**Towards the Integration of Religious and Ordinary Experience:**

**In Conversation with Alvin Plantinga, Mark Wynn, and Thomas Aquinas**

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**ABSTRACT:** In theological and philosophical circles, religious experience has often been described in terms of a direct encounter with the supernatural that exceeds the possibilities of normal human experience. More recently, however, select scholars have endeavored to explore the respects in which ordinary aesthetic experiences might serve as a site for mediated encounters with the divine. In this paper, I will argue that any attempt to establish the legitimacy of both direct and aesthetic religious experiences depends upon their placement within a larger context, which recognizes the sense in which all forms of ordinary human experience may mediate an experience of God. In order to bolster this claim, I will begin with a critical assessment of the relevant work of Alvin Plantinga and Mark Wynn, who respectively offer accounts of direct and aesthetic religious experience. I will then show that neither account fully evades two main objections that tend to be leveled against accounts of religious experience. Following this discussion, I will develop an account of the way all ordinary human experiences may mediate religious experience, in conversation with Thomas Aquinas. Far from precluding narrower accounts of religious experience as direct or aesthetic, this account includes them in a way that makes it possible to determine their validity.

**KEYWORDS:** Thomas Aquinas, Alvin Plantinga, Mark Wynn, Religious Experience, Sense Experience, Theistic Proof, Knowledge of God, Moral Virtue, Intellectual Virtue

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In theological and philosophical circles, religious experience has often been described in terms of a direct encounter with the supernatural or transcendent that exceeds the possibilities of normal human experience. In many cases, such encounters are taken as a basis for arguing that God exists. More recently, however, select scholars have explored the respects in which certain forms of ordinary experience, in particular, sensory or aesthetic experiences, might serve as mediators of a more accessible form of encounter with the divine, to say nothing of theistic proof. In this paper, I will argue that any attempt to establish the viability of both direct and aesthetic religious experiences, not least as a form of proof for the reality of the divine object of experience, depends upon their placement in a larger context, which recognizes the sense in which all forms of ordinary human experience may mediate an experience of God.

With a view to bolstering this claim, I will begin with a critical assessment of the accounts of direct and aesthetic religious experience that are offered by Alvin Plantinga and Mark Wynn, respectively. As I will show, these accounts, which represent the two different types of account in question, fail to evade the two main objections that tend to be leveled against accounts of religious experience. The first objection turns on the observation that religious experiences are personal or subjective. Since they are not publicly verifiable, at best, and may be the product of insanity, delusion or hallucination, at worst, it follows that they fail to count as evidence for the reality of the divine object of experience, to say nothing of the authenticity of the experiences themselves. The second charge has been raised with reference to the fact that religious experiences cannot seemingly be linked of necessity to any specific understanding of God, even though many accounts of religious experience purport to defend a Christian conception of God.

Following this critical discussion, I will draw on the work of Thomas Aquinas to develop an account of the way all ordinary human experiences may serve to mediate religious experience, such that the two forms of experience become fully integrated.[[1]](#endnote-1) By contrast to the other accounts mentioned above, this account is not subject to the two main objections against arguments for God from religious experience. Far from precluding the more narrow accounts of religious experience as direct or mediated through the senses, however, this account makes it possible to cast them in a larger context that allows for determining their validity. In developing this account, therefore, I seek not merely to expand the definition of religious experience, but to do so in a way that confirms the otherwise dubitable capacity of religious experience in all forms to give evidence for God.

At the outset of this discussion, it is worth noting a distinction that is often drawn, and that Aquinas draws, between two main kinds of direct religious experience.[[2]](#endnote-2) On the one hand, there are religious experiences that involve an experience of the supernatural that would not normally be attainable through ordinary sense perception, yet which nevertheless exhibit a quasi-sensory quality, or occur while the senses are more or less in tact. By contrast to such experiences, so-called ‘mystical’ experiences entail an awareness of God, supernatural states of affairs, or in some cases, a sense of pure empty consciousness, that precludes and suspends ordinary sense perception and seemingly transports the subject into another realm, and possibly out of the body.

Although mystical experiences can be defined in a wide range of ways, the description above at least suggests that they fall under a broader category of direct religious experience, all forms of which do not in turn count necessarily as mystical.[[3]](#endnote-3) As I will demonstrate further below, the Thomistic account of religious experience I will develop allows not only for aesthetic religious experiences, but also for both forms of direct religious experience, including the mystical. While it would be interesting to consider exactly how these forms of experience became divorced from the broader context in which Aquinas places them, in the time after Aquinas, this sort of historical inquiry lies beyond the scope of the present project.[[4]](#endnote-4)

As I have already hinted, however, the concern of this project will on some level be to compensate for the problems that have come to be associated with accounts of religious experience as a result of this separation. While Wynn and others like him claim to provide this compensation, I have already suggested that their accounts of religious experience are too limited to succeed in this respect. Thus, the value of turning to a thinker like Aquinas, whose work antedates the dichotomy between religious and ordinary experience—the natural and the supernatural, the secular and the sacred—which now grows day by day, with increasingly devastating effects for the perceived relevance and validity of arguments from religious experience, such as the those that will be outlined below.

**Alvin Plantinga on Immediate Religious Experience**

According to what Plantinga calls his ‘Aquinas/Calvin’ model, ‘there is a kind of faculty or a cognitive mechanism, what [John] Calvin calls a *sensus divinitatis* or sense of divinity, which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs about God. These circumstances, we might say, trigger the disposition to form the beliefs in question; they form the occasion on which those beliefs arise.’[[5]](#endnote-5) As Plantinga goes on to argue, the natural knowledge of God achieved by these means is not acquired by inference or argument, for example, from experience to the conclusion that God exists, as in the well-known theistic proofs of natural theology.[[6]](#endnote-6) Rather, it is immediate. That is to say, the belief produced by the circumstances just *is* the argument or ‘proof’ as it were for the reality of God. ‘In this regard, the *sensus divinitatis* resembles perception…which will ordinarily be *basic*, in the sense that it is not accepted on the evidential basis of other propositions.’[[7]](#endnote-7)

In addition to being basic, Plantinga contends, theistic beliefs are *properly basic.* By this, Plantinga means that they are justified, that is, responsible, or within one’s epistemic rights to affirm*.*[[8]](#endnote-8)Indeed, they are justified because they are warranted, or ‘produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly in a congenial epistemic environment according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth.’[[9]](#endnote-9) According to Plantinga’s A/C model, theistic beliefs are warranted and thus properly basic at another level on account of being produced by the *sensus divinitatis.*[[10]](#endnote-10) The existence of this sense confirms that ‘our cognitive faculties have been designed and created by God.’ [[11]](#endnote-11) As Plantinga concludes, therefore, the design plan in question ‘is a design plan in the literal and paradigmatic sense.’[[12]](#endnote-12)

By way of caveat, Plantinga notes in this connection that the *sensus divinitatis* does not equate with the work of the Holy Spirit in human lives. The Spirit, on his understanding ‘is a very special kind of cognitive instrument or agency; it is a belief‐producing process, all right, but one that is very much out of the ordinary. It is not part of our original noetic equipment (not part of our constitution as we came from the hand of the Maker), but instead part of a special divine response to our (unnatural) sinful condition.’[[13]](#endnote-13) I will come back to this matter further below.

On the grounds that something like the A/C model is correct, and knowledge of God ‘ordinarily comes not through inference from other things one believes, but from a *sensus divinitatis,*’[[14]](#endnote-14) Plantinga goes on to inquire whether it would ‘follow that our knowledge of God comes by way of *perception*?’[[15]](#endnote-15) Strictly speaking, he writes, perception ‘essentially involves specifically sensuous imagery. This imagery

need not be of the sort that goes with *our* sense perception; other kinds are certainly

possible. But sensuous imagery of *some* kind may be necessary for perception.’[[16]](#endnote-16)

Following the work of William Alston in *Perceiving God: An Epistemology of Religious Experience,* Plantinga contends that even if it is not possible to perceive God through the senses, there is certainly something very *like* perception of God, which ‘can properly be called ‘perception’ in an analogically extended sense of that term,’[[17]](#endnote-17) and which, like ordinary perception, may serve as a source of warrant. That is not to say that beliefs gained through the *sensus divinitatis* are necessarily perceptional beliefs, however.[[18]](#endnote-18) Nor is it to suggest that the knowledge of God must be defined in terms of religious or perceptual experience, though it always involves some kind of experience or another.[[19]](#endnote-19) Though he makes these disclaimers, Plantinga refrains from answering the question whether knowledge that comes by way of the *sensus divinitatis,* or warrant, comes from experience. As we will soon see, this is because he wants to leave room for his later claim that warranted belief in God can only come through faith in a fallen order.

After thus resolving what he describes as the *de jure* challenge to Christian or theistic belief, which accuses belief of being irrational, unreasonable, or unjustified, Plantinga proceeds to show that this resolution is related to that of the *de facto* challenge, according to which theistic belief is false. Since humankind is created by God with a belief-producing power or mechanism, the *sensus divinitatis,* that is aimed at truth or what is real, he contends, ‘the question whether theistic belief has warrant is not, after all, independent of the question whether theistic belief is *true.*’[[20]](#endnote-20) In order to answer the *de jure* question, it is necessary to answer the *de facto* question at the same time. To affirm that belief in God is rational in other words is to affirm that God exists.

On stating this point, Plantinga acknowledges nonetheless that sin has completely destroyed the *sensus divinitatis.*[[21]](#endnote-21)As Plantinga understands it, sin is primarily an affective disorder, that is, a problem with the will, rather than with the intellectual capacity to know God.[[22]](#endnote-22) According to the ‘extended’ Aquinas/Calvin model Plantinga subsequently develops, ‘the *sensus divinitatis* is partly healed and restored to proper function by *faith* and the concomitant work of the Holy Spirit in one's heart.’[[23]](#endnote-23) This is the sense in which Plantinga thinks his account of warranted theistic belief may be linked to specifically Christian belief, namely, because it is the Holy Spirit that inspires the faith that heals the will that potentially re-activates the *sensus divinitatis.*[[24]](#endnote-24) As a product of the Holy Spirit inspiring faith, Plantinga claims, the warrant of Christian belief and so by implication the proof for God ‘floats free’ of questions concerning, say, the reliability of Scripture or the Church. ‘It doesn’t require to be validated or proved by some source of belief *other* than a faith inspired by the Holy Spirit, such as historical investigation.’[[25]](#endnote-25)

In this connection, Plantinga contends, even the quasi-perceptual experiences of God, made possible by *sensus divinitatis*, are not necessary for attaining warranted Christian belief. Although such experiences may enhance the faith of a select few extremely mature Christians, Plantinga stresses that the warrant for Christian belief ultimately comes from faith, even in these cases. In an order where sin clouds the will that gives access to the natural knowledge of God, in other words, he insists that warrant is derived primarily from faith rather than experience or perception. This situation obtains even where faith restores the *sensus divinitatis* through which the spiritually advanced may enjoy a quasi-perceptual or religious experience of God.[[26]](#endnote-26) Since faith is all that is required in the last analysis for the purpose of warranted Christian belief, such belief is not limited on this showing to the privileged few who enjoy direct religious experiences, but is far more widely accessible to all believers, as Plantinga rightly intends it to be.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Although there is no doubt that Plantinga presents a brilliant account of direct religious experience through the arguments enumerated above, the two main objections to arguments concerning religious experience have nevertheless been raised with reference to it. As some scholars have noted, for instance, it is hard to see how Plantinga’s account of warrant avoids fideism, or the self-referential and therefore circular affirmation of a personal belief as the very grounds for belief itself.[[28]](#endnote-28) This accusation potentially opens Plantinga’s account to the charge that religious experiences and faith in general as he understands them could be the product of delusion or hallucination. In this connection, his invocation of the Holy Spirit as a basis for faith in God seems like a euphemism for the sort of highly subjective or voluntarist ‘leap of faith’ that has rightly been regarded as questionable grounds for belief in God, and a contributor to the growing sacred-secular divide.

This brings us to the second main charge that Plantinga’s account of warranted theistic beliefs—and religious experience—seems insufficiently tied to any one object of belief, even the divine object of Christian faith that Plantinga proposes to advocate.[[29]](#endnote-29) Precisely because the appeal to the Holy Spirit affords what seems like a highly subjective way in to Christian faith, it does not necessarily link Plantinga’s account to the central doctrines of the Christian faith, such as the Incarnation and the Trinity overall. Without this link, however, there is little reason why the Spirit in question could not be the Spirit of some other God or religious being.

At very least, there is no necessary reason why the theistic belief that is warranted in this instance should be Christian. In making these observations, my purpose is not to discredit Plantinga’s account but to hint that it may require to be re-framed in a larger context through which the relevant objections can be put to rest. Before outlining the conceptual context to which I am referring, however, I turn to consider the work of Mark Wynn, who tries to compensate for the relative inaccessibility of direct religious experiences by exploring how God might be experienced through more ordinary means.

**Mark Wynn on Mediated Religious Experience**

In a new intervention in the debate about the viability of religious experience, not least as ‘evidence’ for God, Mark Wynn has developed an understanding of religious experience as mediated through ordinary sensory and especially aesthetic experiences. For the present purposes, Wynn’s most relevant work is his, *Renewing the Senses: A Study of the Philosophy and Theology of the Spiritual Life.* Here,Wynn’s overarching contention is that, ‘various doctrinal claims, or in general a Christian conception of the person and of their fulfillment in relation to God, can be inscribed in, or can ‘colour’, a sensory experience, so that the sensory realm itself becomes a medium for reckoning with those claims and allowing oneself to be shaped by them.’[[30]](#endnote-30)

In developing this argument, Wynn aims to overcome a longstanding, dualist spiritual ideal according to which faith necessitates forsaking rather than embracing the sensory world. Drawing on the work of William James, he starts by arguing that an individual’s view of the world is ineluctably structured or shaped by personal feelings about it. On this basis, Wynn follows James in contending that a conversion experience—a change in the way of seeing the world—must be precipitated by a change in emotional state. [[31]](#endnote-31) In turn, this change or conversion produces and consists in a change in feelings concerning the sensory world, ‘insofar as the world comes to be stained with the same quality of feeling that I feel.’[[32]](#endnote-32) As Wynn concludes, both the person and the world are renewed through a conversion experience.[[33]](#endnote-33)

With a view to expanding this line of argument, Wynn goes on to suggest that a belief in the divine may lead to seeing the world as divine or the divine in the world.[[34]](#endnote-34) This claim connects with some of Wynn’s other work on the respects in which the experience of God can be mediated through a place, such as nature, or an architectural or pilgrimage site, and the history attached to such sites and the feelings that recognizing their meaning or significance may engender. This discussion of ‘faith and place’ represents a natural point of connection with the recent work by David Brown, who advances the idea that God can be experienced not merely through explicitly religious activities but also through various forms of artistic or creative expression, including different types of ‘place’, like nature, landscapes, paintings, architecture, town planning, maps, pilgrimages, gardens, and sports venues;[[35]](#endnote-35) or through the arts strictly defined, such as music and dance;[[36]](#endnote-36) or drama and rhetoric.[[37]](#endnote-37)

On the basis of his own understanding of these matters, Wynn proceeds to argue that religious experience as he construes it may provide ‘pragmatic justification of religious belief—that is, a justification which does not seek to establish the truth of religious belief, but which maintains that we have good practical reasons, rather than truth-directed reasons, for ‘adopting’, in some appropriate sense, religious belief.’[[38]](#endnote-38) The pragmatic reasons of course derive from the way in which religious belief may ‘enrich’ the appearance or look of things, or allow for ‘the appreciation of an object in aesthetic terms,’[[39]](#endnote-39) when it shapes experience of the sensory world.[[40]](#endnote-40)

As Wynn argues elsewhere, this aesthetic appreciation for the sensory world entails a sense of all things as designed to image the God who is the source of all value, as perceived by feelings, which are engendered by religious belief, which is in turn engendered and sustained by religious feelings. In that sense, ‘this imaging relation is discovered in the world, rather than being simply invented by the imagination.’[[41]](#endnote-41) That is to say, it identifies objective evidence of divine design. On these grounds, Wynn concludes that religious experience does not merely provide pragmatic justification for religious belief. It also affords epistemic or truth-bearing reasons for believing, through something like a teleological or ‘design’ argument for God’s existence.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Thus concludes Wynn’s admirable account of the mediated nature of religious experience and the sort of teleological theistic proof it may provide. This account rightly draws attention to the important role that feelings play in human experience, to say nothing of the experience of God. Even so, it could be argued that Wynn’s account remains susceptible in its own way to the two main charges that have been levelled against direct accounts of religious experience, which pertain to the subjective nature of religious experience and the problem of religious diversity. As I will demonstrate below, these objections remain insurmountable insofar as Wynn limits religious to sensory or aesthetic experience.

With regard to the first of the aforementioned charges, Wynn’s account does not seem to fare much better than direct accounts, because feelings or emotions about sense objects or the sensory world overall arise from embodied experiences, and are therefore specific to the human being whose bodily senses are aroused. While one person may try to understand the pleasure another derives from certain aesthetic experiences, for example, it is impossible for both persons to share exactly the same sensory experience, since they would need to share a body to do so.

Because these kinds of experience are intrinsically private, Wynn’s account fails to preclude the possibility that they might be the product of delusion or hallucination, or even sheer fabrication. This is all the more true if we consider the fact that emotions are not only the most individual but also the most transient and unstable facet of human being. Since the emotions are not held accountable in Wynn’s understanding to any regulating factor other than belief, which is itself generated and maintained by feelings, it is hard to see how they can reasonably be said to afford the sole grounds for authentic religious experience, to say nothing of a consistent religious commitment.

A further yet related problem arises from the seemingly circular nature of Wynn’s design argument for God. As I have noted, this argument turns on the idea that the perception of aesthetic beauty in the world is not merely subjective, but uncovers objective evidence of divine design. This, however, is only the case if the observer already presupposes that beautiful things are indicators of divine design rather than, say, the workings of chance. The fact therefore remains that the evidence of divine design that can supposedly be derived from feelings of appreciation for aesthetic beauty may be nothing but the product of those feelings, which may be misguided.

On still another level, Wynn's ideal of fixation on God in nature and instances of aesthetic beauty seems prone to produce individuals who are out of touch with reality, and therefore potentially out of their minds. While Wynn is rightly concerned to overcome the problematic spiritual ideal as a result of which individuals may become so absorbed in transcending reality as to lose contact with and even scorn reality, his own reactionary ideal could produce individuals who are excessively ‘sensually minded’, to the same effect. Such individuals might become so absorbed in their aesthetic pursuits and experiences as to lose sight of and even deny their ordinary responsibilities, in ways that would detract not only from their own flourishing but also from that of those to and for whom they are responsible.

In this connection, finally, the question could be raised whether Wynn really provides an account of religious experience as mediated. Given that perception is a more or less direct or immediate form of knowing, he seems simply to transfer direct experience of God from the intellectual to the sensory realm. The problem with this move, as I will elaborate below, is that it theoretically allows for confusing sense objects with the real object of worship, namely, God. In other words, it opens the door for the pantheist, animist, or otherwise idolatrous veneration of created objects and human constructions, and thus brings us back to the problem of proving that religious experiences are not subjective or irrational.

This brings us to the next concern, namely, that Wynn’s account of religious experience does not seem tied by necessity to the Christian God—or any other God for that matter—as its object. Although Wynn admittedly notes that the Incarnation of Christ serves to affirm the value of the sense world—as any individual would do in the course of a religious experience—there is nothing in his account to suggest that a belief in God Incarnate is essential to explaining the type of religious experience he describes.[[43]](#endnote-43) While an appreciation for nature and other forms of aesthetic experience may be means of valuing what the Incarnation has supremely valued for Christians, in other words, there is no reason why such appreciation and experiences cannot be attained through other concepts of God, or even through no concept of God at all, as in the case of those who simply enjoy nature, art, and architecture for their own sake.

Although Wynn seems right to register the significance of the emotions that generally precede and then accompany conversion and religious experiences more generally, I have tried to explain how his habit of limiting religious to sensory or aesthetic experiences exposes his account to the key objections which undermine the validity of religious experiences, to say nothing of their capacity to provide proof for God. In what follows, therefore, I will endeavour to develop an account in broadly Thomistic terms that throws into relief the potential of all human experiences to serve as mediators of religious experience. As I will demonstrate, this account not only allows for the sort of sensory or aesthetic experiences that Wynn sees as an excellent means of experiencing God. It pre-empts the two standard objections to religious experience and to the sort of theistic proof that may be derived therefrom.

**A Broadly Thomistic Conception of Mediated Religious Experience**

By contrast to many other accounts of religious experience, this one begins with a discussion not of the experiences themselves but of the conception of God that would ideally inform them. According to Aquinas, whose Christian outlook concurs on this score with many other monotheist religions or religious philosophies, God or the transcendent being always completely is what he is, which is all there is, to wit, the highest good that exceeds and in that sense presupposes the possibility of all goods. So construed, God is unconstrained by space, and the finitude that accompanies it, by time, and the necessity of developing in time, or any other feature proper to ordinary objects and circumstances.[[44]](#endnote-44) As such, he is neither like nor unlike the objects of human knowledge and cannot be reduced to or conflated with them. In Aquinas’ terms, he is simple.

When this insight shapes a person’s way of thinking about ordinary things, it can have a highly significant effect. For the application of the idea of God as the supreme good, whether consciously or unwittingly, corrects a human tendency to ascribe absolute significance to objects of immediate human sense experience, at least for a particular purpose or in a specific respect, to do for example with the promotion of a particular cause, or the pursuit of given course in life.[[45]](#endnote-45) This tendency is natural, on account of the limits of space and time, which render it practically impossible for human persons to avoid operating on the assumption that present circumstances and attainments are the be-all and end-all of human existence. Although natural, this tendency is irrational, because it leads to thinking about and dealing with ordinary things in a way that is inconsistent their own spatio-temporal constraints and corresponding inability to make or break human happiness.

The first and most fundamental way in which a person may irrationally attribute inordinate significance to ordinary realities concerns the primary object of human knowledge, namely, the self.[[46]](#endnote-46) In the absence of any sense of a supreme good, the worth of the self may be over-estimated, as in a hubristic self-image, which presupposes an excessive sense of personal ability, importance or entitlement. Where this self-image fails, alternatively, the worth of the self may be under-estimated, in keeping with a deficient sense of personal ability, importance or entitlement, or false humility.

At the most basic level, the knowledge of God as the highest good affords resources for rectifying these extremes of the vice of pride, because it contests the idea, underlying pride, that human beings can transcend normal human limits in terms of their powers or capacities, and should be treated as worthless if they fail to do so. Whereas an excessive sense of self-worth might lead a person to pursue inappropriate areas of work and inquiry, and a poor self-image might produce lethargy with regard to exercising and even identifying personal abilities, for instance, the knowledge of God provides accountability to come to terms with, and make the most of, the finite capacities all human beings have, no more, no less.

In that sense, the knowledge of God as highest good can shape a person’s whole sense of direction in life, informing the daily activities that correspond to this sense. At the same time, it makes a significant difference to the way ordinary activities are undertaken. When it comes to the pursuit of knowledge or understanding, for example, religious belief as I have defined it has the power to curb any tendency to reduce the truth to a particular idea or theory consistent with a personal agenda, thereby closing the mind to the discovery of other truths. In addition to enabling us to avoid the extremes of excess and deficiency, or irrationality, in the intellectual context where we pursue the good of truth, religious belief makes it possible to avoid these extremes in evaluating any good whatever.

The goods in question may include relationships, education, power, possessions, fame, and so on.[[47]](#endnote-47) Indeed, belief has the power to check the skewed, deluded, or irrational perspective on reality that results from over or under-estimating the value of such goods and fosters instead the balanced perspective on objects and circumstances that makes it possible to appreciate and engage with them in ways that are consistent with their own, and one’s own, integrity. In short, it enacts an ability to deal with things, or at least to explain how to do so, in a way that Aquinas would consider moral.

By supporting rationality at both the intellectual and moral levels, therefore, the knowledge of God allows for correcting the notions about what is true or good that would have sprung from a false understanding and love of the self, whether excessive or deficient. It is worth noting that it may serve this purpose even in the context of dealing with circumstances that have no intrinsic worth of their own but nevertheless form a regular part of human experience. Here, I have in mind evils, such as natural disasters, physical sufferings, and death, among other exigencies of natural life. Arguably, the knowledge of God provides the tools to assess these evils as it helps us evaluate all things, namely, through the lens of the belief that no temporal circumstance is absolutely decisive for human happiness. In that sense, the knowledge of God makes it possible to bring something valuable, to wit, the good of a morally virtuous life, even out of experiences, which would otherwise detract from value or goodness of life.

Although it is not possible to know God directly by these means, it is possible to experience him indirectly or through the mediation of the things that are considered in the light of the knowledge of his supreme goodness. This indirect knowledge or experience of God comes by way of recognising the difference that belief in him makes to the way ordinary realities, including the self, are perceived, rationally rather than irrationally. In that sense, the experience of God is not a separate form of experience, but the formality or framework in which ordinary experiences are pursued.

With continued practice, therefore, it may eventually become possible to form a relatively consistent habit of operating under the formality of faith, such that the two forms of experience become interchangeable without remainder. According to Aquinas, striving along these lines to perceive all things in the light of God gradually predisposes a person ultimately to see God himself in the life to come, in much the same way that seeing the world in brighter levels of sunlight adjusts the eyes to the brilliance of vision in broad daylight.[[48]](#endnote-48)

While I have only discussed so far the ways God can be experienced at the intellectual and moral levels, there is a nonetheless important place for the senses—and the feelings or ‘value-judgments’ attributed to sense objects—in this account, not unlike Wynn’s. In this instance, however, the role of the senses is understood in terms of the way that sensory perceptions, and feelings about sense objects, respectively guide human thoughts about the world, and human desires about how to pursue knowledge and live within it—or better, are permitted to offer guidance on the basis of a belief in God. On Aquinas’ understanding, in fact, every sensory experience results in the production of a ‘mental image’ of whatever object is experienced and a corresponding feeling or value judgment about the possible relevance of the object imaged to the purposes of the knowing agent.

In turn, the mind and will are informed by these mental images (*phantasmata*) and feelings or ‘passions’, respectively, in their collaborative effort to determine how to think and act appropriately, in the intellectual and moral contexts, respectively. When these two faculties fail to function properly in these contexts, they do so as a result of allowing passions for particular objects—like an ideology, a career, or a relationship—to rule the work of the mind and will rather than the other way around. This overthrow of the intellectual and volitional faculties by the senses is in turn a product of forgetting God as the highest good. By advocating efforts to bring belief in God to bear in the mental and volitional effort to decide how to deal with the objects of passion, consequently, Aquinas is far from advocating the expulsion of the passions or the denigration of the senses more generally.

Rather, he seeks to foster passion in the true sense of the term, that is, passion that promotes the intellectual and moral flourishing of human beings. Such flourishing is hindered when objects of passion are pursued on the assumption that they can afford a lasting or complete sense of satisfaction, which their fleetingness and finitude ineluctably prevents them from providing. Thus, Aquinas helps his readers avoid the disappointment and even devastation this pursuit is bound to engender by construing the senses as a resource for experiencing God only insofar as they serve as means to the end of enabling an ordinary human intellectual and moral life that is governed by belief in God.

As this confirms, his account expands the scope of religious experience far beyond that of sense experience itself to include the whole range of human life pursuits and experiences. That is not to say that Aquinas’ account precludes the possibility of encountering God through the explicitly sensory or aesthetic experiences Wynn discusses, however. In these cases, the experience of God simply arises from the effort to bring belief in God to bear in the aesthetic as in the intellectual and moral contexts. That is to say, it is derived not from a direct and even palpable encounter with God in the beauty of the world or the arts and architecture, whereby human beings imitate and celebrate that beauty.

Instead, it comes from realizing that God is far superior to the beautiful object experienced, such as a sunset or a Gothic cathedral. As in the intellectual and moral contexts, consequently, the proper object of religious experience in the aesthetic realm is not God himself but something in the world, like a sunset or cathedral, which is seen differently than it might otherwise have been, on account of the belief that there is something greater than all things in the world, namely, God.

On this showing, God cannot be confused with the sunset, such that the sunset is worshipped instead of him. Nor is it possible to ascribe so much significance to sensory experiences as to become lost in the sensory world and thus lose touch with reality in ways that detract from ordinary life and thriving. This account avoids both of these problems, which are endemic to Wynn’s, inasmuch as it situates the senses within a broader framework in which they guide—or in the case of aesthetic experiences, are guided by—human thoughts about the world and desires concerning life within it, which are themselves formed by a belief in God which makes it possible accurately to estimate the value of all things.

By casting all human experiences as possible mediators of religious experience, this framework simultaneously, and significantly, renders religious experiences intrinsically public. After all, decisions about how to act, desires to act in certain ways, and even aesthetic experiences that are shaped by these decisions and desires, unlike passions or feelings, can be shared with others. This is true even in cases where individuals have reached the same decisions, and cultivated similar desires through different sensory experiences, or allowed different sensory experiences to be influenced by similar decisions and desires.

In that light, the religious experiences individuals enjoy as they find ways rightly to estimate the truth, goodness or beauty of things in the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic realms, respectively, are not only subject to wider scrutiny and therefore immune to the objection that they are purely subjective. For this very reason, they may also afford a sort of evidence or proof for the rationality of belief in God and the reality of his existence, which is in principle accessible or intelligible to all persons who have the opportunity to observe these experiences. This evidence consists in the profoundly positive and ‘rationalizing’ effect belief in God can be seen to have on individuals dealing with ordinary intellectual, moral, and aesthetic affairs.

Such proof is obviously not definitive in the sense that it establishes the reality of God in the way the reality of empirical objects can be established. Since God subsists beyond human comprehension, and is neither like nor unlike any object of human knowledge, definitive proof cannot be obtained in this life. As an alternative to it, of course, Plantinga and Wynn have provided the sort of circular or self-referential proofs, which have been shown to be relevant only to those who already believe and thus to fail as proofs for those who do not as yet believe. By contrast, the present account offers a kind of proof that is neither circular nor unavailable, and becomes available through efforts to discern the difference belief in God can make in navigating experiences that are in principle common to all human beings.

In Aquinas’ account, however, the God in question is not just any God. For contrary to Plantinga’s reading of Aquinas, the one supreme or highest good is by definition unknowable unless he makes himself definitively known as such. That is not to say that it is impossible to postulate the existence of God through inferences from the natural order. While Aquinas affirms this possibility, he acknowledges that such inferences remain merely speculative apart from the self-revelation of the God who alone can know himself in full.[[49]](#endnote-49)

On this basis, he insists that God cannot be conclusively known apart from the Incarnation of God the Son.[[50]](#endnote-50) The Son revealed God to humankind by exhibiting his divine nature, which involves expressing the Spirit (life, mind, personality) of God in view of the ultimate goodness of God the Father, in the context of dealing with ordinary human affairs. By these means, the Son further revealed the Triune nature of God.[[51]](#endnote-51) Since human beings were made to image this Trinity by living their lives or expressing their spirits in light of the Father’s glory, however, Aquinas does not see any conflict between the Son’s divine and human natures.

To the contrary, he argues that the divine nature positioned the Son to accomplish infallibly, and with the unlimited-ness or universality that characterizes all God’s acts, the work that is proper to human beings.[[52]](#endnote-52) In this connection, the divine nature enabled the Son to make a way for all human beings to overcome sin—above all, pride—with a view to glorifying, and thus experiencing, God, through every single instance in which the knowledge of God as the supreme good is brought to bear, after the example of Christ.

As these arguments suggest, the doctrines of Incarnation and Trinity are essential in this account to a full explanation of the nature and knowableness of the God that is encountered through religious experience. That is not to invalidate the religious experiences of those who affirm the reality of God or the transcendent without acknowledging him as Incarnate or Triune. Still, it is to forge a necessary link that is missing from the accounts of both Plantinga and Wynn between religious experience, or at least a robust explanation of the necessary conditions for such experience, to the intended, Christian God. It is to show how a broadly Thomistic account evades the second, as well as the first, of the two main objections to arguments from religious experience.

Most importantly, however, the foregoing discussion has aimed to articulate an account of religious experience with which all persons, not least those who are religious, can in principle identify. By defining religious experience as potentially mediated through all kinds of ordinary experience, in fact, the present account has affirmed the religious experiences ordinary religious persons may have been enjoying all along, without realizing they were religious experiences. For this very reason, it may provide a new cause or motivation for seeking out religious experiences that were formerly supposed to lie beyond the purview of most persons. By describing religious and ordinary experience in convertible terms, in summary, the broadly Thomistic account outlined above may allow for more regular religious experience and thus for a more widespread and relevant testimony to Christian faith.

**Thomas Aquinas on Immediate Religious Experience**

In light of the discussion above, it remains to consider whether there is any room in this account for an immediate or direct experience of God. At first glance, Aquinas’ thought may seem to exclude the possibility of such an experience, since he emphatically contends that human beings are unable to attain knowledge except on the basis of sense experiences, and God is not a sense object.[[53]](#endnote-53) Although Aquinas certainly thinks it is proper to human beings ultimately to know God himself, he insists on these grounds that the direct knowledge of God is largely unattainable in the present life. For the knowledge of the world in light of the knowledge of God as the highest good, and the knowledge of God himself as such a good, is mutually exclusive, in much the same way that it is impossible to look at the light of the sun, and look at things in its light, at the same time.[[54]](#endnote-54)

On this basis, Aquinas further argues that the transportation of the mind outside of the senses that is involved in direct religious and mystical experiences, which he describes as forms of ‘rapture’, can have only one of two causes.[[55]](#endnote-55) One such cause would be insanity or delusion, which debase or corrupt the integrity of nature. Another possible cause would be God himself, elevating the human mind to a state towards which it is ultimately ordered, albeit in advance of the time at which that state would normally be achieved. While Aquinas recognizes that this elevation might be supposed to violate human nature, in the sense that it is impossible to achieve by human beings operating of their own accord, he insists that no violation occurs, precisely because rapture is consistent with the integrity of human nature in its final form.

Though such raptures—much like miracles—exceed natural possibilities, consequently, Aquinas does not see them as unnatural strictly speaking, because they bestow upon human nature blessings for which it is predisposed, but which are presently out of reach apart from an act of special divine intervention. The unqualifiedly beneficial and therefore naturally desirable nature of the goods bestowed by raptures and miracles is the arguable reason why these events would rarely be unwelcome. Since the events in question are nonetheless extraordinary, however, Aquinas fittingly explains them with reference to the supernatural end of human nature, which creates a sort of ‘loophole’ through which direct religious or mystical experiences may occur in the present life.

In elaborating on the nature of these experiences, Aquinas speaks of the way the mind may be elevated “to a vision in the imagination…as happened to Peter and to John the Evangelist in the Apocalypse.’[[56]](#endnote-56) Thus, he acknowledges a form of direct religious experience in which something like sensory perception, if not sensory perception itself, is still active, and serves as the means through which God conveys a message to an individual about something they should do or how they should live. For instance, Peter’s vision, recounted in Acts 10:9-22, helped him know how Christians should reckon with all that Israel previously would have regarded as ‘unclean’. Likewise, John’s vision led him to write the book of Revelation, which seeks to prepare readers for the end times.

In addition to these types of experience, Aquinas explains, there is another in which the mind is transported out of the senses and beyond all that it can think or imagine to a purely intellectual vision of God. In his understanding, this sort of mystical vision occurs when ‘the understanding sees God through his essence,’ as in the example of St Paul, who was transported into the ‘third heaven’ where he presumably saw nothing but God. In the course of describing Paul's experience, Aquinas notes that, by contrast to the blessed in heaven, who see God as a matter of permanency, or without qualification, the Apostle saw God only in passing.[[57]](#endnote-57) On his account, the reason for the fleeting nature of this encounter had to do with the fact that Paul ‘was not enraptured to become blessed, but to be a witness of beatitude.’[[58]](#endnote-58)

In expanding on this claim, Aquinas states that the Apostle was given a vision of God’s essence in order that he might gain implicit understanding of the matters that concerned him in life, and how to deal with them to the glory of God, so that he might in turn apply this understanding on returning to his senses.[[59]](#endnote-59) While celebrating the Mass in 1273, Aquinas himself received such a vision, as a result of which he described all his work as ‘straw’, and ceased to write another word until his death three months later. On a separate occasion, St Benedict of Nursia enjoyed a vision of the whole world gathered under one brilliant beam of light that later helped him see how to address the enormous challenges the Church faced following the fall of the Roman Empire, not least by founding of the Benedictine Order.[[60]](#endnote-60)

As these examples indicate, direct religious experiences are ordered for Aquinas towards facilitating human efforts to strike the mean between excess and deficiency in extenuating circumstances that stretch the powers of human discernment when it comes to determining how to think and act appropriately with respect to ordinary human affairs. They are means to an end rather than ends in themselves, which must have positive practical implications for human society that can be observed and judged openly as rational and consistent with human flourishing.

For this very reason, direct religious experiences cannot rightly be regarded as the proper object of a religious quest in their own right. Indeed, this kind of pursuit fosters a world-abnegating desire to experience God alone, which is ironically incongruent with the purposes of a God who intervenes in natural affairs only to affirm and enhance the natural life of his creatures. Such escapism, as it were, in turn renders individuals vulnerable to confusing their own heightened emotions are imaginations with religious experiences that only God can grant. In other words, it increases the chances of experiences, and human lives organized around and as a result of experiences, that are the product of insanity, hallucination, or sheer human fabrication, rather than divine intervention.

In this connection, the pursuit of direct religious experience as the main or only means of knowing God allows for the possibility of ‘rapturous’ experiences that have an outright negative effect on those raptured, and through them, on others. That is not to rule out the possibility of ‘traumatic’ raptures, such as were experienced by St John of the Cross, for instance. But it is to affirm that any ‘dark night of the soul’ needs to be judged in terms of whether it brings about repentance leading to renewed life—thus enhancing life in the real world rather than causing a loss of contact with it.

To this end, Aquinas situates direct religious experience within the larger context of indirect or mediated—ordinary—religious experience, which makes it possible to determine whether unmediated religious experiences are consistent with the divine purpose of enabling human beings to appreciate normal instances of goodness, truth, and beauty, and thus to embrace fully the life he intended for them in the world. It is the lack of this larger context that evidently depletes accounts like Plantinga’s of the litmus test that is needed to determine whether any given direct experience represents a valid experience of God.

Although Wynn has attempted to compensate for the deficiencies of many such accounts in exploring the possibility of experiencing God by ordinary aesthetic means, his account has also been shown to lack this larger context and thus to fall subject to the same objections which detract from the credibility of direct accounts of religious experience. By contrast, a Thomistic account of the way religious experience may be mediated through ordinary experience transforms all fields of human experience, including the mystical and aesthetic, into possible sites for knowing God and making him known in the most relevant and thus profound ways.

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**Notes**

1. Lash presents some compatible insights in *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), as do the contributors to a volume edited by Boeve and De Maeseneer, entitled, *Religious Experience and Contemporary Theological Epistemology*. See especially Boeve’s contribution on ‘Theology and the Interruption of Experience’, 11-40. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Gellman, ‘Mysticism and Religious Experience’, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, 265-343. In this context, McGinn discusses many of the different interpretations of mysticism that have been offered by philosophers, theologians, and psychologists. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. On this, see Schumacher, *Divine Illumination,* and McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief,* 172. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 175. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 178. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 179. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 182. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid.,183. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 208. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 287. Although Plantinga claims Aquinas as a key source for his A/C model, his account of the knowledge of God seems quite distinct from that of Aquinas and far more closely related to the theory of Aquinas’ Franciscan contemporary, Bonaventure. See Lydia Schumacher, *Divine Illumination: The History and Future of Augustine’s Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief,* 259. See also Plantinga’s *God, Freedom and Evil* for his development of a version of the ontological proof for God’s existence. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 289. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Swinburne, ‘Review of *Warranted Christian Belief* by Alvin Plantinga’. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Beilby, ‘Plantinga’s Model of Warranted Christian Belief’; see also Baker, *Tayloring Reformed Epistemology*. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 22 [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., chapter 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place.* [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Brown, *God and Grace of Body.*  [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Brown, *God and Mystery in Words.* [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., chapter 5. Here, Wynn discusses some of the ways in which this can happen, namely, through experiencing the presence of God in nature (129ff.), by recognizing the contingency of creation, through the experience of mystery (145), or the fact that creation is independent of human concerns and interests, and through the experience of unity in the sense world. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. See Wynn, *God and Goodness.* [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Wynn, *Renewing the Senses*, chapter 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Ibid., I.12-13. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., II-II.2.162. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., II-I.2.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid., I.12. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., I.1.1: ‘Even as regards those [truths](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15073a.htm) about [God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm) which [human](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09580c.htm) [reason](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12673b.htm) could have discovered, it was [necessary](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10733a.htm) that [man](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09580c.htm) should be taught by a [divine revelation](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13001a.htm); because the [truth](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15073a.htm) about [God](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm) such as [reason](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12673b.htm) could discover, would only be [known](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08673a.htm) by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many [errors](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05525a.htm).’ [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid., III.10-12. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Ibid., I.32. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III.10-15. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Aquinas, *De Veritate* 13.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Ibid., 13.3. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Aquinas, *De Veritate* 13; *Summa Theologiae* II-II.175. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Aquinas, *De Veritate* 13.2, reply to objection 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Aquinas, *De Veritate* 13.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Aquinas, *De Veritate* 13.3, reply to objection 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Aquinas, *De Veritate* 13.3, reply to objection 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Gregory the Great, *The Life of St. Benedict*, 2.35. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)