Part III

Epistemology of religious belief
Philosophers of religion are divided over whether religious experience provides epistemic support for religious beliefs. I am one of those who maintain that at least some do. In what follows, I argue that we defenders have taken too narrow a view of the ways religious belief gets positive epistemic support when a person has a religious experience. I will be proposing ways that religious experience provides support – thick support – for religious belief that we defenders have neglected.

By a ‘religious experience’ I mean the following: an experience purportedly granting acquaintance with, or supporting belief in the existence of, realities or states of affairs of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection and having religious meaning for the subject. One can have a sense experience while having a religious experience, but what makes it a religious experience is distinct from what makes it a sense experience. Each of the following counts as a religious experience: experience of the emptiness of all reality; experience of God’s loving presence; experience of God admonishing one; experience that one is included in the Absolute; experience from which one forms the belief that one’s life has transcendent meaning.

In what follows, I will say that an experience, E, of S’s, supports (or has positive epistemic import for) a belief, B, of S’s if S forms B as a result of E, and E is either evidence for B or creates some grounding for B. Support comes in degrees, including support that falls short of full justification or of fully adequate grounding, and it is vulnerable to defeaters.

Analytic philosophers of religion have been interested largely in theistic experiences and theistic beliefs. The relevant theistic experiences are either such that, allegedly, God is perceived to be present or acting in one form or other, or else such that from them a person forms beliefs about God, including that God exists, even if God is not present. Theistic beliefs are beliefs involving commitment to God’s existence. (Notice: That a theistic experience occurs does not entail God’s existence. That a theistic belief is true does.) Accordingly, my focus here will be on how theistic belief gets support when a person undergoes a theistic experience. What I say about theistic experiences and theistic beliefs should be applicable, mutatis mutandis, in part or in whole, to at least some other religious experiences and religious beliefs, as well.

Philosophers have advanced three major approaches that endorse theistic experiences as support for theistic beliefs: (1) Richard Swinburne’s Principle of Credulity; (2) William Alston’s Doxastic Practice approach; and (3) Alvin Plantinga’s Proper Functionalism approach. Each has led to a massive literature of criticism and defense. It is impossible to attempt a survey of those
exchanges here or to evaluate the acceptability of each of these views. Accordingly, in the first part of what follows (‘Three Views’), I focus on how each of these views, if acceptable, leaves us with too narrow an understanding of how theistic experiences provide support for theistic belief. After that, in the second part (‘Acceptance and Thick Support’), I argue for expanding our vision of such support so as to encompass not only belief-formation as the fruit of theistic experience, but also forms of acceptance. In addition, I sketch a proposal of important ways in which theistic belief and acceptance gain support when one has a theistic experience, ways entirely different from the three views I will have canvassed.

Three views

Richard Swinburne’s Principle of Credulity

Richard Swinburne (1979/1991: 254) endorses a principle he calls ‘the Principle of Credulity’ (PC): It is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that O is present, then probably O is present. In the ‘epistemic’ sense of ‘seems’, for Swinburne, ‘It seems to S that O is present’ means that S is inclined to believe O is present on the basis of his present experience. ‘Special considerations’ refers to reasons to think or suspect that x had not been present to the subject, reasons that defeat a presumption, according to PC, that x was present, or reasons to think that the subject’s experience, on the present occasion, is impugned by other considerations. So, if it seems to a person that God is present and no special considerations obtain, by the Principle of Credulity, probably God is present.

Swinburne is treating an experience of the presence of God as just like any other sense-experience, in the respect that support goes from a discrete experience to a discrete proposition. There seems to be a tree in front of me straightaway – in the absence of special defeating conditions – supports Probably, there is a tree in front of me. Just so, It seems that God is present straightaway – in the absence of special defeating conditions – supports Probably, God is present. Swinburnian support fails to give adequate support to the typical epistemic wallop theistic experiences can provide, issuing in deep conviction and a profound change in life. Swinburnian support does not sufficiently account for the tenacity with which experience-induced theistic belief can be held, and the recalcitrance such belief can have to counter-evidence. If these features of theistic experience are to be rationally justified we need a thicker support than that which Swinburne provides. The problem here is that Swinburne, as well as those who have followed him in this approach, including myself, has failed to appreciate the epistemic repercussions of what happens when it is God, and not a tree, that is allegedly experienced, and thus has missed the support from the profound changes in one’s beliefs, desires, and values that can come about as a result. I pick up on this theme in the second part.

William Alston’s Doxastic Practice approach

William Alston says that a ‘doxastic practice’ ‘involves a family of ways of going from grounds – doxastic and experiential, and perhaps others – to a belief with a certain content’ (Alston 1991: 100). And: ‘A doxastic practice can be thought of as a system or constellation of dispositions or habits … each of which yields a belief as output that is related in a certain way to an “input”’ (Alston 1991: 153). A doxastic practice is a way of forming and epistemically evaluating beliefs (the ‘output’) from various cognitive inputs together with an overrider system. Alston defined an ‘overrider system’ as what ‘determines how we go from prima facie to unqualified justification; as such it has a crucial bearing on what outputs are ultimately approved’ (Alston 1991: 189).
Alston argues that the justification of every doxastic practice is 'epistemically circular', that is, its reliability cannot be established independently of the practice itself. The support for the reliability of any doxastic practice, including for its overrider system, is always internal support, which already assumes the reliability of the practice. However, we cannot avoid engaging in doxastic practices. Therefore, it is rational to engage in the doxastic practices we do engage in provided there is no good reason to think they are unreliable. Unreliability could come from the emergence of internal inconsistency in the practice or from inconsistency between a practice and other practices that have veto power over it.

There is a Christian mystical doxastic practice, says Alston. It mandates taking certain kinds of experiences as input, running them by an overrider system and forming theistic beliefs. Hence, as with all doxastic practices, in practical terms, it is rational for a person who participates in a Christian mystical practice to continue doing so until it can be shown to be an unreliable practice. Hence, the beliefs produced in the Christian practice are practically justified.

A problem with Alstonian support is that it supports only continuing in a Christian mystical practice when already engaged in it. Alston seemed to have in mind people who simply 'find themselves' inside a Christian practice, such as those who are raised Christians. Alston gives no experiential epistemic support for joining such a practice in the first place. After all, a person might join a Christian mystical practice, or allow herself to be absorbed into one, for irrational reasons. We should be tepid about granting a certificate of practical rationality where a person has joined a Christian mystical doxastic practice for irrational reasons. Simply presently being in a Christian practice cannot make you immune to a judgment about the epistemic credentials of your grounds for having joined it in the first place. Hence, my attention is turned to epistemic support for conversion experiences, from which a person might be prompted to join a Christian mystical practice or simply find herself in one as a consequence. Only by judging the credentials of experiences occurring independently of being embedded in Christian mystical practice can we fully account for how theistic experience supports theistic belief.

**Alvin Plantinga’s properly basic beliefs**

Alvin Plantinga (2000: 156) gives the following ‘nutshell’ account of his epistemology of proper functionalism: *A belief has warrant for a person only if that belief is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for one’s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth.* Plantinga argues that if God exists, God would want humans to have warranted belief in God. So, we should expect there to be a reliable cognitive faculty for this purpose, answering to Plantinga’s requirements for conferring warrant. This faculty has been called the *sensus divinitas*. Various experiences properly ground or enhance belief in God through this faculty. These experiences would include perceiving beauty in nature, feeling God’s forgiveness, and feeling God speaking to you while reading the Bible. Such experiences have positive epistemic import for the proposition that comes to be believed. The experience non-propositionally grounds the belief rather than being evidence for it. So, if God exists, the appropriate experiences warrantedly ground our belief in God.

Plantinga’s theistic model for properly basic belief in God relies on a theology that posits a sense of the divine that should operate on a grand scale. People in general should be believing in God. To explain why this sense does not operate so grandly as expected, Plantinga invokes the idea that sin damages our noetic makeup. This theology then posits ways in which our noetic makeup can get repaired fully or in part.

Despite having credentials in some Christian sources, Calvin in particular, this theological story is not compelling from a broad theistic perspective, or even for all Christians. Several
Christian philosophers do not recognize a sensus divinitas of the kind Plantinga advances. I include here such diverse Christian thinkers as Søren Kierkegaard, Joseph Butler, William Abraham, Ronald Hepburn, Michael Murray, C. Stephen Evans, Paul Moser, and John Hick. In Judaism, as well, the sensus divinitas plays a minor role. Far more prevalent is an appeal to a reliable tradition as the basis of belief and to trust in those who have achieved a higher consciousness of God. Some forms of Judaism will emphasize God’s hiddenness, as opposed to God’s eagerness to be revealed.

Here are a few examples of Christian philosophers whose views clash with supposing a sensus divinitas to exist. In his Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, Butler (1878: 210–11) remarked on the ‘evidence of religion not appearing obvious’ and that ‘a conviction of its truth is not forced upon every one’ as being a test of how seriously human beings will take up the subtle signs God provides. It is because of divine design that God does not make himself manifest to all, not by sinful fallenness.

Evans (2010: 19) writes:

Those who do not wish to love and serve God find it relatively easy to reject the idea that there is knowledge of God. The plausibility of this principle stems from the assumption that God wants the relation humans are to enjoy with him to be one in which they love and serve him freely and joyfully.

This, according to Evans, explains why God does not provide strongly indicative natural signs of God’s presence in the world. God abides by a ‘Principle of Easy Resistibility’. Yet, says Evans, God does make his presence subtly accessible to those who wish to know him. Evans makes of this the ‘Principle of Wide Accessibility’, according to which God makes it possible at least for humans to come to know his existence. Notwithstanding, the signs have to be read freely so that a person will enter freely into relationship with God. Open signs are not absent because of sin, but by design.

Moser (2008: 243) argues extensively that God would grant a non-coercive offer of fellowship to humans in which we are free to respond to God in love. God’s call:

may intrude a bit into our experience, say in conscience, but it can readily be overlooked, ignored, suppressed, or dismissed by us, because it is intended by God not to coerce a will … but to be willingly received by humans. In particular, it’s designed to woo or invite us rather than to force or dominate us.

These philosophers, as well as the others I have mentioned, believe that God wants us to come to God in freedom and joy. Not sinfulness, but God’s purposeful design accounts for our failures to detect God’s existence. On this conception, our experiences do not necessarily cause us to simply ‘find ourselves’ with theistic beliefs. Rather, theism can be formed in us by our actively responding to what we experience. For this view, we require a different understanding of the support provided by theistic experiences for theism than that of the sensus divinitas. We require an approach that will warrant a person in taking ‘signs’ as an indication of God. To encompass this fuller range of theistic theology, for the remainder of this chapter my focus will be on alternatives to the sensus divinitas for accounting for the positive epistemic import of theistic experiences.

**Acceptance and thick support**

The above three views provide support only for theistic belief and account for limited types of epistemic support. We need to attend as well to acceptance and provisional acceptance of God’s
existence as resulting from theistic experience, not only to belief. In addition, we need to attend to thick support for belief and acceptance, to be found in what I call ‘mediated support’.

**Acceptance and provisional acceptance**

Theistic experience can lead to acceptance or provisional acceptance of theistic belief. These might be epistemic end-points or, in turn, subsequently issue into full-blown belief. I will say that S accepts p when:

1. S does not have a belief-feeling that p.
2. S decides to use p as a premise in theoretical and practical reasoning where this is appropriate, and S has a tendency to do so.
3. When S considers whether p is the case, S tends to have a positive epistemic attitude toward the truth of p.
4. If someone asks S whether p, S will have a tendency to respond affirmatively.
5. S will tend to act in ways that would be appropriate if p were the case, given S’s goals, aversions, and other propositional attitudes.

Acceptance differs from belief in two ways. With acceptance a person might be aware of reasons to think p true, yet not find herself believing p, having that familiar belief-feeling about p. This can happen, for example, when the reasons to think p true are not strong enough to generate a belief that p. Secondly, one decides to accept a proposition, whereas ordinarily one cannot decide what to believe just like that. The reasons in favour of p’s truth will be strong enough for a person to want to decide to accept that p.

Provisional acceptance differs from just plain acceptance in that in provisional acceptance a person accepts a proposition to see what will come from accepting it, to see how it will fit with further experience and beliefs. The person has enough of a positive attitude toward the truth of p to accept it provisionally, but not enough to accept it outright. The consequences of provisional acceptance can vary from subsequent rejection to full belief, with acceptance in between. Provisional acceptance of p differs from adopting p as a mere hypothesis in that, with the latter, one need not have a positive attitude toward the truth of p, only wish to test its truth. With provisional acceptance a person has enough of a positive attitude toward the truth of p to make it her own – but only provisionally.

Swinburne, Alston, and Plantinga deal exclusively with belief, leaving out acceptance. This ignores decision in response to theistic experience, decision that can be warranted and also freely given, even when belief is not warranted. That God’s signs might require a decision on the part of one who experiences those signs fits well the view of those philosophers and theologians who declare that a person must come to God in freedom. Freedom implies decision.

**Mediation**

I will say that a theistic experience E affords a direct support, D, for a theistic belief, B, when: (1) in D, E supports B; and (2) in D, there is no element essential to E’s support of B that comes about as a result of E (other than, at most, S’s belief that E occurred). And I will say that E yields a mediated support, M, for B when: (1) in M, E does not directly support B; and (2) in M, E gives rise to elements essential for the support of B. (Analogous definitions are to apply to acceptance and provisional acceptance.) E can give both a direct and a mediated support for B.

It is in the nature of direct support that it is in place when the theistic belief is formed. Direct support is either evidence or grounding, and these are there from the start. Mediated support,
though, might come about only following the initial forming of the theistic belief. That would be because a chain of mediated support might become epistemically adequate only after the belief-formation and so provide support only retroactively, as it were, back to the earlier formed belief. Alternatively, the person might initially have had only a proto-belief, a belief-feeling for a vaguely formulated belief, which becomes clarified and determined following mediated support. This is true for acceptance as well.

When a person has come to believe or accept a theistic proposition because of a theistic experience, and is presently warranted in doing so, it does not follow that the person had adequate support or the present degree of support from the very start. The present support could be from what the belief or acceptance received subsequent to the initial moment of its formation, support traceable through mediating steps back to the theistic experience.

Each of the three views I have canvassed thinks of the way experience epistemically supports theistic beliefs as direct support, thus as support that is present as soon as the belief forms. As noted above, Swinburne’s paradigm of justification is an experience where God seems to be present, and the justified conclusion from that straightaway is that probably God is present. This is direct support. Alston, like Swinburne, thinks of the Christian mystical practice endorsing theistic belief very much like sense perception endorses sense-perceptual beliefs. Typical examples from Alston of how the Christian mystical practice works are: I saw Christ at my side endorsing Christ was at my side; I was conscious of God’s presence endorsing God was present; and I heard a voice firmly saying. … endorsing God was saying. … In such cases, the experience supports the belief in much the way sense-experience supports sense-perceptual belief. One goes from an experience to a belief with nothing more than a filtering overrider system. Alston’s typical experiences in the Christian mystical practice support, through the filter of the overrider system, the corresponding beliefs. (That Alstonian support must pass the test of the overrider system of the Christian practice does not mean that Alstonian support is mediated. It would be mediated only if the experience produced the overrider system. It does not. So, Alstonian support is direct.)

Plantinga explicitly compares experiential non-propositional grounds for theistic belief to experiential non-propositional grounds for sense-perceptual experience, as well as to memory and experiences of the a priori (Plantinga 2000: 176). Plantinga describes his model as generating beliefs from experience ‘unmediatedly’, as when one looks up at the starry night sky and simply ‘finds oneself’ with the belief that God exists. Plantinga acknowledges the possibility of a model in which the sensus divinitas mediates beliefs, referring to a study by Michael Sudduth. Sudduth argues that John Calvin’s ‘natural knowledge of God’ included inferential knowledge, mediated by reasons (Sudduth 1995: 55). According to Sudduth, Calvin affirmed that the sensus divinitas could operate in a mediated way as follows. S has an experience which, via the sensus divinitas, creates a non-theistic belief or beliefs, from which S then infers a theistic belief. S’s experience will provide support for the theistic belief as mediated by the non-theistic belief. An example would be when S has an experience of the beauty of a grand mountain range, which experience gives rise via the sensus divinitas to the belief that these mountains could be so very beautiful only if God exists. Then S all on her own infers from that, together with believing in the great grandeur of the mountains, that God exists.

Sudduth’s mediated ‘propositional’ support shares with direct support its being in place when the theistic belief is formed. The inference has the support when it is made. However, there exist kinds of mediated support for theistic belief (and acceptance) realised only subsequent to the formation of the belief (or acceptance). These kinds of mediated support are important to consider in experiential support for theistic belief. I call these ‘noetic reconstruction’ and ‘value-attitude reformation’.
Noetic reconstruction

I propose we attend to the mediated epistemic support a theistic experience provides by initiating what I will call ‘noetic reconstruction’ and ‘value-attitude reformation’. By ‘noetic reconstruction’ I mean a new, extensive, systematic modification of a person’s noetic content. Reconstruction can be deliberate or something that happens to a person, or a mixture of both. A noetic reconstruction would pertain to: (a) the propositions currently in one’s noetic structure; and (b) the way the propositions are connected, including by deduction, induction, abduction, and causality, or just the way propositions go together for specific purposes.

A theistic conversion experience can be the cause of noetic reconstruction by giving rise all at once to a radical ingestion into one’s noetic framework so that one sees life and reality in a wholly new way. The experience of coming to possess a radically restructured noetic system can help explain the profound sense of self-transformation often to be found in theistic experiences. This would help account for the profound effect theistic experiences can have on a person, due to a sudden, massive noetic redoing. Alternately, the experience might first precipitate deep discontent with one’s present noetic content. The break-up of one’s previous noetic structure pursuant to many theistic experiences, and the consequent noetic discontent, can help explain the sense of intense disorientation sometimes accompanying theistic experience. In such cases, the theistic content of the experience will then serve as a criterion of adequacy for the ensuing noetic reconstruction.

Accordingly, the order of the noetic reconstruction and the nature of the epistemic support of the acquired theistic belief can take different forms. Here are some examples (where ‘theistic reconstruction’ refers to deeply ingressive noetic reconstruction along theistic lines, ‘→’ means ‘causes’, and ‘⇒’ means ‘(which) epistemically supports’):

(1) Theistic experience → theistic noetic reconstruction ⇒ theistic belief.
(2) Theistic experience → theistic belief → noetic discontent → theistic noetic reconstruction ⇒ theistic belief.
(3) Theistic experience → noetic discontent → theistic noetic reconstruction ⇒ theistic belief.

In (1), we are to imagine theistic experience prompting a shake-up in one’s noetic structure, while not yet producing belief, which in turn prompts a newly emerging noetic complex. Features of the new theistic noetic complex (to be given below) will supply support for the belief in God, which belief is embedded centrally in the reconstruction. The experience supports the belief by the mediation of the latter.

In (2), theistic belief is formed before noetic reconstruction; however, its epistemic support depends (at least in part) on the success of the subsequent reconstruction in which it plays a central causal role. The belief gets epistemic support when the inevitable noetic discontent follows and produces an emerging theistic noetic complex that returns noetic satisfaction. Features of the new theistic noetic complex will supply support for the belief in God retroactively, back to the belief in God earlier formed and embedded in it.

In (3), experience unhinges a person’s trust in her present noetic structure. She now sees through her previous understandings, and they no longer serve her. Life and the world suddenly lose the meaning she thought they had. Here is an example of this taken from a characterisation by Martin Buber (1946: 76) of the experience of a ‘miraculous’ event.

Miracle can be fully included in the objective, scientific complex of nature and history; the vital meaning of which destroys the security of the whole complex of
knowledge and explodes the fixity of the fields of experience named ‘Nature’ and ‘History’.

Given the noetic discontent and the theistic experience, the person constructs, or finds herself with, a new understanding along theistic lines. Features of this new understanding (see below) will support the belief in God.

**Value-attitude reformation**

By ‘value-attitude reformation’ I mean an extensive modification of a person’s attitudinal complexes and behavioural dispositions expressing value orientations, including importantly attitudes about the meaning of life. Value-attitude reformation can result from a sudden ‘seeing’ of things in a radically new way or from the emergence of deep value discontent. The reformation can be deliberate or just something that comes over a person, or a mixture of both. By analogy with what transpires with noetic reconstruction, we get these three versions, where ‘theistic value reformation’ refers to a value reformation along theistic lines.

1. The theistic experience → theistic value reformation ⇒ theistic belief.
2. The theistic experience → theistic belief → value discontent → theistic value reformation ⇒ theistic belief.
3. The theistic experience → value discontent → theistic value reformation ⇒ theistic belief.

In all three, the experience’s support of the theistic belief is mediated by the value-attitude reformation. Put differently, the epistemic test of the theistic belief is in the character of its subsequent ingress into, and effect upon, the subject’s value situation.

In a theistic conversion experience, especially, both noetic reconstruction and value transformation should be expected to occur. Inserting the two into one complex process gives us a large number of possibilities of how the two can cooperate in getting from an experience to epistemic support for theistic belief. Here are two examples:

1. The theistic experience → theistic noetic reconstruction → value discontent → value reformation → (theistic noetic reconstruction + value reformation ⇒ theistic belief)
2. The theistic experience → theistic belief → theistic noetic reconstruction → value discontent → theistic value reformation → (theistic noetic reconstruction + theistic value reformation ⇒ theistic belief)

When in addition to belief we consider also acceptance and provisional acceptance, the possibilities for support multiply. Here is one possibility, a modification of the example I have just listed:

3. The theistic experience → theistic provisional acceptance → theistic noetic reconstruction → value discontent → theistic value reformation → (theistic noetic reconstruction + theistic value reformation ⇒ theistic belief)

This scenario tells the story of an initial experience with not enough epistemic punch to cause a belief-feeling yet possessing sufficient epistemic clout for the subject to decide to accept theism provisionally. Subsequently, the subject finds sufficient confirmation for her acceptance from noetic reconstruction and value transformation, so that her acceptance turns into belief.
How do theistic noetic reconstruction and theistic value reformation provide support for theistic belief? I cite two ways, each separately, although they commingle and are mutually supportive in how they function.

**Mediated support**

**Support by noetic coherence**

In theistic noetic reconstruction and theistic value reformation, belief in God becomes embedded as a central organizing principle in a new, convincing noetic structure. The new construction either is, or shows strong promise of becoming, far more coherent and comprehensive than what was previously in place. The new structure is now so convincing compared to a non-theistic world-view that the subject might not be able to imagine there being any satisfactory alternative to it. This does not mean that all of one’s questions are answered; rather, this noetic constellation gives better answers when it does give answers, and provides the right direction for going further. Such coherence counts in favour of the belief in God as opposed to non-belief embedded in alternative noetic structures.

**Support by changed value complex**

Theistic belief gains support by one’s newly shaped value complex. Consider a person who finds a cluster of her empirical experiences compelling and yet finds herself without a satisfactory ontology to explain their occurrence. Suppose that others also find themselves in a similar situation regarding similar experiences. It would then be warranted to make new ontological assumptions for the sake of explanation. This is one way in which science advances. Similarly, a person could find a value-attitude complex to life and the world profoundly compelling, yet not have an ontology sufficient to account for the appropriateness of these values. By analogy to compelling empirical experiences, making new ontological assumptions would be warranted for obtaining a satisfactory explanation. Value-attitudes can be very basic, pervasive, and convincing and demand a correlative ontology to adequately account for its appropriateness to the world. In this way value-attitudes could support theistic belief. For example, suppose people were convinced optimists about life. Suppose they believed, in the words of William James, that ‘the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word’ (1979: 25). This attitude could be so profoundly basic to their relation to reality, as basic as the deliverances of their senses, that it would justify their engaging in ontologizing to answer the question, ‘What would reality have to be like to make this optimism justified?’

When thrown by a theistic experience into a convincing value transformation, the fact that belief in God makes the best sense ontologically of newly emerging, profoundly felt values, counts in favour of the truth of that belief. When one finds others of the same mind, the value-explaining power of belief in God is enhanced. What I say here about value-attitudes should be expanded to account for newly discovered pervasive beauty, awe, and mystery. Experiences of the latter can be so persuasive as to support a belief in God as explanation. These can work in tandem with experience-induced value-attitude changes to provide positive epistemic import for theistic belief arising from religious experience in a mediated way. The theistic experience brings with it support for theistic belief by the mediation of the satisfactory value-reformation.
Before an initial theistic experience, a person had experienced the world and herself differently, perhaps atheistically. In having a theistic experience, one sees through one’s previous world-outlook. A seeing-through experience counts in favour of believing or accepting what one now sees. The relationship between the old, secular view and the new theistic one can be compared to the change of appearance of the painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel after its restoration. Before restoration, the ceiling’s paintings were covered in grime and soot, and had been damaged by water. Because of that, paintings had been painted over in part, in misguided attempts to restore what people thought was there but could not see clearly. Just so, a theistic conversion experience can grant a sense of one’s previous secular view having been unknowingly like looking through a covering of soot and grime, as well as having had one’s observation suffer from misguided attempts to present a proper picture of what then could not be seen clearly. One well understands why secularists think they are seeing properly and understands also why they fail to see what one now sees properly. It is as though one has experienced a seeing of a restoration. This is an epistemic reason to now discount the secular point of view.

To use another analogy, a person in a theistic experience could be warranted in seeing herself as a kind of ‘expert’ and therefore in a superior epistemic position relative to novices. That novices do not see what she sees when observing a Cloud Chamber is not a defeater for what a particle physicist sees. The latter, after all, is an expert, and her expertise justifies her believing that she sees what is not accessible to others. She sees something deeper in the visible misty tracks of the chamber, recognizing particles passing through the chamber’s medium. In the same way, it is not solely noetic and attitudinal coherence and explanatory power that are relevant to the support of theism in a theist experience. The experience brings with it a perspective newly granted of now being in a superior epistemic position than previously because now one can see what others ordinarily do not see. This counts in favour of the theistic experience. When one can identify other ‘experts’ concerning such experiences, one’s conviction is justifiably strengthened.

Strong noetic reconstruction and value reformation that might accompany theistic experience can help account for the tenacity with which ensuing theist belief will be held and the recalcitrance of such belief to change. For it is not a matter of having only a supported belief, but of having a supported thick noetic and value networks holding the theistic belief in place.

The philosopher Janet Martin Soskice (2009: 77–78) reported on ‘a dramatic religious experience’ which converted her to Christianity. Her report illustrates well the roles that noetic reconstruction and value-attitude reformation can play in theistic belief. Before her experience, Soskice thought religious people must be so ‘for a sense of belonging or nostalgia’, or were ‘clearly undereducated and overexcited’. Religious believers were either cognitively lazy or cognitively deprived. She writes of her experience:

I was in the shower, on an ordinary day, and found myself to be surrounded by a presence of love, a love so real and so personal that I could not doubt it. … I could not doubt the reality of that loving presence, and still cannot. … I was turned around. Converted. Not that I had been the sort of person who kicked old ladies and found myself now helping them across the street. I was much the same person, but facing in a new direction.

And she writes:

Once I believed in God: things clicked into place. … I do feel that it becomes possible to see the presence of the world and its orderliness in a new way when you believe it
to be a gift – literally gratuitous – and a gift from a Giver. … I do believe that the world fits together only if you believe there’s a God.

(Soskice 2005: 28)

In personal correspondence, Soskice wrote to me, ‘I was at first very reluctant to talk about how I “came to believe in God” (misleading phrase).’ In reply to my question why she thought that ‘came to believe in God’ was a misleading phrase, she replied as follows:

I suppose because ‘believe in’ so readily suggests (to many) believing in an assertion, whereas this is more like falling in love, ‘seeing as,’ ‘resting in’. … It’s not as though one had a list of facts (or beliefs) and just added another to the list. My life was changed.

Although Soskice hesitates to speak of herself as simply ‘believing’ a proposition about God, her description of her experience strongly suggests that she did acquire a belief in God. And it appears that her belief in God was formed in her from the start. It was not a matter, however, of simply acquiring a propositional belief. Her belief was formed together with a sense of being ‘turned around’, akin to falling in love. In my terms, there occurred the start of a new value orientation; she was ‘facing in a new direction’. To be sure, it was not a complete reorientation, but a new wide-ranging value framework waiting for details to be filled in. Some of Soskice’s old values remained, but now became embedded in new, wider values and took on radically changed meanings. In addition, Soskice came to see that with belief in God everything ‘clicked’ into place. She became convinced that the world ‘fits together’ only if you believe in God. She is indicating here what I have called ‘noetic reconstruction’, providing a comprehensive, coherent, theistic world-outlook. When assessing the epistemic credentials of Soskice’s theistic belief, we are not restricted to its first stage, in which belief in God arises in a causally direct manner. The epistemic status of the belief should be evaluated on the basis of the entire ensuing epistemic situation. In a report such as the above of a conversion experience, belief in God finds support in noetic reconstruction and value reformation, backed by a sense of having a restored view of reality from a vantage point not available to all others.

Conclusion

Swinburne’s Principle of Credulity might provide some support for theistic belief based on theistic experience. However, Swinburne omits the kinds of thick support theistic belief garners in other ways from theistic experience. For sure, Swinburne would agree that a newly acquired theistic belief makes serious ingress into one’s noetic and value structures, but it is important to recognize the important part that process can play in supporting the directly acquired theistic belief. Theistic experience provides thicker support than does the Principle of Credulity by itself.

I pointed out that Alston’s Doxastic Practice approach provides no support for joining a Christian practice, giving only a reason to stay with such a practice in which one already participates. My remedy is two-fold. First, justification for joining a Christian doxastic practice need support only accepting Christian teachings. There might be enough in one’s pre-practice theistic (or Christian-type) experiences to provide support for acceptance, which, in turn, justifies a person in joining a Christian doxastic practice to acquire a standard for her accepting experience-based outcomes. Secondly, there might be enough noetic and value support from one’s pre-practice experiences to justify one’s joining a Christian doxastic practice. In that practice, one could then acquire incremental support for those noetic and value structures when the
practice fleshes out those structures in a self-justifying process. Thus do noetic reconstruction and value reformation provide a thickening of support for theistic belief following theistic experiences.

Plantinga considers ways in which a *sensus divinitas* may underwrite warranted resistance to (apparent) counter-evidence to God’s existence. He compares it to warranted resistance to counter-evidence of a clear memory belief about where you were at a certain time. Just as you are warranted in depending on your memory belief to defeat the counter-evidence – ‘But I clearly remember that I was walking in the woods at exactly that time!’ – you are warranted in depending on your *sensus divinitas* belief that God exists to defeat counter-evidence: ‘But I experienced that God exists when I looked up at the starry sky!’

However, the epistemic force of a theistic belief induced by the *sensus divinitas* can be much stronger than an ordinary memory belief like where I was at a certain time. A single memory belief like remembering where I was at a certain time has a certain degree of ingress into one’s noetic structure. That ingress is decidedly thin compared to that of a theistic experience with its power to grossly revamp one’s noetic structure into a comprehensive, coherent whole. An ordinary memory like remembering where I was at a certain time, generally speaking gives less epistemic support for a memory belief than can a theistic experience give to theistic belief. In addition, the degree of value-attitude reformation attendant upon my remembering where I was at a certain time might be significant in certain instances. Yet it will be confined to a relatively small part of my value structure, while a theistic experience, as I have pointed out, can provide a much richer value support for theistic belief by virtue of radical value change.

Finally, by acknowledging acceptance and provisional acceptance as outcomes of theistic experience, we are able to accommodate the view that God has not given us a *sensus divinitas* but wants us to come to God in freedom and joy. Rather, God will give muted signs of his presence which signal that God wants a person to positively respond. The best way to interpret such a response is that it involves acceptance or provisional acceptance. From a theistic point of view, the person will be judged by her willingness to decide to make her own *that God exists and is present to me*. From an epistemic point of view, support for making God her own will likely come directly from theistic experience and indirectly from the considerations that I have tried to present here.