

JEFFREY S. PRIVETTE

Constructive Realism,
Incarnation,
and Experience of God

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109

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

This book developed a shape very like the one it has now, and some of its better rhetoric, in dialogue with my initial doctoral supervisor, Professor Kevin Vanhoozer; and it was spared the dung heap when Dr. Fergus Kerr, OP, generously agreed to succeed Kevin as my primary adviser. I wish here to thank them for their willingness not only to direct me but to share the struggle of the process itself. Three of my colleagues from those delightful Edinburgh days, Dr. Chris Firestone, Rev. Dr. Myron Penner, and Rev. Dr. Timothy Ward, read portions of the manuscript and made suggestions which considerably improved the final text. What infelicities, ambiguities, and blunders remain are mine alone. To complete this project, I have needed motivation, inspiration, insight – and many other things that are perishable: so I offer my gratitude to friends and family, without whose unstinting support the work at hand would have passed from oblivion to the same.

Knoxville, May 2021

Jeffrey S. Privette

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The Argument in Context

Are you listening? This is language itself, wanting to get a word in. – Elfriede Jelinek¹

The buzzing controversy around the subject of the epistemology of religious experience has intensified in recent years, perhaps especially among philosophers of religion and theologians with keen philosophical interests. Exponents of religious experience (experience here loosely defined as any human encounter with God that has religious significance)² concern themselves, typically, with establishing the existence of God as a distinct plausibility, if not a proof, on the basis of experience of God – experience allegedly serving as a truth conducive, evidential source of belief and knowledge about God.³

Another common approach, a subtle or subtly circular version of the former, is to presume or bracket the reality of God, a reality which (it is supposed) cannot be compressed or captured in a syllogism, and then proceed to defend the rationality of forming beliefs in the light of experiences of God, or religious experiences, occasionally returning to the initial presumption to suggest that it is more than presumption.⁴

Still others are committed to the possibility of experiential awareness of God but set themselves apart by being more radical in their denial that God is an item in the universe to be discovered, digested and domesticated. True to the spirit of that strident position, or rather to the stridency of that spirited position, they are more interested in clarifying, say, the Christianness of the commu-

¹ Jelinek, *Lust*, 25.

² William Alston, one of the primary interlocutors of this book, prefers the following definition: “I will term ‘mystical’ any experience that is taken by the subject to be a direct awareness of (what is taken to be) Ultimate Reality or (what is taken to be) an object of religious worship” (“Literal and Nonliteral in Reports of Mystical Experience,” 80).

³ A good example of this is Swinburne, *The Existence of God*. Also relevant, Swinburne’s brief *Simplicity as Evidence of Truth*.

⁴ See, for example, Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*; Alston, *Perceiving God*; Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*; Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

nity's experience than in defending that experience against irrationality or according to extrinsic rational standards.⁵ Religious experience, construed in such ways, will always have animadvertisers.⁶

It will become obvious that I have more in common with the radical (some would say, radically sectarian) philosophers/theologians on this issue. But the approach I adopt is more integrative, or at least I wish for it to be, and the fact that it pursues a radical modesty is no accident. So I will not foolishly try to argue God into existence, as if God were an irresistible inference from some profound mystical experience or the necessary conclusion of a shrewd and powerful argument. Nor will I be especially bothered to show that beliefs formed in the fray of religious experience are justified, or justifiable, or rationally acceptable, or not irrational, or whatever. I happen to believe that some such case can be intelligently made – that is to say, made *intelligible* – but as far as it is sustained in this discussion it is only adventitious. A comical couplet from Blake carries the point: “He’s a Blockhead who wants a proof of what he can’t Perceive, / And he’s a Fool who tries to make such a Blockhead believe.”⁷

Instead, I will concern myself with experience of the Christian God – or *Christian* experience of God, to make the subtle distinction on which the whole hinges: that is, with what *that* sort of thing looks like *from within*, so to speak, and how it is occasioned, cultivated, regulated. To what extent is Christian experience a function of the language and language-practices of Christian community, broadly construed? Does Christian experience, in other words, depend for its possibility and intelligibility on that community's gospel, enacted and embodied in the community's worship, catechesis, prayer, social action, and so on – and if so, in what ways? In what sense is it true, *Christianly speaking*, that to experience divine reality is, importantly, to embody it, to be its *body*, and that to embody it just is to experience God in the relevant sense? How do Christian experiences shape the community's identity and inform its life together?

⁵ See Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*; Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding*; Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence*; and Marshall, *Trinity and Truth*. Marshall, along with Placher, Wood, and others, has, having studied with Frei and Lindbeck, been shaped by the postliberalism of the so-called Yale school. But in his fine book, *Trinity and Truth*, Marshall is concerned to address, overtly and with both seriousness and a high degree of philosophical acuity, questions of truth, meaning, and justification, and he does this by engaging such influential analytic philosophers as Quine, Davidson, and Dummett. Hence his attempt “to bridge the gap between theology and analytic philosophy” (xi). Marshall is thus, according to Sue Patterson, an important participant in what she dubs a hybridizing movement in theology (*Realist Christian Theology in a Postmodern Age*, 5).

⁶ For instance: Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*; Cupitt, *Taking Leave of God*; Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*; Nielsen, *Contemporary Critiques of Religion*; Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*.

⁷ Blake, *Notebook 1808* (Rossetti MS).

And what sort of universal potential do the very particular Christian experiences possess or portend? I will address these questions in Chapters 6–8. Simply, I hope to interpret, or provide a theology of, interpretation in (Christian) experience.

But there are corollaries of course. If language determines what experiences one may have, as well as the warp and woof of those experiences, must one concede that language constructs reality? I will argue, in extended fashion, that interpretation in experience is unavoidable. But does that imply that God, and with him reality, is either unreal or out of reach? What if every experience is, because interpreted, also diminished or distorted in some nontrivial way? This is the human predicament. The human animal bruises everything it touches, even its experiences. But does that situation require epistemological antirealism? We cannot, I shall argue, escape the world we inhabit and the traditions that influence and shape us. Indeed, we make contact with the world, if we make contact at all, through the stories we hear and tell – and enlarge on in the telling. Simply put, there is no direct access to reality: all experience – of oneself, of others, of the world of which both are a part, of the God who is not of this world – is mediated. There is, if you like, a sociolinguistic shape and structure to human experience and identity. I see no reason to deny this farrago of facts, nor any reason to be particularly glum about it. Rather, admitting the predicament is real, indeed *insisting* on it, I contend that, from the mundane to the mystical, reality need not (therefore) exceed human grasp. Alas, there is no unmediated access to reality. But it does not follow that there is no access at all.

It is not in my nature to be hyper-skeptical about the objective otherness, or independent status, of the external world. For as hard as I try – and as an intellectual exercise I have tried – I am unable to force myself consistently to doubt what is impossible consistently to doubt. Anyway, questioning the world in which we are all thoroughly immersed, which is always already with us and we with it, from the first whimpering wails of life to life's shallow dying breaths, strikes me as a perfectly dotty thing to do.⁸ We do not as a rule believe things we think are false, or second-guess beliefs we strongly suspect are true. However, I do find a sort of skepticism about what can be known of the world and God more persuasive. For as hard as I try – and as an intellectual exercise I have tried – I am unable to escape the compelling ubiquitous evidence that human beings are limited, biased, prone to paint partial pictures, prone, that is, to find precisely what they are looking for when they have set their minds to it,

⁸ So Popper: “[T]he greatest scandal of philosophy is that, while all around us the world of nature perishes – and not the world of nature alone – philosophers continue to talk, sometimes cleverly and sometimes not, about the question of whether this world exists” (*Objective Knowledge*, 32).

prone also to shut their eyes to what is as obvious as the high-noon sun. So Coleridge:

[T]he owlet, Atheism,
 Sailing on obscene wings athwart the noon,
 Drops his blue-fringed lids, and holds them close,
 And hooting at the glorious sun in Heaven,
 Cries out, ‘Where is it?’⁹

I am not a metaphysical idealist: the world – imposing, multifaceted, elusive – does not depend on a subject’s perceptions or mental operations for the depth and richness of its being. (With no humans on the scene, what remains of the world, however meager, however dull, would not vanish. Do ships bound for new worlds vanish at horizon’s edge or cease to exist when they are no longer seen?) This position is sometimes, perversely, blamed on Kant. I will argue in Chapter 2 that the criticism does not stick. In conversation with Kant and Husserl, I try to show that metaphysical idealism, at least in some of its bombastic forms, is awkward and counterintuitive. However, my overriding concerns are epistemological. How do human beings – constrained by prejudice, conditioned by time, place, and the nagging presence of others – experience reality?

I am a constructive realist: the world does depend on a subject’s involvement for its being known and properly engaged, so experiencing reality will naturally be sloppy at times and very human. In what follows, I try to advance a cautious critical realism – that is, a realism critical of itself – according to which both the prejudices of language and the presence or otherness of the world condition experience. Human beings live in the body and therefore within the body’s limitations, not least those of the senses. Thus the interpretation of stimuli, even faulty interpretation, is unavoidable. This is what it means to be human. So, in Chapter 8, I also anticipate a hermeneutic that should help us both engage with reality properly and notice when we have failed to do so.

There are other volatile queries to consider. If different languages or engagements with reality delimit different ranges of possible human experience, how does one avoid some sort of pandemic relativism or irreducible pluralism. Reality is always seen from a particular point of view, a conditioned and necessarily partial one, and every glimpse of something other – the frontier beyond the frontal lobe – marks a boundary in the face of which one must reckon with one’s own limitations.¹⁰ So if one is going to slip the grip of relativism, must

⁹ Coleridge, *Fears in Solitude*.

¹⁰ For variation on the frontier theme, see Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 44–45. For a trenchant treatment of the metaphor of limit-experience, see Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 131–133.

one finally propose some adjudication between perspectives or, at least, criteria for some such sorting out?

But whose purported experience of God is to be privileged, one might ask? Whose perspective or way of life? For if all rational inquiry is in some sense ‘tradition-constituted’ (MacIntyre), how is meaningful comparison manageable?¹¹ I agree that these are important questions; and throughout I touch on them, as a sonata touches on subordinate themes, but in an irrevocably partial and unsystematic way. For, ultimately, what I am offering is not a comparison of religions and religious languages, worlds and worldviews. Rather, I am considering the Christian religion – asking how *its* purported experiences of God are fecundated by a Christian way of life (and vice-versa), and how Christian identity (whatever that turns out to be) is created through such experiences.

A variety of linguistic contexts may, if entered, open the possibility of some kind of experience of God; I shall keep such wounds of possibility open. But the narrative with which I am ultimately dealing, to use Tillich’s language, is the Christian gospel, embedded in the context of the life and bustle and depravity of the community for whom that gospel is normative. How do the gospel (text) and the gospel community (context) together function to ground experience of God (pretext)?

Part 1 (The Ethics of Experience) and Part 2 (The Epistemology of Experience) deal with the role of language and interpretation in experience generally. The curious philosophical problems that arise here are also investigated. Part 3 (The Ecclesiology of Experience) considers the implications for Christian experience. How, for example, might sharing the burden of interpretation, in the context of a truth-seeking community, prevent experience from becoming merely private and self-enclosed – or impervious to critique?

If all experiences are structured by language and language-related activities,¹² then some context of interpretation will be crucial in providing criteria and setting boundaries for personal encounter.

I sketch three distinct but overlapping contexts within which interpretation necessarily takes place – the congenital, the cultural, and the communal. The *congenital* context is just the natural condition in which all of us enter and experience the world – that which is logically prior to any experience you please. There are, it would seem, concepts which are effectively with us from

¹¹ See MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

¹² This and similar phrasing will recur throughout, especially in Chapter 8 where I try to connect learning the Christian language and developing Christian identity to the language-related activities of the Christian community, particularly prayer, proclamation and eucharist. I am using this ‘language-related activities’ category to sketch a border around the central Christian practices that both create the conditions for acquiring the relevant linguistic habits and constitute those linguistic habits – and that (therefore) serve a crucial identity-sustaining function.

birth, categories and dispositions which make certain basic experiences possible. The ‘before/after’ category, variously construed in spatial, temporal, causal, and logical terms is an example of this. I will argue that there are no experiences whatever without such categories. The *cultural* context broadens, or provides natural environment for, the congenital. It is developed around the concepts, beliefs, and habits one acquires, both unwitting and witting, in ordinary interaction with the world. And, finally, the *communal* context encompasses the concepts, beliefs, practices, and dispositions one learns in more localized settings – in religious communities, for example. I will argue that these cultivated ideas, practices, and so on, transform not only the way one views the world and one’s place in it but also the significance of almost any experience you like.

At the same time, I will suggest that an ecclesial community – that is, a church – is an example of the relevant communal context. I will try to show that distinctively Christian experiences of God depend for their intelligibility in the first place upon just such contexts. If you will: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Indeed, the ecclesial community provides narrative structure and structural accountability for Christian experience. In short, the ecclesial context, with its narrative vision of reality and its many interpretive resources, makes Christian awareness of God possible. Thus, in Part 3, the ecclesial community shifts from the background to the foreground, and the dynamic function the church performs in creating unity and intelligibility in Christian experience is outlined.

A few additional comments on context are called for. This book enters discussions that are wide and varied, in one way or another contiguous to a great many vexing and longstanding debates in philosophy and theology alike; and that is as it should be in a study that depends as heavily as mine does on the conviction that language constitutes, or significantly shapes, human identity and activity, and determines both what one says and how one sees.¹³ The argument I am making should therefore, ideally, work on different levels. For there are a number of perennially important questions on which it encroaches, and therefore a number of contemporary debates for which it has more than passing paltry relevance: the lively debates between liberals and postliberals, foundationalists and nonfoundationalists, realists and antirealists, moderns and post-moderns, to name a few. Of course, each discussion is its own, playing host to its own subtly different aims and assumptions, promising its own contribution to the larger discourse – and I do not want uncharitably to define away the differences. In the context of the larger argument as I sketch it, a rapprochement between the universal and the particular is desirable and should be sought. However, it can be said, fairly I think, that each debate, intramural though it is, is attempting to deal with fundamental and fundamentally important questions

¹³ See Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, 215–247.

– questions concerning language and thought, truth and rationality, knowledge and justification, individual (identity) and community, objectivism and relativism, the one and the many, sin and salvation, and so on. I too address many of these questions, with varying degrees of depth and explicitness; and I confess that I do so not from no point of view (nor from every relevant point of view) but *with reference to* the many points of view these debates and movements recommend, and this in the hope of encouraging genuine openness in dialogue – the sort of openness that makes exchanges between philosophers and theologians, and therefore change and reconciliation, possible.

Chapter 1

Prolegomena

Any philosophy that can be put in a nutshell belongs in one. – Hilary Putnam

One of the intractable problems of philosophy is the nature of the exchange between the knower and the known, the subject of experience and its object.¹ How can one know that one's putative experiences of the world (or God) have a footing in reality, or that one's impressions of things presumably external to the mind correspond to the way things are – or, for that matter, that there even are things really 'out there' to which the mind fortuitously corresponds?

For experience of the world may be some beguiling phantasm, a sinister hoax, an optical illusion, on par with seeing a mirage in a desert or the deliquescence of an apparition in an old photograph. Maybe nothing exists beyond the gray matter of one's brain, and the resilient doctrine of solipsism is true after all. Or maybe the world is just too vast to be experienced, so vast and variegated that, even when encountered, it is never experienced with sufficient clarity – like seeing an illusionist's act in an ill-lit room, and from the very back.

As for experience of God, perhaps it is merely psychical, a mental aberration, a potent delusion drummed up by feelings of inadequacy and fear.² Perhaps, analogously, experience of God resembles some peculiar and peculiarly

¹ For a brief discussion, see Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*. For an imaginative treatment, see the marvelous Marjorie Grene, *The Knower and the Known*. I admit this knower/known language is artificial, dated, and perhaps not particularly illuminating. I aim to use it sparingly.

² Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* and the equally biting *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*. Freud, for example, in one of his more congenial moments, remarks: "These [religious ideas], which are given out as teaching, are not precipitates of experience or end-results of thinking: they are illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfilment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human

hazy feeling, the feeling of awe,¹ or fear,² or transcendence,³ or otherness,⁴ or utter dependence⁵ – arouses or is aroused by the relevant feeling.

These are possibilities. It is also possible of course that experience of God, or of the divine more generally, reaches and reflects something real, something beyond mere longing. But what is the real, and how would one reach it or be reached by it? Where God is concerned, no telescope is big enough, no reflection astute enough. God may indeed exist and exist indeed; and if God exists, and one actually experiences God, then, clearly, one experiences (I have not said one *clearly* experiences) more than one's wild imagination.⁶ It is not obvious, initially, how one would sort out one suspicion from any other. For if God is more than a "fiction fabricated" (Rescher's phrase), then the difference between veridical and non-veridical experience is nontrivial. And it will follow that veridical experience of God is more than delusion and more than feeling – though, presumably, a genuinely human experience of God would involve genuine feeling (and delusion too), a sense of peace, awe, ambivalence, or whatever.⁷

But if God does not exist in the relevant sense, and that too is a possibility, experiences that are allegedly of God are simply experiences of oneself, one of those notorious projections perhaps, or else of something else, say, immensity, otherness, a bewitching sense of purpose, and suchlike – various confusions of non-self with God.

In experience of God one has to do, obviously, not with anything like normal sensory experience. After all, God is not a dung beetle, or a porch swing, or a star demolished sky, or a bowl of chili. Experience of God, whatever it happens to be, will be something else, something other – abnormal sensory experience, perhaps, or suprasensory experience, something resistant to reduction and analysis. And this is not at all to beg the question but simply to acknowledge at the outset a fact so stubborn that it problematizes discussions of God and human experience of God.

civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place" (*The Future of an Illusion*, 38).

¹ Wettstein explores this idea in his *The Significance of Religious Experience*.

² See Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. And there is the famous declaration from Statius: *Primus in orbe deos fecit timor* (Thebaid, III).

³ Stone, *A Minimalist Vision of Transcendence*.

⁴ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

⁵ Schleiermacher, *On Religion*.

⁶ See Alston, *Perceiving God*; Mavrodes, *Belief in God*; Pike, *Mystic Union*; Wainwright, *Mysticism*; Yandell, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*.

⁷ For a treatment of experience and ambivalence, in addition to Otto's classic account, see Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*, 24–68.

A. Beyond Realism and Idealism

Another way of broaching these issues is to ask whether there is a future for religious epistemology, some clearing or clarity beyond realism and idealism for fruitful conversation. Is there a way of advancing the discussion, overcoming the impasse? The question is significant and involved. Indeed, even the simplest questions about realism and idealism are labyrinthine. So the simple questions – What is realism? What is idealism? – cannot be answered simply. There are many views and versions of each: popular views and views that no longer enjoy popularity, flourishing views and languishing ones – to say nothing of those that deservedly dwell in obscurity. And then there are numerous nuances, compressions, amendments, emendations (or as Heidegger might say, ‘retouchings’) of each. Some versions share a basic structure and outlook. Others vary widely enough in emphasis they seem like different things altogether.

Realism’s central thrust, broadly speaking, is that the physical objects that constitute the world really exist, that the world, teeming with life, almost unimaginably varied, exists apart from all perceptual and conceptual activity.⁸

⁸ So Alston: “[W]hatever there is is what it is regardless of how we think of it” (“Yes, Virginia, There Is a Real World,” 779–780). Elsewhere Alston qualifies his position in the following way: “I will be thinking of metaphysical realism as holding that *large stretches of reality do not depend on our conceptual and theoretical choices for existing and being what they are*” (*A Sensible Metaphysical Realism*, 10). This is an austere non-epistemic realism, combining the supposition that there are realities that exist independently of human cognition with the corollary that those realities are what they are independent of human apprehension, regardless of what or how anyone thinks of them (truth outruns justification). To get a thoroughly *epistemic* realism, just conflate truth value and epistemic status: stipulate that what one thinks, under just the right conditions, more or less matches the way things are, such that truth and justification share a common fate (truth just is justification). Epistemic realism accepts that one cannot step out of one’s skin to view the world, but also assumes that it is unlikely that most of our beliefs about the world could turn out to be totally false. It is worth noting that not every realist is a realist about the existence of physical objects. Indeed, one can be a realist (or non-realist) about all sorts of entities or phenomena other than physical objects – objective moral principles, propositions, numbers, universals, paranormal forces, textual meaning, and suchlike. Alston calls these *departmental realisms*. (See Dummett, *The Seas of Language*, especially Chapter 11. For a realist account of textual meaning (‘critical hermeneutic realism’), see Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*, 300–303. And for an intriguing openness to the possibility of paranormal cognition, see Price, *Essay in the Philosophy of Religion*, 21–36). One may be a realist about mental states, about the privileged access one has to the contents of one’s own consciousness, but a non-realist (a skeptic, perhaps) or anti-realist with regard to the ontologically distinct existence of the world. One may be both a common-sense realist and an anti-scientific realist, as it were simultaneously affirming the existence of *observable* entities and denying the existence of *unobservable* entities (see Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, 137–153). One may affirm the reality of the mind-independent world, as well as other minds, but deny (or doubt) that one has the conceptual wherewithal to experience the world reliably or the language potential to

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