

UNITED WISDOM

Religious Experience: Personal Conviction and Public Evidence

World and Consciousness

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W-11-N03 · EN

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Epigraph

“His words are deeds.”

Teresa of Jesus, The Life, XXV §23; David Lewis translation, third edition, 1904. Complete sentence. “His” refers to her Lord within her testimony; this is no general assertion about anyone's speech.

What this article is about

An experience can be so convincing that someone changes habits, relationships, and their understanding of life. For that person, whether something real happened may seem almost settled. Someone who was absent still faces other questions: what is being reported, how was its cause established, and what can be checked independently? We explore this difference through Teresa of Jesus, William James, and a contemporary study of religious context. Their tasks differ: autobiographical religious discernment, philosophical discussion of experiential authority, and a bounded experimental comparison. Reading them together can respect personal conviction without making it compulsory public evidence. It also helps us discuss consequences without promising healing, a final brain theory, or agreement with someone else's faith. Our proposed practice concerns reading and wording claims. It requires no unusual state and does not assess anyone's spiritual maturity.

I. Which claim are we actually discussing?

Imagine an invented conversation after an ordinary meeting. Someone says that during prayer they felt a presence and stopped fearing an important decision. Their listener hears a promise that the decision must turn out well. Several additional steps have appeared between the initial statement and the promise heard. A report of presence, an explanation of its origin, a change in fear, and a prediction of future success need different grounds. A useful conversation unfolds these steps before either person accepts or rejects everything at once.

The first step concerns available testimony: someone describes what happened to them. We can clarify timing, wording, and confidence, but we acquire no direct access to their experience. A second step attributes a cause, such as God's action. A third concerns consequences, some potentially visible to others. A fourth extends the event's significance to other events or people. These distinctions do not decide the answer beforehand. They reveal

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where the question changes and why sincerity alone cannot support every transition that might be proposed.

Public evidence here means grounds outsiders can discuss and examine through a stated procedure without sharing the original experience. The procedure depends on the claim. A delivered letter, lasting behavioural change, and general therapeutic efficacy require different kinds of inquiry, the last considerably more demanding. Proposing a clear procedure does not require abandoning faith. It explains why others should accept a particular assertion about their shared world and how far the material presented can reasonably reach. The question is always what this particular evidence supports.

The distinction also protects the speaker. If calm during prayer becomes an unconditional guarantee of success, any later failure can seem to invalidate their entire inner life. If the account remains an account of experienced calm, an unsuccessful decision does not erase that experience. The prediction and responsibility for acting can still be reconsidered. Someone need not defend extra promises merely because these quietly attached themselves to meaningful testimony. This framework is our original way of reading, rather than a formula already supplied by the primary texts.

II. Teresa: conviction from within and the work of discernment

In the selected part of chapter XXV, Teresa describes inward words and distinguishes them from ordinary hearing. For her, they can be clearer than external speech and appear outside her usual control. This is religious autobiography within a particular tradition. We read David Lewis's English translation in its third edition of 1904, rather than analysing the Spanish manuscript. Identifying that version preserves the distance between the witness's writing, its translation, and our present account. Her explanation remains recognisably her own throughout that distance.

Teresa does not simply assert that a powerful impression must be trustworthy. In §§3–6 she considers words formed by the mind and attempts to distinguish them from what she attributes to God. She attends to experienced passivity and the words' effects on the soul. Conviction accompanies an effort to understand possible error. This is no contemporary diagnostic test or source-identification procedure validated by us. It is nevertheless a significant feature of the testimony itself, easily lost in a retelling concerned only with its unusual character.

In §23 the account describes a sudden inner change. Teresa reports peace, strength, and confidence and explains these through her Lord's action. The epigraph concludes precisely this account. Its brevity must not transform an attribution into an independently established causal result. We can accurately state how the witness understood her transformation and how convincing she found it. This paragraph alone cannot establish that every similar effect

has the same cause or should lead to identical decisions. Preserving that limit allows her account to retain its particularity.

Even the version of one expression matters. In the introduction we read, the editor discusses a correction to an earlier translation of §4: an erroneous negative must not remove the possibility of an inward answer. Responsible reading therefore includes identifying the edition, alongside attending to a moving quotation. That textual correction does not verify every event described. Both scales matter: a particular wording has been clarified, while the publicly established origin of the experience remains a different question. Our comparison uses the specified edition throughout.

III. James: for whom does experience have authority?

In the selected argument about mystical experience, William James distinguishes its authority for the experiencer from its binding force for outsiders. He also leaves room for religious possibilities opened by such experience. These propositions belong together. Keeping only personal authority could impose another person's impression on everyone. Keeping only outsiders' freedom from obligation would produce a stronger rejection than the argument allows. For our topic, the difference in audiences is useful: whose life does the experience change, and who is being asked to accept its interpretation?

This distinction does not suggest that conviction is entirely a free choice. A felt certainty can precede reasoning and resist doubt. Its strength and the right to extend it to another person nevertheless remain different relations. One can recognise an experience as central to someone's life while discussing conditions for a shared decision. Our contemporary example concerns a family budget: a personal religious reason for spending does not remove the need to agree on the use of shared money with the people who own it.

James also notes variation in doctrinal interpretations. Some similarities in descriptions do not compel every school to adopt one metaphysics. In this context he considers differing religious and philosophical positions rather than making them interchangeable. Words such as “unity” or “encounter with a presence” do not yet specify what a speaker regards as true. An attentive reader asks about concepts within that testimony instead of translating every tradition into a convenient universal scheme. Similar vocabulary can open a conversation without deciding the doctrine in advance.

We do not turn James's historical psychological vocabulary into a current diagnosis or treat his speculations as a final brain explanation. His contribution here is narrower: distinguishing personal experiential authority, another person's obligation to agree, and the philosophical content of a report. This produces no ready-made experiment. It does offer a clear question

for public claims: which part of the argument is available to someone who respects the testimony but neither participated in the event nor shares the doctrine used to explain it?

IV. What did the contemporary study examine?

Schienle, Gremsl, and Wabnegger's 2021 study concerns religious context and resting-state functional connectivity. Its 37 healthy women were selected with regard to religious beliefs and positive expectations about Lourdes water. They constitute a particular group, rather than a representation of every believer. Most were students and Roman Catholics. Recruitment already indicates which question the study could clarify and why extension to other groups would need further work. The sample's specificity forms part of the result's meaning, rather than being a detail to discard.

Participants attended two visits a week apart, with condition order counterbalanced. Both used tap water, but labels, information, and the surrounding presentation differed. An accurate account therefore describes a comparison of entire conditions. It does not isolate the effect of one word on a label. The scanning experimenter was unaware of the condition, while participants received different information. This procedure limits one possible influence. It provides no basis for calling the entire experiment fully blinded for everyone involved or for assuming that every contextual element was independently tested.

The organisation of reporting particularly matters. Ratings during a study and later accounts of that period address related but different questions. A later recollection assembles impressions into a story; an immediate rating records only what was asked then. This difference does not automatically make one the genuine experience and the other deception. It reveals how a conclusion depends on when and how a report is obtained. Here the design makes visible a boundary that ordinary conversation can easily overlook when someone summarises an entire event.

An independent invented example can illustrate the distinction. After a concert, a listener says they felt united with the audience throughout the evening, although midway they noted tiredness and irritation. The event's eventual meaning need not coincide with every immediate sensation. An inquirer can retain both reports and ask which question each answers. This example describes no study participant and establishes no general law of memory. It shows how question structure can prevent both a premature accusation and an equally premature confirmation of a broad claim.

V. Findings, correlations, and explanatory limits

During-study pleasantness and calmness ratings showed no significant condition difference. Retrospective reports differed in bodily feelings and emotions; thoughts did not show the same finding. We retain this uneven result rather than turning it into one effect on the whole experience. Differences between reporting formats become part of the question. They do not make every participant transformed. Equally, the absence of a significant finding for one rating does not establish that every individual impression was absent. A useful account preserves which result belongs to which measure.

The authors also report changes in functional connectivity between specified regions and networks. Here this concerns statistical relationships between resting signals, rather than direct observation of divine action. Even a convincing condition difference needs a separate discussion of what the proposed model explains. The word “brain” does not finish that discussion automatically. A relationship can matter for a bounded research question while leaving uncertainty about the causes of individual accounts, the meaning of faith, and broader philosophical assertions. Explanatory reach must be argued, rather than supplied by terminology.

A selected healthy group and brief observation also provide no conclusion about therapeutic efficacy. The paper identifies limits of transfer and a need for replication. This matters when an appealing title becomes advice to someone making a health decision. The studied context, reported feelings, and a clinical outcome cannot simply be equated. We propose no repetition of the procedure, use of this water, or treatment change. This article examines grounds and limits of claims; our comparative reading has established no medical effect and supplies no clinical recommendation.

The comparison with Teresa works by distinguishing tasks. Her account conveys the spiritual significance of inner change; the experiment sets bounded comparison and measurement conditions. The first does not become a laboratory finding, and the second does not exhaust the first's meaning. Similar words about calm cannot establish that her situation was studied. We can identify a shared question about reports and consequences while preserving differences of period, language, participants, and procedure. The comparison is useful precisely because it lets the sources retain their different voices.

VI. Making a public claim discussable

Suppose an invented small group wants to publish that a new meeting helped its members become more considerate. This is an understandable, limited intention. First, clarify whether people report an impression of one meeting or present lasting behavioural change. Then ask who contributed, who declined to answer, and what preceded the event. An openly stated scale makes the account more useful. Readers can assess a particular assertion without being required to believe in a general effect of every similar meeting or to share its religious background.

Checkability starts before elaborate measurement. Clear wording, a retained procedure, and access to material that differs from the expected outcome all matter. Publishing only inspiring answers can preserve sincerity while failing to represent everyone. Renaming a negative answer as insufficient openness protects a claim from objections by removing its testability. Our original recommendation is to state in advance which observation would require a narrower formulation, then retain that criterion when a result proves inconvenient. Such a criterion still needs to fit the actual question being asked.

James provides no ready-made method for this project, and one study supplies no universal standard for every religious community. The comparison distinguishes positions. Personal testimony remains available as an account; a public conclusion needs further grounds appropriate to its content. When the procedure cannot answer a question about an ultimate cause, say so. A limited answer can be precise rather than weak. It can identify what was learned and where faith, further investigation, or reasonable disagreement still have room, without pretending those possibilities have already been resolved.

Public discussion also does not grant unrestricted access to someone's intimate life. A person may tell a friend about an experience while declining recording or publication. Refusal does not prove the account false. Nor does missing material become evidence of its external circumstances. These propositions are compatible. A shared inquiry can choose a less personal question or an existing public text. Our respect for consent is a contemporary editorial position, rather than a claim that the primary authors already supplied today's procedure for handling private recordings.

VII. Discernment without taking over another person's life

Teresa considers possible error within her religious language. The contemporary study considers measurement and later interpretation. These approaches differ, yet both complicate a retelling in which one powerful feeling supposedly settles every question. Readers can ask what the author regards as grounds for conviction and how doubt is addressed. They must then ask which conditions are accessible to an outsider. The first inquiry helps understand testimony; the second assesses a public conclusion. Neither requires the reader to obtain the described experience or reproduce the original setting.

Conversation benefits from avoiding two forms of appropriation. One insists that someone else's experience must mean our preferred doctrine. Another claims to know its sole final cause and therefore stops listening. Both replace the report with a predetermined explanation. A simpler clarification might ask, “Are you describing presence, inward words, or an interpretation formed afterwards?” This leaves the experience's authorship with its speaker. It also leaves the listener free to hear an answer without agreeing to a cause that has not yet been discussed or established.

Care does not require certainty about causation. One can help organise an ordinary day, discuss relationships, or respect a wish for silence without claiming to know an experience's origin. One can also refuse a demand affecting oneself without declaring the other person's inner life false. Consider an invented cancelled meeting: respect for what someone experienced does not automatically communicate the other person's agreement. Shared action still needs a conversation accessible to both people and clear responsibility for choices. Compassion and participation in a particular decision remain distinct.

Not every question needs to become a research project. Sometimes someone wants an attentive listener, rather than public verification. State the conversation's purpose: understanding an account, making a shared decision, or assessing a published causal claim. This can remove unnecessary conflict. Boundaries remain even when a story seems elevated. A meaningful experience does not confer universal knowledge of other people. Conversely, the absence of public proof gives a listener no right to demand intimate disclosure or humiliate the witness. The purpose can change, but participants should recognise that change.

VIII. Consequences and responsibility for choices

Life changes after an experience deserve attention without establishing its sole cause. Someone may report greater patience or reconsideration of an old conflict. Where relationships are involved, others can contribute observations. Their accounts expand the material about consequences rather than converting metaphysical attribution into an established fact. Distinguish “What changed between us?” from “Why did the experience occur?” Different answers need not cancel each other because they address different parts of the story. Consequences can be discussed carefully while the underlying causal interpretation remains open or contested.

Consider another original situation. After a significant prayer, someone wants to restore contact with a relative. Their conviction may support writing a respectful letter. It cannot determine the recipient's feelings in advance or promise immediate reconciliation. A considerate letter leaves room to refuse, choose a time, and understand the past differently. Here experience supports one's own step rather than providing authority over another person's response. Even sincere benevolent purposes preserve the difference between intention and mutual agreement; the recipient's freedom is part of the proposed action's meaning.

An action can be assessed without settling an unusual event's ultimate explanation. Are consequences disclosed, can another person refuse, and is the speaker willing to repair harm? These questions concern shared life, where more is accessible than one inward account. Such assessment does not claim the whole spiritual truth. It permits ordinary responsibility to be discussed before a difficult philosophical dispute is resolved. This is our contemporary application of the distinctions. Neither Teresa's autobiography nor the connectivity study tested this approach's effectiveness, and we present no such finding.

Responsibility also includes revision. If someone interpreted an experience as a precise promise that was not fulfilled, examine that promise, its wording, and its grounds. There is no need to declare the entire experience erased or every failure a secret new confirmation. A significant account can remain part of life while an associated public prediction changes. This requires attention to language rather than a display of coldness. Separating the questions preserves experiential significance without demanding endless defence of every later interpretation as though it could never be reconsidered.

IX. What honest comparison leaves open

These three grounds do not combine into one final theory. Teresa speaks of her Lord and inner transformation. James considers experiential authority and diverse philosophical readings. The contemporary work compares specific conditions and measures in a selected group. Shared themes of confidence and consequences make conversation possible without removing differences. We learn more when we can name each source's task and notice where moving between them needs another argument rather than an attractive verbal coincidence. Differences remain part of what the comparison teaches us to read.

What counts as a sufficient explanation also stays open. Describing signal relationships can clarify a physiological question without settling personal meaning. Religious testimony can provide a language for life without an independent causal test. Philosophical reasoning can expose a logical transition without supplying missing observations. These contributions have different limits. Recognising them forbids neither inquiry nor faith. It prevents material obtained for one question from becoming a finished answer to all its neighbours. Further claims remain possible, but they need to show how their additional grounds bear on those questions.

The useful result is more precise speech. Instead of “This proves everything,” one can identify personal conviction in testimony, a bounded difference in a study, and a cause still subject to interpretation. Instead of “Then nothing happened,” one can retain the reported experience while assessing an external conclusion separately. Such language requires patience because it supplies no immediate victory. It lets people see where agreement is possible and where positions actually diverge. Precision can change the discussion even when it does not resolve the underlying religious disagreement.

Readers need no matching experience to undertake this work. An open text, clear questions, and freedom to stop are sufficient. Testimony's importance is not measured by unusual details, nor an argument's quality by a listener's reverence. Attentive comparison leaves people their lives, sources their tasks, and public claims the corresponding burden of support. We propose it as a limited reading and conversational discipline. It promises no common faith, healing, or universal agreement, but can avoid adding unnecessary demands to an experience someone already finds significant.

What this means in practice

Choose an already published account or a personal record you are comfortable reading. The exercise requires no recollection of your most intense event. Take one sentence and distinguish its experiential report, attributed cause, described consequence, and possible prediction. Leave missing elements blank instead of adding a preferred meaning. This is our original reading practice, rather than a way to test someone else's spirituality or produce an unusual state. A modest account is sufficient for the task.

For each element, name the available grounds. Testimony indicates how someone reports an experience; a retained letter may clarify a later action; another person's account describes their own perception of a relationship. Make none of these universal. Mark what remains unknown and what material could actually clarify the question. If there is no precise procedure, record that limitation rather than substituting confidence for a completed inquiry. The question can remain open without losing its importance.

If another person is involved, state the purpose and seek their agreement. For a shared decision, formulate an ordinary action that permits refusal and revision: offer a conversation, clarify timing, or acknowledge a misunderstanding. You may name a personal religious reason without demanding its acceptance. Do not use the record to prescribe treatment, alter sleep, or reproduce the research procedure. The exercise concerns language and responsibility, rather than ways to obtain a new experience or extend authority over someone else.

Finally, compare the original sentence with its clarification. Has the experience's importance survived? Has an unsupported promise about another person's decision or a general cause disappeared? Can uncertainty remain without humiliating the speaker? You can stop with these questions. Agreement about metaphysics is not required. A wording that conveys personal experience honestly, identifies the reach of a public claim, and leaves others free to contribute their own grounds is a sufficient outcome for this limited exercise.

Key quotation

> *“Future research is warranted to replicate the results.”*

Anne Schienle, Albert Gremsl, Andreas Wabnegger, 2021, Discussion, replication sentence. Complete original sentence; it concerns this preliminary study's results, rather than all religion.

Connections between traditions

Two grounds and locators	Substantive connection	Boundary
Teresa, XXV §§2, 5, 23; Schienle and colleagues, Methods Procedure / Results Table 1	Personal clarity and different times of feeling reports need separate readings.	Participants are not equated with Teresa; no common cause established.
James, Mysticism, authority propositions; Teresa, XXV §23	Experiential authority for a person differs from outsiders' obligation to accept its explanation.	Personal significance retained; no added public causal proof.
James, doctrinal-variation paragraphs; Schienle, Participants / Discussion	Traditional concepts and recruitment conditions shape the comparison's reach.	A selected sample represents no universal belief; doctrines stay distinct.
Teresa, XXV §§3–6 and editorial introduction; Schienle, Discussion on retrospective interpretation	Discernment of possible error is compared with qualifications about later accounts.	Religious discernment is no diagnostic test; accounts are not declared false.
James, authority and outsiders argument; Schienle, counterbalancing / experimenter blinding / limits	A public conclusion needs an accessible procedure and its limitations.	One experiment tests no totality of religious claims.
Teresa, XXV §23; Schienle, Results / Discussion on healthy sample	Personally significant change is distinguished from clinical efficacy.	No water, treatment, or self-repetition recommendation.

Primary sources

1. Teresa of Jesus, The Life of St. Teresa of Jesus. David Lewis translation, third edition, Thomas Baker / Benziger Brothers, 1904; editor Benedict Zimmerman. Title, selected editorial correction, and XXV §§1–6 actually read; §23 with its nearby context freshly read for this article. Epigraph is §23's complete sentence. Religious testimony and internal criteria provide no independent cause verification; neither Spanish original nor whole chapter studied. Russian quotation translated by the authors.

2. William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience. Longmans, Green and Co., 1917 edition; lectures of 1901–1902 identified separately. Honest reuse of the complete selected Mysticism argument on authority, outsiders' obligations, and doctrinal variation actually read in

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this task; title, preface, and selected opening also read. Whole-book reading not claimed. Historical clinical vocabulary supplies no current diagnosis.

3. Anne Schienle, Albert Gremsl, Andreas Wabnegger, Placebo Effects in the Context of Religious Beliefs and Practices. Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience 15:653359, 6 May 2021, DOI 10.3389/fnbeh.2021.653359. Methods, Results/table text, complete Discussion/limitations, ethics and data-availability material actually read; exact key sentence freshly checked. Raw data neither received nor reanalysed. Selected healthy group, short recording, and differing context limit conclusions; therapeutic efficacy and divine cause not tested. Russian quotation translated by the authors.

Tags

United Wisdom, religious experience, testimony, personal conviction, public evidence, Teresa of Jesus, William James, religious tradition, interpretation, causality, memory, inward speech, discernment, philosophy of religion, research design, expectation, context, functional connectivity, selected sample, replication, study limitations, consent, responsibility, intercultural dialogue, attentive reading, uncertainty, shared decisions, experiential consequences

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