



# Religious Experience and Mysticism



# Overview

Reminder

Religious experience

Some case studies

- Medieval Islamic Mysticism

- Apophatic mysticism

# Reminder

Is religious faith rational, or can it be?

- It is difficult to talk about God (perhaps we can, by analogy)
- What does it take a belief to be rational? Does it need sufficient evidence? If yes, what counts as sufficient evidence? If not, can we believe what we will?
  - Arguments for God's existence: ontological, cosmological, design, ... – if these work, that would count as sufficient evidence
- Maybe it is rational to believe in God even if we cannot demonstrate his existence, and even then this belief would not be completely arbitrary
- Or maybe: religious belief is irrational if it leads to absurdities.
  - e.g., you may think that divine foreknowledge leads to denying human freedom.
  - if there is a God, God is a creator. But can we make any sense of creation?
  - perhaps the existence of evil negates God's existence
- Can it be reasonable to believe in God based on experience? What is religious experience anyway?

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Is it rational to believe in God based on experience?  
(Cf. deducing that there is an animal in my yard vs seeing it)

Here are some reasons for the affirmative:

- God can be directly experienced, and one can reasonably believe in something one experiences in the way God is experienced.
- extension: **argument from testimony**: even if we don't have direct experience of God, we may rely on the testimony of those who did. (E.g., I never met the US president, but by testimony I believe that he is real.)

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# God and Experience – Objections

But consider some common objections:

- 1 If the notion of God implies a contradiction, or his existence is simply impossible (e.g. if the logical problem of evil is sound), then there can simply be no experience of God!
- 2 Experience can often be deceptive – we can misperceive things, misidentify things, hallucinate, etc. So we shouldn't put too much trust in experience.
  - but perhaps context matters; we do usually trust experience.
- 3 Experiences of God are difficult if not impossible to verify; no uniformity of testimony.
  - is there *any* experience that can be uniformly attested? How much uniformity do we need?

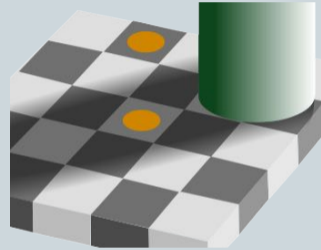
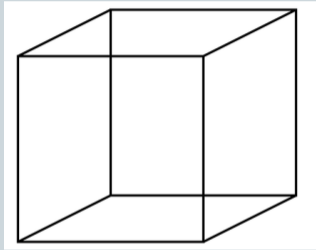
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# What *Is* Religious Experience?

## “Experience of God” – what sense does that make?

- “I had an experience of God” – is that analogous to “I had an experience of Albert Einstein”? Or to “I had an experience of cat”?
  - Neither seems to make much sense.
- Maybe: experience of God is like sense experience – so, you can see a cat; you can see God.
  - God is supposed to be immaterial while objects of sense experience are material! God is supposed to be everywhere, while objects of sense experience have particular locations. Etc.
- Perhaps: experience of God is analogous to experience of people, by some non-inferential act of awareness.
  - do we experience incorporeal persons? (People always have a material component at least; e.g., that’s how we can count them.)

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# Further Problems

- Usually when I experience something, I must be able to recognise it (if I experience that my cat is on the sofa, I must be able to recognise the cat and know it's not the dog, etc.).
- So when someone experiences God, they must be able to recognise God and distinguish God from other things. But how?
- Some thinkers like Aquinas seem to maintain that God cannot be an object of experience at all, at least in the usual way. (God is creator, entirely different from everything, not an object among others.)
- Or is internal certainty enough? Cf. the internalism vs externalism debate: what makes an experience justified?

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Even most of the mystics saw the problems.

St John of the Cross (1542–91) (*Complete works*, 74.)

“The soul must be voided of all such things as can enter its capacity, so that, however many supernatural things it may have, it will ever remain as it were detached from them and in darkness. It must be like to a blind man, leaning upon dark faith, taking it for guide and light, and leaning upon one of the things that he understands, experiences, feels and imagines.

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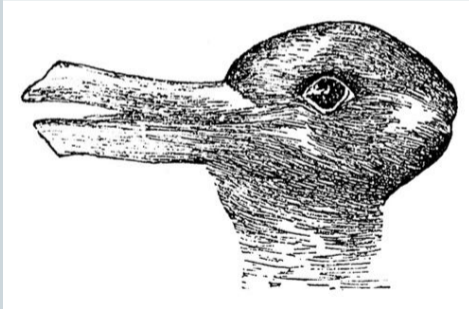
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# Seeing As?

Suggestion (John Hick, Brian Davies): perhaps **experiencing God is like *seeing-as***; and most of our seeing is *seeing-as*.



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# A Glance at Medieval Islamic Mysticism

E.g., Rabia Al-Basri (al-Adawiyah), d. 801

“My love of God Almighty has filled my heart to such an extent that there is no room left [in it] for the love or hate of anyone else.” (Badawi, *Rabi*, 151.)

Or, Al-Junayd (d. 870):

“Man becomes a ghost in the presence of the Almighty, upon whom the decrees of His providence are fulfilled in the performance of the ordinances of His power in the labyrinths of the seas of His unity, *through the act of self-annihilation* and oblivion of the call for creation. . .” (Quoted by Fakhry 1997, 75.)

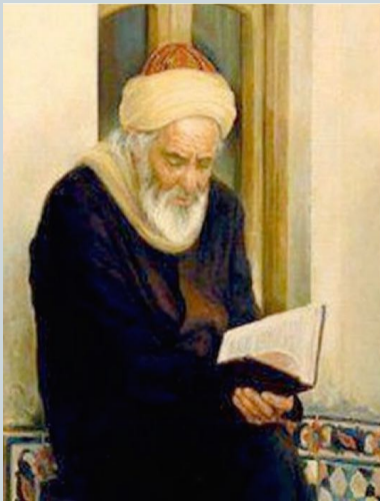
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The *Rescuer from Error*: includes an autobiography

- goal: to find certainty, a strong one (“If someone tried to show that it was false by turning stone into gold . . . that would not make it doubtful or refute it”). But what can stand up to this criterion?
- not sensory knowledge
- intellectual knowledge? logical principles? But perhaps these aren’t reliable either! – they cannot be proven but are always presupposed.

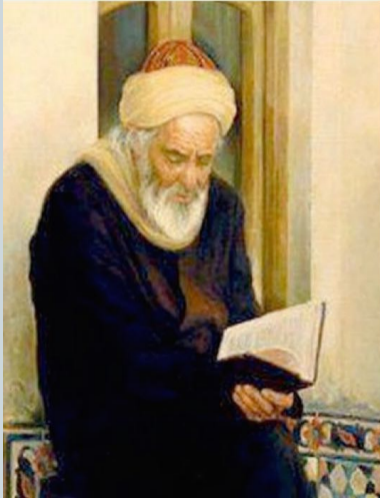
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Seekers of truth:

- **Theologians:** they employ too much dialectic, which is not very useful if you only accept necessary truths.
- **Philosophers:** some part of philosophy is useful, but not all parts, and it is not enough: again, no infallible certainty for most cases.
- **Sufis:** their objective is to overcome the obstacles in the soul; to clean the soul from everything but God. Ultimately cannot be expressed in words; “they are the masters of states, not of statements”.

Q.: do the sufis stand up to Al-Ghazali strict criterion of certainty?

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- mystical experience: unitive (uniting the self with God); can be super- or sub-perceptual, but can also be embodied (via the traditional senses).
- 2 large traditions:
  - ① **apophatic mysticism**: annihilation of the self is essential for the highest form of union with God. (Eckhart; Marguerite of Porete)
  - ② **affective mysticism**: emphasising embodied experiences; reliance on imagination, spiritual vision. The union with God fulfills the self, instead of annihilating it. (Julian of Norwich)
- different roles of self-knowledge; different roles played also by the faculty of reason and imagination

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# Western Medieval Mysticism

Marguerite of Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 169

“And so I answered at once that I was pure nothingness. Alas, what would I wish for? Never did Pure Nothingness have any element of will, and I wish for nothing at all. The goodness of Love is nothing to me, and therefore all that is Love is nothing to me.”



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# Some Remaining Questions

- Is this self-negating conception of mystical experience meaningful?  
Should we *want* it?
- Can it at all be inter-personal? Can anyone else know what experience I have?
- Does this have any significance regarding the experience's role in justifying religious belief?

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