

The “Relationship” with Jesus Christ as a Template for Christian Religious Experience

“A relationship with Jesus Christ”¹, is a term often used to summarize the Evangelical religious experience. This paper examines the idea of ARJC and Christian Religious Experience(s)², and will show that the phrase ARJC serves as a template through which Evangelicals interpret their RE’s.

The phrase ARJC most likely developed during the revivalist era. Preachers of the time stressed the difference between merely *knowing about God* and *knowing God personally*. According to preachers like Finney, to only know *about* God was to have an intellectual faith, while knowing God *directly* was to have a faith of the heart³. Today, this phrase is a unifying characteristic of North American Evangelicalism in the following ways:

- It is the primary description, or shorthand, used by North American Evangelicals to describe salvation
- Its use is trans-denominational⁴
- It denotes shared perspectives concerning the elements of true Christian piety, namely:
 - The individual believer’s commitment to Christ
 - The imminence of Christ’s presence in daily living
 - The immediate resources of prayer, Scripture, and the Holy Spirit (of Christ) as spiritual aids

What is ARJC? It is often spoken of as if it were a simple concept in devotional literature or popular apologetic material. According to Josh McDowell, “True Christianity is simply about entering into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.⁵” For many believers this appears to be a simple concept to grasp; it is clear to most Christians what having a relationship entails. However, it is difficult to understand how the relationship that ‘Mr. X has with Mr. Y’ can be compared to ARJC. The

¹ In this paper the phrase is referred to as ‘ARJC’.

² In this paper the phrase is referred to as ‘RE’.

³ According to Finney, *The Way Of Salvation Sermon Collection*, <http://thebiblerevival.com/teachings/books/0060/> [public domain] by Charles G. Finney “ . . . heart faith, on the other hand, is true confidence, and involves an earnest committal of one's self and interests, to the demands of the truth believed. It is precisely such a trust as we have in those to whom we cling in confidence.”

⁴ Though there may be shades of nuance concerning what is referred to, there is most likely enough similarity in meaning to avoid the need of clarifying any differences in emphases amongst denominations or believers.

⁵ Josh McDowell, *More than a Carpenter*, Living Books, 1986.

elements that constitute or indicate earthly relationships become difficult to perceive when these elements are related to ARJC. These elements include the following:

- Knowing
- Speaking
- Listening
- Observing
- Responding
- Growing

What does it mean to “know” Christ? Does the believer know Christ in the manner in which Mr. X can be said to know Mr. Y? Coleman, although he is a Christian, admits that it is problematic to speak of “knowing” Christ since there can be no *earthly* knowing of Christ⁶. That is to say, although the phrase “Mr. X knows Mr. Y” would be easily accepted and grasped by most, it becomes more difficult to understand what this means when “Mr. A” speaks of knowing a person that is not physically on this planet (and never has been during “Mr. A’s” lifetime).

The element of speech or communication is also difficult to envision. Traditionally, the Christian understanding of speech between God/Christ and believers is that that believers speak to Christ through prayer, while Christ speaks to them primarily through the words of Scripture⁷. However this spiritual view of speech distorts a normal understanding of speech: If Christ is truly human, why doesn’t he speak directly to his followers (face to face)? Moreover, why are his words addressed in a general rather than a specific manner? When a person reads the Bible, they are reading the same words (receiving the same message⁸) as other Christians. No doubt some would argue that they receive a personal message, in the manner that a work of poetry or music may “say” different things to different people. However, this difference in meaning arises more from the differing psychological states of people, based on their experiences, etc. The difference

⁶ Robert Coleman, *Issues of Theological Warfare: Evangelicals and Liberals*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, 23.

⁷ I realize that there are other ways that some Christians claim Christ speaks to them, including: direct, audible voices, a sense of divine guidance, etc. Since there are many differing views concerning these manners of speech, I have avoided them. The belief that God speaks to his people through the Scriptures is virtually universal among Evangelicals.

⁸ Of course, this is a philosophically difficult expression to use. Suffice to say that its ‘simple use’ “gets the point across.”

in “meaning” is subjective, rather than objective. It would seem strange to claim a *personal* relationship with someone if the claimant only received the same correspondence as everyone else.

To this type of examination there are two objections that most commonly arise. The first is an appeal to the historicity of Christ⁹. However, not all would acknowledge that Christ was ever an historical figure. For example, Robert Eisenman’s work, *James the Brother of Jesus*, advances the notion that our portrait of Jesus in the Greek gospels seems largely to be a combination of Pauline anti-*halakha*, and accounts taken from various messianic and prophetic figures in Josephus¹⁰. If Eisenman’s hypothesis concerning the development of the early church is correct, the appeal to a historical Christ is unpersuasive.

The second common objection to the claim that ARJC is problematic is the defence that appeals to the uniqueness of ARJC. The argument states that believers do indeed have ARJC in that they talk with Jesus, hear him speak, see him, respond to him, etc. The difference lies in the meaning of the elements. The definition of knowing (etc) has been changed. Thus, according to Frame (etc), language referring to the elements of ARJC is necessarily analogical¹¹. This approach is understandable in itself, but does it bring clarity to the concept of ARJC? If the elements have changed their meaning when applied to ARJC, and if the elements serve as markers that help define, lend the ability to be recognized, and serve as markers of where relationships exist, how is it possible to know what ARJC actually means? From a distance, ARJC stands as a rough analogy, but upon closer inspection it is a difficult concept to grasp because the rules governing the language surrounding the elements of a relationship have completely changed. If Mr. X knows what he means when he says that he speaks to Mr. Y, how will he know, how will he recognize if he is speaking to Mr. Z when the definitions have changed?

Others have sought different or complimentary explanations of ARJC. It is often spoken of in terms that suggest believers are in direct spiritual communication with Christ. While issues with this language have

⁹ Indeed there is often the assumption that the historicity of Christ can serve as a common ground on which the believer and non-believer may dialogue. Take, for instance, the famous ‘trilemma’ of C. S. Lewis (*Mere Christianity*, Harper Collins, Glasgow, 1984, 52.). Of course, if Christ was not an historical figure, the force of Lewis’ argument is lost.

¹⁰ Robert Eisenman, *James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Viking Penguin, 1997.

¹¹ See for example, his account of this in *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, P&R Publishing, Philipsburg, 2002.

already been raised, Price wonders at the coherence of the idea itself. He suggests what Christians are really speaking of is a type of New Age ‘channelling’ that makes Christ akin to a “disembodied ‘spirit guide’ or ‘space brother’”¹².

Christians speak also of a sense of transcendence or awe, or simply an innate sense of the reality of God¹³. The Christian has an immediate awareness or knowledge of God’s presence in his or her life. According to Craig, “you can know God exists wholly apart from arguments simply by immediately experiencing him. This is the way people in the Bible knew God.¹⁴” This type of expression could be echoed by many people. That is the problem. If ARJC means experiencing God in a direct fashion, the uniqueness of the expression as referring to something that is distinctly Christian is gone. It would be impossible to tell whether a person’s experience of their deity was unique, or showed any features that separated the experience from anyone else’s experience. Since it is not possible to experience another person’s experience, there would be no way of comparing (for the sake of determining the validity of the experiences) the spiritual experiences of a Christian, Mormon, or a Hindu¹⁵. Certainly there are many who would claim that they have directly experienced God, but would label their God with a name other than Jesus Christ.

It appears that the clearest thing that can be said about ARJC is that the terminology serves as a *template* through which Christians interpret their Religious Experience(s) [RE]. Here it helps to borrow (and twist) the language of Wilhem Herrmann. According to Herrmann, Christians experience the power and love of God only through the New Testament’s account of the “inner life” of Jesus¹⁶. Herrmann points out that

¹² Robert M. Price, *Beyond Born Again*, Apocryphal Books, Upper Montclair, 1993, 68.

¹³ Pinnock, picking up from Paul in Romans 2, suggests as much in an older work of his, *Set Forth Your Case: Studies in Christian Apologetics*, The Craig Press, Nutley, 1968, 76 – 77.

¹⁴ William Lane Craig, quoted from a debate in Ottawa, Ontario, 1999.

¹⁵ Or for that matter, even someone who had ingested some sort of hallucinogenic. Listen to the account of Hudson Smith: “I actually conducted an experiment on that in which I took snippets or paragraphs from classic mystical experiences, and then descriptions of experiences under the psychedelics which were mystical. Of course not all experiences under those have that character, but there were many of those that did. And then I shuffled them up and gave them to people who were knowledgeable about mysticism, and asked them to sort them in what they thought . . . (a)nd there was no reliability in their predictions,” transcript from *Thinking Allowed* television series.

¹⁶ Wilhelm Herrmann, *The Communion of the Christian with God*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971, p. 283.

this cannot be called ARJC¹⁷. This view may help the reader think of ARJC as a functional term that Christians use to describe the common elements of the Christian tradition;

- Prayer
- Reading the Scriptures
- Attending church
- Evangelizing, serving (etc)
- Having a sense of transcendence, awe, otherness (etc)

Obviously from this point of view, the Christian claim to uniqueness that is embodied in the ARJC language is gone. If this is true, *there is nothing external that can validate the claimed uniqueness of the internal Christian RE.*

Does this mean a religious claim from RE is necessarily invalid? Some like McGrath have attempted to ground the reality of Christian Religious Experience(s) [CRE] in the school of concrete realism. According to McGrath, this enables one to develop a ‘scientific theology.’ In doing so, McGrath attempts to root the development of, and engagement in theology with historical science. Given the success of the scientific method (which allows one to posit that reality exists apart from the observer, though still acknowledging the observer’s role in shaping and understanding the world), McGrath argues that the understanding of the world as ‘real’ enables a theology that shares the characteristics of the physical sciences¹⁸. Writing against theological idealism, McGrath posits four characteristics of a scientific theology, saying that it:

1. takes the form of a coherent response to an existing reality,
2. is an *a posteriori* discipline,
3. takes account of the unique character of its object, and
4. offers an explanation of its reality¹⁹.

¹⁷ Herrmann, 281.

¹⁸ Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology: Volume II - Reality*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2002, 245.

¹⁹ McGrath, 246 – McGrath offers a further characteristic of his own (that scientific theology is *christocentric*), but this point is not germane to the present discussion.

McGrath offers these criteria for a scientific theology without explaining, for example, why one should see such parallels between the pursuit of science and theology. How can a scientific theology be falsified?²⁰ In what sense is a scientific theology a response to the world?²¹ How can theology be understood as an *a posteriori* discipline? The matter gets even more confusing when one reads McGrath as he explains that, “[a] scientific theology takes the view that theological reflection paradoxically begins with an actual knowledge of God, and the light of this, proceeds to inquire *as to how this knowledge might be possible*”²².

Assuming that the belief in God is an inherently theological belief, or the statement “God exists” an inherently theological statement, it is difficult to understand how scientific theology can be an *a posteriori* discipline. For McGrath, this scientific view is the ideal mediation between foundationalist and coherence theories of reality, and thusly provides a grounding-point for the reality of RE.

Plantinga takes a more intriguing approach to the issue of RE. According to Plantinga, RE functions as a basic belief – that is, a belief that ‘just is.’ Basic Beliefs [BB] are those beliefs that we do not feel compelled to justify. According to Plantinga:

I simply see that they are true, and accept them. I accept many propositions in this basic way; that there is snow in my backyard, for example, and that it is still white. . . [t]he propositions I accept in the basic way are, so to say, starting points for my thought²³.

For Plantinga, these beliefs function as the foundations for his “structure of beliefs.”²⁴ Included as a BB, is the reality of a Christian’s RE. Since a Christian’s RE is a BB, it is not a scientific hypothesis, and therefore does not seek justification in order to be acted upon. In making this point, Plantinga compares

²⁰ See, for example, Antony Flew’s *Theology and Falsification, Philosophy Now* (reprint), October – November, 2000, 28 – 29.

²¹ It is of course, a response to the world in one sense, namely that our minds are a part of the world. Naturally McGrath means much more than this> as science developed as result of our interaction with a *real* world, so too, theology developed as a result of our interaction with a *real* god.

²² McGrath, 269, emphasis added.

²³ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, 83.

²⁴ Ibid.

belief in RE to a person's belief in memory²⁵. However, it is doubtful whether the comparison is a fair one for several reasons:

1. Memory, unlike a CRE, is a universally shared belief;
2. Memory, unlike CRE, is constantly reaffirmed by experience. Though there are times when our memory fails us, the overwhelming majority of the time our memories serve us correctly²⁶.

Of course, if someone found that they were in a world where most others did not share the experience of memory,²⁷ they would indeed begin to treat their memories more like scientific hypotheses. It is also true that people who have a *particular* reason to distrust their memory often test the validity of the individual memory (for example, a person who checks to ensure that the door of the house is locked).

The question may be asked, "if *Christian* RE's can be basic, then why not *all* RE's?" Or simply, can't a person who does not have any sort of RE, but instead an NRE [Non-religious experience>that is, daily life] take the experience as properly basic?²⁸

This warrants further attention. Consider the following:

A. Many people have RE²⁹

Either

B. RE points to a single divine being that is the Christian God

Or

C. RE points to a single divine being that is not the Christian God

Or

D. RE points to various numbers of divine beings

²⁵ Ibid, 330 – 331.

²⁶ Regarding this point, someone asked me if I had seen the movie *Memento*. What they overlooked was the fact that even the character in this movie (who had lost his ability to form short-term memories) still had the vast majority of his memories intact.

²⁷ In this analogy the *specifically* Christian RE would be compared to the *generally* shared experience of having memory.

²⁸ This raises the main problem with Plantinga's argument: although he does believe that Christian theism is rational, he does not perceive why many say that non-theism has the stronger force as a basic belief. See his *Theism, Atheism, and Rationality*, *Truth Journal*, 2002.

²⁹ If A, then *either*. . . or. . .

Or

E. RE points to a human response of a Natural Factor [NF] >>an aspect of reality that is a part of the natural world.

If B. is true

1. Other RE's are false, either in the sense that their referents are incorrect, or that they were not true RE's;
2. Explaining the existence of other RE's is problematic unless the reality (at least some of the time) of E. is acknowledged.

The possibility of C or D will be skipped.

If E. is true

1. B, C, and D. are false;
2. The fact that "many" and not "all" people have RE's (A.) is understood;
3. The possibility of there being the existence of false RE's is explained;
4. The occurrence of RE's without the person who experienced it offering a religious 'interpretation' is better explained³⁰.

Plantinga does not seem to explain that there can be, and often is, a scale or degree to beliefs. In other words, beliefs about god (even the Christian god), are often stronger or weaker, depending on perhaps, circumstance, the force of an argument, a perceived answer/non-answer to prayer, etc. Is this possible for a BB? Certainly a person may doubt whether there is *still* snow in the backyard (to use Plantinga's example). Perhaps the sun melted the snow while he/she was working in the basement, but that person is not likely to believe that there had *never* been snow in the backyard -- assuming that the belief was basic -- because at some point the individual had personally witnessed the snow in the backyard. Memory is another example

³⁰ For example, an individual may have a powerful response to a piece of art and not describe it as a religious experience, whereas the Christian (or other) might well indeed describe it as a religious experience.

offered by Plantinga. As a BB, specific memories are often questioned or looked upon suspiciously by people who have reason to distrust their memory. However, memory is not usually distrusted by most people. In this case, the 'basic' nature of memory is characterized by the consistent belief in memory. Plantinga speaks of BB's in this manner, but does not acknowledge the tenuous aspect that on occasion accompanies belief in God (or trust in RE's) for many people.

An interesting example of an RE that functions as a BB for Plantinga is what he terms, the Internal Instigation of the Holy Spirit [IIHS]³¹. IIHS may be understood as referring what has been traditionally called in Christian theology as the 'quickening' of the Holy Spirit, or the act of Regeneration which enables a person to trust in Christ. While, according to Plantinga, all Christians have experienced the IIHS (it is necessary for salvation according to the Reformed model), it is unclear whether this should function as an RE. Certainly not all Christians would claim to have had an RE. Indeed, many Christians express their coming to salvation in fairly rational (read 'non-mystical') terms. One solution to this is to classify RE's as having subjective and objective elements to them. Thus an RE could have, but may not have, the subjective element to it, while all RE's must have the objective element to them.

Assuming that a grouping of RE's have the subjective element. Are all the characteristics that belong to the subjective element of the RE explainable by Natural Experience [NE] without recourse to the supernatural? Or, are there characteristics that belong to the subjective element of an RE that are unique or Truly Transcendent [TT], and thus not explainable by NE?

If there are TT characteristics, how can they be recognized as being part of a Christian Religious Experience [CRE]? Are a person's interpretations of perceived supernatural experiences possessing the same trait (that of functioning as a BB) as our interpretation of common experiences?

If all the characteristics are explainable by NE, it would seem to follow that there may be a more natural explanation for the existence of CRE's (as well as RE's in general).

Ramachandran points out this possibility

³¹ Plantinga, 130.

Certain kinds of epilepsy have long been noted to be associated with a heightened sense of religiosity. After having one of their brain electrical storms, patients may actually speak of having had a "religious experience," or say that they now "know why there is a cosmos." Other symptoms of some temporal lobe epileptics can be hypergraphia (writing large, complicated tomes, often of mystical or personally religious significance) and frequent conversions (to several different religions in sequence). A known feature of epilepsy is what is known as "kindling," the strengthening of neurophysiological connections, often involving the limbic system³².

In this case, the existence of an RE is probably attributable to NE (in this case a disorder of the brain).

While it would be unfair to claim that because some epileptics occasionally suffer religious delusions, all RE's are therefore delusional, the beliefs of the epileptic at this point would probably meet Plantinga's criteria of being a BB. In other words, the epileptic may very well trust implicitly in his/her beliefs, not seeing the need to defend them or prove that the beliefs are rational.

Are there properly valid RE's, or, to the point, properly valid CRE's? Runehov warns against a "false form of reductionism" in speaking of reducing RE to NE just because there are NE's present³³. However, it is unclear what other reasons exist to support claims of RE's. According to Runehov, while there is a cerebral (material) aspect to RE, that does not mean there is not more involved, or that the experience is not real. Take, for example, the statement, Mr. X knows Mr. Y. No doubt there is a cerebral aspect or a physical process occurring while a person (Mr. X) is undergoing the sensation of knowing, or is stating that he knows Mr. Y. Very few people would doubt the validity of this statement, at least not on philosophical grounds.

Duran notes that it is difficult enough to establish epistemic justification for the statement that "Jim owns a Ford." It must therefore be more difficult to establish the epistemic justification for RE's³⁴.

Why is this so difficult? At the very least, it may be that RE's, if they are true experiences, are related to a world that many, if not most people, never enter. There is simply not a common ground of experience from which those who say there are RE's and those who say RE's are illusions can discuss. Furthermore,

³² Norman Hall, A talk given by Dr. V.S. Ramachandran as part of the program *Human Selves and Transcendental Experiences: A Dialogue of Science and Religion*, presented at U.C. San Diego, January 31, 1998

³³ Anne L. C. Runehov, *A Neuro-psychological Explanation of Religious Experience*, Doctoral dissertation, Upsala University, 2003, ii.

³⁴ Jane Duran, *Religious Epistemology: Naturalizing a Point of View*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2001, 480 – 488.

while in an epistemologically naïve manner, it could be said that the statement “Jim owns a Ford” is interpretively straightforward, RE’s are difficult to explain, let alone interpret to others in a coherent manner. It seems simpler to accredit RE’s to NE’s, and therefore see ARJC as a template for the Christian’s religious experience(s).

Bibliography

- Coleman, Robert. Issues of Theological Warfare: Evangelicals and Liberals, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.
- Craig, William Lane. Quoted from a debate in Ottawa, Ontario, 1999.
- Duran, Jane. Religious Epistemology: Naturalizing a Point of View. Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 2001.
- Eisenman, Robert. James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Viking Penguin, 1997.
- Flew, Antony. *Theology and Falsification*. Philosophy Now. (reprint), October – November, 2000.
- Frame, John. The Doctrine of the Word of God, P&R Publishing, Philipsburg, 2002.
- Herrmann, Wilhelm. The Communion of the Christian with God, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971.
- Hall, Norman. A talk given by Dr. V.S. Ramachandran as part of the program Human Selves and Transcendental Experiences :A Dialogue of Science and Religion, presented at U.C. San Diego, January 31, 1998.
- Lewis, C. S. Mere Christianity, Harper Collins, Glasgow, 1984..
- McDowell, Josh. More than a Carpenter, Living Books, 1986.
- McGrath, Alister. A Scientific Theology: Volume II – Reality. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2002.
- Pinnock, Clark. Set Forth Your Case: Studies in Christian Apologetics, The Craig Press, Nutley, 1968, 76 – 77.
- Plantinga, Alvin. Warranted Christian Belief. Oxford University Press, New York, 2000
Theism, Atheism, and Rationality, Truth Journal, 2002.
- Price, Robert M.. Beyond Born Again, Apocryphal Books, Upper Montclair, 1993.
- Runehov, Anne L. C. A Neuro-psychological Explanation of Religious Experience. (Doctoral dissertation), Upsala University, 2003.
- Smith, Hudson Transcript from Thinking Allowed television series.
- <http://thebiblerevival.com/teachings/books/0060/> [public domain] by Charles G. Finney.