


BOOK REVIEW

Paul K. Moser, *Understanding Religious Experience: From Conviction to Life's Meaning*

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Are religious experiences a special kind of experiences? Can those experiences serve as evidence for a religious view? Or are they human experiences that are ‘deemed religious’, as Ann Taves has it in her *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (Princeton University Press, 2009)? That is, are we dealing with a religious interpretation of ordinary experiences? On the topic of religious experience, Paul K. Moser and Chad Meister collected various contributions in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 2020). In the book under review here, *Understanding Religious Experience: From Conviction to Life's Meaning*, Moser presents his own view and arguments.

‘Religious Experience Characterized’, the first chapter, is the heart of the project. Moser does not begin with exceptional experiences, but rather with a consideration of human life. As humans, we find ourselves in a maze of options for action. In making choices and going forward, we engage with morality and questions of meaning and purpose. Morality and meaning, as a response to the question why we do what we do, might be taken in a limited sense, in regard to specific actions. Moser argues that one may also speak of the purpose of the maze, of overall value, of overarching meaning – and thus assume ‘something transcending the maze that gives it such meaning’ (5). The book’s subtitle could be taken to signal this move, as Moser draws on the experience of practical and moral, self-involving conviction to argue for life’s meaning. Though Immanuel Kant appears only in the seventh of these nine chapters, there is some affinity with his later philosophy here, as religion is treated as related intrinsically to practical reason rather than as a form of theoretical reason.

The source of overarching meaning may be envisaged as personal, as in monotheism, but other traditions, such as Buddhism and Neoplatonism, ‘hold that reality is ultimately value-laden and purposive, even if God does not exist’ (14). Whatever the specific form, religious experience and meaning serve to integrate our experiences and beliefs, giving a sense of direction to humans, in the face of a divided self and life. In subsequent chapters, Moser considers six different religious orientations while developing his general argument. Two are non-theistic: the Buddhist practice exemplified by Prince Gautama, seeking awakening, and the cultivation of relational virtue by Confucius. Within Hinduism, Moser considers the emphasis on adoration as found in the figure of Krishna according to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a theistic form of religion. Both in Judaism and in

Christianity the focus is on atonement; in the first case via adherence to the Law and in the second, exemplified by the theology of Paul, in Christ. In Islam, as conveyed by Muhammad, meaning is associated with submission to God. Drawing on those six case studies, he discusses how religious experiences are interpreted in, and shaped by, the context of various traditions and how religious experiences, again with all their variety in form and substance, are evoked by religious practices – from meditation to daily prayers and more.

After having thus introduced his view of religious experience, as a general issue and exemplified by six different religious orientations, Moser comes to ways of understanding and explaining religious experiences. In chapter 4, the central question is whether such experiences can be understood naturalistically, prioritizing the non-intentional physical world, and thereby be explained away. A problem with such a physicalist naturalism is the existence of agents such as ourselves; these do not fit well in a physicalist view of reality. And any particular experience of pain is personal, not public, but nonetheless genuine. According to Moser, accepting the natural sciences does not imply the acceptance of methodological or ontological naturalism. Psychological explanations, discussed in the next chapter, acknowledge the presence of intentional actors. Some thinkers, such as Sigmund Freud, assert that believers are not clear about their own motives for religious commitment, and thus conclude that religion is an illusion. Such psychological explanations do not do justice to religious lives; naturalistic and psychological reductions claim too much.

Reducing religious experience to morality, treating it as coded language in morality, does not do justice to actual religions either, as is argued here in relation to the six cases. Religion is more than ethics. But, and here he draws on Kant and others, one can moralize religion without reduction. There may be morality without experiencing our lives in the world in religious terms, but there is an alternative option: a religious view, an overarching sense of meaning in particular religious terms, as inspiration for a moral way of life. If so, our experience of moral goodness might serve as evidence for a religious view that supports morality.

In the penultimate seventh chapter, he develops this as a cognitive approach, as delirating knowledge, the knowledge that we are led by God, as discerning God. The main test Moser proposes is in the orientation religious beliefs evoke, which should be an attitude of *agapē*, disinterested love. Unlike the discussion of the framework for understanding religious experience in the previous chapters, here Moser explicitly opts for a monotheistic, Christian view. In the final chapter, Moser considers potential cognitive defeaters for this theistic view. His moral approach, which associates God with perfect goodness, may be challenged by invoking the problem of evil. But why should we expect that God would have revealed to us the ultimate purpose of allowing evil? Another challenge is pluralism, but from a theistic perspective, one may hold that other people are also led by the good God, even though they do not understand their own lives in those terms.

This book is an original and relevant contribution to reflections on religious experience, and on religion more generally. A strength, in my opinion, is that rather than considering extraordinary happenings, such as miracles, the basis for a religious view of our lives, he focuses on our human sense of moral conviction, of conscience. Thus, the entry to the discussion is in practical philosophy rather than in theoretical philosophy. However, I am not fully convinced that once one has made this choice, there is sufficient basis to move on to the discourse of theoretical philosophy with terms such as evidence and cognition. The transition from practical to theoretical philosophy seems to necessitate playing down science more than I find convincing; an alternative would have been to think through the coexistence of science and a science-informed understanding of reality with morality in a more persistent Kantian fashion.

A second strength is that Moser avoids an atomistic approach, which would ask of particular individual experiences whether those are religious or not. He opts for a more holistic approach, how we understand our lives in terms of overarching meaning, or, as is acknowledged as a genuine option, how we do without such a teleological orientation. This is also a book in which the author prioritizes a Christian view while having a conceptual framework that allows for the plurality of religions.

This philosophical analysis may be of genuine interest to systematic theologians, philosophers of religion, and philosophers who think through issues of moral motivation and justification. It could be a core text for a course in philosophy of religion, preferably alongside other voices as that helps readers see what is particular to this well-developed philosophical approach.