining, “Peerhood in deep religious disagreements,” *Religious Studies* 52 (2016): 403-419.

⁴² Nathan L. King, “Disagreement: What’s the Problem? or A Good Peer is Hard to Find,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXXXV (2012): 249-272.

⁴³ Thomas Bogardus quoted in Reining, “Peerhood in deep religious disagreements,” 406. See also Tomas Bogardus, “Disagreeing with the (religious) skeptic,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 74 (2013): 5-17.

⁴⁴ There is a growing literature in social epistemology on the nature of testimony that I will not examine here.

⁴⁵ Reining hints at this distinction but in different terminology (“Peerhood in deep religious disagreements,” 407).

⁴⁶ Reining, “Peerhood in deep religious disagreements,” 407.

Not only does this response satisfy the above worry, but Reining shows that it can begin to put epistemic pressure on the sceptic if her opponent reports such experiences. Imagine two sceptics about religious belief who are epistemic peers. One has a religious experience of intuitive knowing and comes to form religious beliefs (partly) on the basis of that unique experience. Up until the point of the experience the two sceptics were epistemic peers, and therefore had the same evidence. Reining explains that:

[T]hey regard each other as equally competent in recognizing relevant evidence regarding religious matters when having the evidence. Even though, right before getting to know about the disagreement, they already know that they now base their religious views on different bodies of evidence, and therefore no longer regard each other as peers, the fact just stated still constitutes a relation of similar epistemic significance. That is, even though, right before getting to know about the disagreement, they no longer regard each other as peers, they still have no reason not to regard the other as equally competent at the meta-level of recognizing relevant evidence when having it.⁴⁷

In such a scenario the sceptic is forced to acknowledge that if she had had a similar experience of intuitive knowing that she would have also come to hold religious beliefs. After all, she would assess such an experience in the same way as her opponent since they were epistemic peers up until the experience.⁴⁸ Thus, the existence of private religious experiences such as intuitive knowing can form a conciliationist challenge for the sceptic when a scenario like the one described here occurs. This turns the challenge of religious disagreement against the sceptic rather than against the religious believer, at least when private religious experiences are part of the religious believer's total evidence. This discussion supports the following thesis:

The Religious Experience Peer Pressure Thesis: If a religious believer reports a private experience to a religious sceptic, the latter is pressured to conciliate in the direction of the believer (if they were peers prior to the experience).

Of course, the Religious Experience Pressure Thesis doesn't imply that the sceptic must always conciliate when such experiences are reported. Experiences can be misleading and there are sometimes good reason to reject them. For example, one could recognize that she would believe an absurd proposition if she were hypnotised, but that does not mean she ought to revise if her opponent has been hypnotised and come to believe an absurd proposition.⁴⁹ Part of the appropriate reaction may depend on the sceptic's initial beliefs about the legitimacy of such experiences in the first place.⁵⁰

Suppose someone like David Koresh claims to be the final prophet on the basis of intuitive knowledge. He claims that there's an evidential asymmetry between himself and his (many) opponents. Intuitive knowledge provides him with additional evidence his opponents simply lack. Not only is this epistemically problematic, but misleading experiences can ultimately cause harm and even death just as it did in the real Koresh case. It's true that in the account I've presented there is no in principle way to be sure of avoiding misleading experiences and the potentially

⁴⁷ Reining, "Peerhood in deep religious disagreements," 409.

⁴⁸ Reining, "Peerhood in deep religious disagreements," 410.

⁴⁹ Reining, "Peerhood in deep religious disagreements," 410.

⁵⁰ Reining, "Peerhood in deep religious disagreements," 411.

problematic results that come with them. But this just makes the account I've offered here a falliblistic one.

It's important to keep in mind the context in which we're discussing intuitive knowing. Intuitive knowing is a plausible evidential asymmetry in cases between opponents who are otherwise peers. Nothing in this means that we should exclude other evidence in favour of intuitive knowing. I don't have to conciliate with David Koresh, even if he reports intuitive knowing that I can't access, because we aren't epistemic peers at any time before his experience. In fact, I have better evidence and cognitive abilities than Koresh such that there aren't many, if any, topics that I need to be concerned about if I find myself in disagreement with him. So it's not as if intuitive knowing is evidence that swamps all other evidence. It's just evidence that one has *in additional* to all the other evidence that my very well be fully shareable between the two opponents. Thus, while there's no in principle way to avoid misleading cases of intuitive knowing, there are reasons to think one won't frequently encounter such cases.⁵¹

Finally, in cases where two opponents are epistemic peers up to the point of a private religious experience, the burden of proof is on the sceptic to explain why her opponent is mistaken. It's doubtful that many cases like Koresh will have this initial set-up between two peers. If at the time when the opponents are epistemic peers neither hold that religious experiences are necessarily non-veridical, then it is genuinely possible that the report of such an experience could require conciliation on the part of the sceptic. To assume otherwise would be to beg-the-question against the religious believer. What I have said here can be standardized as the following:

The Pressure

9. If B had experienced K then she would have additional evidence for R. [True given they were peers until (7)]
10. Testimony of experience is reliable. [Assumption]
11. A testifies about K to B.

Therefore,

12. B has additional evidence for R. [The Pressure]

5. An Objection

The religious sceptic might object that intellectual visions aren't evidence because they can't be fully shared. This objection doesn't depend on denying the reliability of testimony. Rather, this objection is that whatever is testified about has to be in principle accessible to both peers. An intellectual vision isn't evidence because there is no way for that experience to ever be accessed by the peer who does not experience it. Intellectual visions can't be used to create an evidential asymmetry in a dispute since they aren't evidence.

⁵¹ I suppose one could object that all of Koresh's followers were (epistemically) rightly misled if they had the same or worse evidence than him prior to Koresh having the experience. But I find it hard to believe that none of them simply failed to accurately assess the evidence accessible to them, even if for psychological reasons they aren't culpable for that.

This idea is an objection to both the Solution and the Pressure. It poses a challenge for the Solution because while (5) might be true in that intellectual visions are unique (6) is false because K doesn't constitute additional evidence for R. Thus, (7) and (8) don't follow. A and B are still epistemic peers with respect to whether R. So it's still the case that agent A needs to revise her belief that R. The success of the Solution is at risk. This implies that the success of the Pressure is also comprised. Even if (10) and (11) are true, (9) is still false since K isn't additional evidence for R. Thus, (12) is false and agent B does not have additional evidence for R.

Reply:

Part of the focus of the disagreement literature is figure out whether (i) higher-order considerations are evidence and; (ii) if it is evidence what weight, if any, should be accorded to it. But notice that in this project I have been assuming that conciliationism is true. I have therefore been assuming that the higher-order fact of disagreement is indeed evidence and however much weight should be accorded to it, it is enough to generate a sceptical worry for religious belief. The above objection assumes that there is a meaningful evidential distinction to be drawn between testimony of an experience and the experience itself. But I'm assuming that higher-order considerations are indeed evidence.

More to the point, what about the claim that evidence needs to be in principle fully shareable? Only a justified prima facie scepticism about the legitimacy of the reporter of the evidence or content of the report itself could justify this objection. Consider the following example: Consider the reports of transgender experience. Transgender persons often report that there is something uniquely *felt* about their experience. A person may have been born as a biological male but their experience of the world and themselves lead them to believe that they are a woman. Now, there a number of ways to understand the transgender phenomena. Some of these understandings have become increasingly or decreasingly morally or politically acceptable. One might think that transgendered are born with and hence predisposed to understand themselves as the opposite gender of their biology. Others might tell an explanatory story that involves free choice or sociological facts to explain the phenomena. Finally, others might understand this phenomena as a mental illness that should be treated as such.⁵² But notice that on all of these interpretations the felt experience of individual in question is not denied. The evidential import of the felt experience is just interpreted differently.⁵³ But no one denies that the experience occurs and that it constitutes evidence for *something*. A main part of the debate, then, is over what the evidence of such uniquely felt experiences are purported to support. So there is precedent for counting uniquely felt experiences as evidence.⁵⁴

One might argue that this response plays right into the hands of the objector. Why not think that an intuitive vision is the result of mental illness? Likewise, haven't people on LSD also reported experiences similar to that of intuitive knowing? Again, this type of response implies that *something* is occurring. This response is about what an intuitive vision is purported to support. But more noteworthy is the fact that scepticism about the intellectual vision begs-the-question about the religious believer. We don't expect evidence to be fully available or sharable in a whole host of other cases. It would therefore be unprincipled to expect the evidence of an intellectual vision

⁵² I take it that even this understanding is compatible with using surgery to transition.

⁵³ I do not claim that these are the only three possible interpretations. I make no argument for which interpretation is correct since doing so is not relevant to my argument here.

⁵⁴ It is open question how closely a religious experience of an intellectual visions is similar to what L.A. Paul calls a 'transformative experience'. See L.A. Paul *Transformative Experience* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2014). Also consider that over half of the results reported in the social science aren't repeatable.

to be fully shareable. This is especially clear in cases where the two opponents are epistemic peers right up until the vision.

A strategy that attempts to debunk the purported experiences may be similar to Hume's objection to miracles. According to Hume, only an unintelligent and uneducated person could possibly make the mistake of believing in the veracity of a miracle. Since all reports of miracles come from such people the reports aren't reliable. At the very least we ought to be more sure in the truth of the laws of nature than the veracity of such reports. And of course, testimony is always second-rate to actual sense experience.⁵⁵ I think that Hume's treatment of miracles is problematic for a variety of reasons I don't have space to consider here.⁵⁶ But even if one is more inclined than I am to agree with Hume's arguments for the implausibility of miracles this strategy simply isn't available to the religious sceptic in the scenario I'm examining in this paper.⁵⁷ Why? Because within the dialectical context we're exploring the religious believer reporting the experience is the religious sceptic's *epistemic peer*, at least right up until the intellectual vision occurs. Dismissing the religious believer's testimony on account of her being unintelligent and uneducated just isn't available to the sceptic in this case. The believer is just as intelligent and educated as the religious sceptic.

With these thoughts in mind, it becomes difficult to see how the religious sceptic can reject the intellectual vision as evidence without begging-the-question against the religious believer. Unless the sceptic has a countervailing reason to think her opponent is unreliable (e.g. she took LSD prior to the experience) she has to take seriously the report as evidence. The sceptic can't even appeal to her prior commitment in ontological naturalism, for example, to justify rejecting the experience. For part of the very disagreement between the religious believer and religious sceptic is over the question of whether naturalism is true.⁵⁸

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it's worth noticing that in cases of religious experience that are not cases of intuitive knowing and hence not perceptually or phenomenologically unique that while two agents can be brought to evidential symmetry (assuming that testimony is reliable) the disagreement isn't straightforwardly a problem only for the religious believer. Here's the type of scenario I have in mind: Suppose there is a disagreement over religion between a religious believer and a religious sceptic. Religious experience such as a vision, audition, or near-death experience, or miraculous healing makes up part of the evidence about the dispute it question.⁵⁹ Suppose the religious believer

⁵⁵ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (New York: Oxford University Press 2007 [1748]): Section X.

⁵⁶ Hume's scepticism about miracles has hardly been met with universal praise.

⁵⁷ Assume Hume's assessment of intellectual visions is the same as his assessment of miracles.

⁵⁸ Assume that R entails supernaturalism and not-R entails ontological naturalism. This is also why one can't appeal to Hume's claim that we ought to be more sure of the laws of nature than the possibility of miracles in order to dismiss the report.

⁵⁹ See Dumsday, "Evidentially Compelling Religious Experiences and the Moral Status of Naturalism,"; Davis C. Franks Davis, C. (1989). *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Emma Heathcote-James, *Seeing Angels: True Contemporary Accounts of Hundreds of Angelic Experiences; Seeing the Invisible: Modern Religious and Other Transcendent Experiences* eds. M. Maxweel and V. Tschudin (London: Penguin, 1990); P. van Lommel, van Wees, R., Meyers, V., and Elfferich, I., "Near-Death Experience in Survivors of Cardiac Arrest: A Prospective Study in the Netherlands." *The Lancet* 358 (2001): 2039-2045; J. White, *When the Spirit Comes with Power: Signs and Wonders Among God's People* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998); Phillip H. Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today*.

has had such an experience and that the religious sceptic has the testimony of the experience. Admittedly, if the two opponents really are epistemic peers and conciliationism is true then a sceptical threat has indeed been posed to religious belief. *But a threat has also been posed to the religious sceptic.* In such a scenario the sceptic must lower her credence or suspend judgment about her religious scepticism (depending on what version of conciliationism to which one subscribes). Therefore, in cases where religious experience does *not* constitute an evidential asymmetry in a disagreement between two opponents who are otherwise peers, the existence of religious experience may pose a challenge to the sceptic even if it offers no help to the believer.⁶⁰ This is represented by the fact that (4) includes belief revision for B's denial of R.

We saw that a common response to conciliationism in religious disputes is to allege an epistemic asymmetry between the religious believer and the religious sceptic. Self-trust, immediacy, and the reliability of introspection are not good candidates to explain this alleged asymmetry in cases of religious disagreement. A better explanation, at least in religious disputes, can be found in investigations of religious experience since such studies will be able to offer a potential relevant epistemic asymmetry in objective and public terms. But if intellectual visions are private, it can potentially justify a religious believer remaining steadfast in the face of disagreement. At the very least, it constitutes an additional piece of evidence that might only be available to the people who have had such experiences. But the private nature of such experience also helps to explain why appealing to it may not be satisfying to opponents. While many further questions remain about the epistemic value, if any, of (alleged) religious experience, intuitive knowing is a plausible way to understand the religious believer's claim to a special insight that her non-religious opponent lacks. So we have good reason to think that the Private Religious Experience Thesis is true. Namely, private religious experience can provide a relevant evidential asymmetry in cases of religious disagreement.

We also saw that in cases where two opponents are epistemic peers right up until the point of one having religious experience, the religious sceptic must deal with the testimonial report her opponent's experience. Thus, the existence of private religious experiences such as intuitive knowing can form a conciliationist challenge for the sceptic when such disagreement occurs. This turns the challenge of religious disagreement against the sceptic rather than the religious believer, at least when private religious experiences are part of the religious believer's total evidence. I concluded that the burden of proof is on the objector to explain why the evidence needs to be in principle fully sharable, rather than merely reported, since we don't use this standard with respect to other types of evidence. Finally, it's difficult to see how the objector could respond by rejecting the evidential import of an intellectual vision up front without begging-the-question against the religious believer. The evidential value of the intellectual vision is precisely what's under dispute.⁶¹ So we have evidence for the Religious Experience Peer Pressure Thesis. Namely, if a

⁶⁰ In his article, "Evidentially Compelling Religious Experiences and the Moral Status of Naturalism," Travis Dumsday has argued that the pervasiveness of religious experiences where the content and context imply supernaturalism should force a settled metaphysical naturalist into a tentative metaphysical naturalist. Otherwise she immorally calls those reporting such experiences liars (on the assumption other naturalistic explanations can be ruled out) without just cause. Or she irrationally dismisses evidence against metaphysical naturalism. Dumsday's argument is stronger than what I claim here but is an excellent resource to help grasp how religious experience could constitute evidence in a peer disagreement.

⁶¹ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the *Theology and Philosophy of Science: Analytic, Scholastic, and Historical Perspectives* Conference held at Concordia University (Edmonton, October 2016) and at the Disagreement, Higher-Order Evidence, and New Arguments for Scepticism Symposium held at the *Canadian Philosophical Association*, Annual Congress (Ryerson University, June 2017). This paper benefited from comments and/or

religious believer reports a private experience to a religious sceptic, the latter is pressured to conciliate in the direction of the believer (if they were peers prior to the experience).