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John Hick

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RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND THE RATIONALITY OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

John Hick

The view that religious experience is a valid ground of basic religious beliefs inevitably raises the problem of the apparently incompatible belief-systems arising from different forms of religious experience. David Basinger's and William Alston's responses to the problem present the Christian belief-system as the sole exception to the general rule that religious experience gives rise to false beliefs. A more convincing response presents it as an exemplification of the general rule that religious experience gives rise (subject to possible defeaters) to true beliefs. This requires a 'two level' conception.

During the last thirty or forty years a significant new approach has emerged in the philosophical defence of theistic belief. Previously the almost universal form of apologetic was a direct attempt to prove, or show it to be more probable than not, that God exists. This approach continues strongly, as for example in Charles Hartshorne's advocacy of the ontological argument and Richard Swinburne's Bayesian probability argument.¹ But now there is also a second, indirect approach which seeks to show that, even if divine existence can be neither proved nor shown to be probable, it is nevertheless entirely rational in certain circumstances for a person to believe in the reality of God. This indirect apologetic hinges upon the empiricist principle that it is sane and rational to base beliefs upon our experience, adding that this is true of religious as well as sensory experience. Just as it is reasonable for one who visually 'experiences a tree' to believe that there is a tree there, so also it is reasonable for one who 'experiences God' (in ways to be considered presently) to believe that God exists.

An earlier (1950's) statement of this indirect approach reads as follows:

We cannot explain how we are conscious of sensory phenomena as constituting an objective physical environment; we just find ourselves interpreting the data of our experience in this way. We are aware that we live in a real world, though we cannot prove by any logical formula that it *is* a real world. We discover and live in terms of a particular aspect of our environment through an appropriate act of interpretation; and having come to live in terms of it we neither require nor can conceive of any further validation of its reality. The same is true of our apprehension of God. The theistic believer cannot explain *how* he knows the divine presence to be mediated through his human experience. He just finds himself interpreting his experience in this



way. He lives in the presence of God, though he is unable to prove by any dialectical process that God exists. To say this is not of course to prove that God *does* exist. The outcome of the discussion thus far is rather to bring out the similarity of epistemology structure and status between men's basic convictions in relation to the world and divine existence.²

Having laid out this general position, such an apologetic considers possible defeaters (such, for example, as naturalistic interpretations of religious experience, or any proposed proof of the non-existence of God), and then addresses the apparently damaging differences between sensory and religious experience: principally, that sense experience is universal and largely uniform whilst religious experience is not, so that whilst sensory beliefs are open to public confirmation, religious beliefs are not. The standard response to the latter objection is to argue that these differences are correlated with differences between their putative objects, and are indeed such as to be expected if those objects exist.

Religious experience figures in both forms of apologetic. In the direct form it is viewed from outside, as a phenomenon which, it is suggested, points to God as its cause. In the indirect form, however, it is viewed from within, from the point of view of the religious experiencer; and it is claimed that it is entirely reasonable for one who experiences in this way to believe in the reality of the God whose presence, or whose activity, he/she seems to be experiencing.

The most comprehensive version of this approach will be in William Alston's forthcoming *Perceiving God*; though he has already adumbrated it over the years in a number of important articles. In one of these he summarizes as follows: 'The experience (or, as I prefer to say, the "perception") of God provides prima facie epistemic justification for beliefs about what God is doing or how God is "situated" *vis-a-vis* one at the moment.'³ This position is also, under the name of the 'parity' argument, a theme of Terence Penelhum's *God and Skepticism*⁴ and as applied to mystical experience is a theme of William Wainwright's⁵ and the author of the 1950's quote above (namely myself) has also developed it in subsequent writings.⁶ Again, it corresponds to one understanding of Alvin Plantinga's much discussed notion of 'proper basicity.' For whilst the belief that God exists, as a properly basic belief, is not derived from other, evidence-stating propositions, and is to that extent 'free standing,' it is, as Plantinga insists, not therefore groundless. As he says, 'a belief is properly basic only in certain conditions; these conditions are, we might say, the ground of its justification and, by extension, the ground of the belief itself.'⁷ Thus "I see a tree" is properly basic when I am (in Chisholm's terminology) being appeared to *treely*. Plantinga gives a number of examples of the analogous circumstances in which belief in God is properly basic: contemplating a flower and believing 'This flower was created by God';

beholding the starry heavens and believing 'This vast and intricate universe was created by God'; upon having done something cheap, or wrong, or wicked, believing that 'God disapproves of what I have done'; upon confession and repentance believing that 'God forgives me for what I have done' (p. 80), and so on. There are indeed 'many conditions and circumstances that call forth belief in God: guilt, gratitude, danger, a sense of God's presence, a sense that he speaks, perception of various parts of the universe' (p. 81).

Although Plantinga does not generally use the term 'religious experience,' I think it is clear that these various situations are occasions of religious experience, and that this mode of experience constitutes the justifying ground of the basic belief in God. For it is not suggested that we *infer* God from the flower or the starry heavens or our sense of guilt or forgiveness: that would be the old evidentialist procedure. Rather, we experience the flower *as* a divine creation, the starry heavens above *as* God's handiwork, the moral law within *as* God's command, life's goodness *as* God's gift, its troubles and tragedies *as* occasions to cleave to God. In prayer and contemplation the circumstances may simply be our own present existence, which we experience as being in the invisible divine presence. More generally, the occasioning and justifying ground of the basic belief in God is the 'sense of the presence of God,' or the sense of being in God's presence, which may occur in many different circumstances—perhaps in principle in any circumstances. In all these cases we experience some situation as mediating God's presence or activity; and it is claimed that it is fully sane and rational for this mode of experience to be reflected in the body of our beliefs.

A feature that is not always recognized in versions of this type of apologetic is that it involves *degrees* of 'well-groundedness' or of 'justifiedness,' depending on the strength or weakness and the coherence-and-persistence or fleetingness, of the experience that grounds the belief. This variation in degrees of justification can be overlooked because sense experience, which we are taking as the paradigm ground of rational believing, is almost always fully compelling in virtue of what Hume called its 'force and vivacity.'⁸ We thus normally have no occasion to think in terms of degrees of the well-groundedness of perceptual beliefs. However there are marginal cases in which we do recognize degrees. Suppose in the hot desert I seem to see an oasis in the distance, but see it indistinctly and intermittently. It may be a real oasis (with my perception of it being affected by the heat haze) or it may be a mirage. In such a case, I would be less well justified in believing 'There is an oasis there' than when I see it plainly and close up. Now religious experience does sometimes, in the great religious figures, have a stable and compelling quality comparable with that of ordinary sense perception; but much more often, in the case of ordinary believers, it has an intermittent and hazy quality analogous to the desert traveller's glimpses of what may be an oasis or may be a

mirage. This of course is why the religious exemplars have an absolute and undoubting faith whilst ordinary believers commonly have a less stable faith, sometimes strong but often weak.

The experiential justification of religious belief is at its maximum in the paradigm religious figures. It seems clear, for example, that in the case of Jesus, if we think of him in his humanity, his heavenly Father seemed to him as real and as continuously present as were his disciples, or the hills and lake of Galilee. In such a case we can say not only that it was rational for him to believe in God, but that it would have been irrational—a kind of cognitive suicide—for him not to. And although their awareness of God's presence was not so overwhelmingly powerful and continuous as this, the experience of St. Paul or St. Francis or Martin Luther, and in varying degrees of thousands of other saints (though by no means all of those officially so designated by the church), has surely been such as to entitle them to believe in the reality of the divine Being whose presence they have experienced. In the case of ordinary believers, whilst our basic theistic belief is less well grounded than that of the saints, nevertheless our relatively slight and occasional moments of awareness of God may well be sufficient to render our basic (i.e., not inferred) belief in God epistemically justified.

This fact of degrees of well-groundedness opens up a new dimension of considerations. How well-grounded does our belief need to be in order for it to be *properly* basic? It would not be sufficient for it just to have 'popped into our minds' or for us merely to have absorbed from our surrounding culture what Cardinal Newman called the 'notional' belief that there is a God. To be rationally justifiable the belief must be grounded in and reflect our own religious experience. But is it sufficient if this only enables us to share in and be affected by the much greater stream of religious experience of the Christian tradition as a whole? There is here a large area for further discussion, which I am not now going to enter. But the basic principle still holds that, as our experience of the physical world properly gives rise to our belief in its existence, so experience of God's presence can properly give rise to belief in the reality of God.

Clearly this basic principle has to be applied, not only to Christian but also to other forms of theistic experience; and indeed not only to theistic but also to non-theistic forms of religious experience. Perhaps some (Christian) theologians feel that they can properly exclude from attention information concerning the wider religious life of humanity—though if so, it would seem that they should also exclude information derived from the sciences and from other aspects of human experience and thought. But a philosopher of religion has to take account, in principle, of religion in all its forms throughout the world. In practice, of course, that is too large a task—just as it is too large a task for the philosopher of science to know all the special sciences—and we

have to be satisfied with a sufficient knowledge of a few of the major forms of religion. But to know only one out of many significant variations within a large class is not really to know even that one; for we understand each partly by comparison with others. Thus for a philosopher of religion who is a Christian it is important to study not only such neighboring faiths as Judaism or Islam but also such very different faiths as Buddhism or Hinduism.

Within the philosophy of religion, then, we find that by solving one major problem—namely, how to justify belief in God—we have brought to light another equally major problem, that posed by the fact of religious plurality. For it seems evident that if Christian experience justifies a Christian in believing in God as the heavenly Father of Jesus' teaching, or perhaps as the Holy Trinity of developed Christian theology, then Muslim experience justifies a Muslim in believing in the Qur'anic *Allah rahman rahim*, God, the gracious and ever merciful; and that Jewish experience justifies a Jew in believing in Adonai, king of the universe, God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and that Vaishnavite Hindu experience justifies a Vaishnavite in believing in the divine lord Krishna, incarnation of Vishnu; and that Shaivite Hindu experience justifies a Shaivite in believing in the lord Shiva whose cosmic dance is the ongoing life of the universe; and that advaitic Hindu experience justifies an advaitin in believing in the infinite consciousness of Brahman, which in the depths of our being we all are; and that different forms of Buddhist experience justify belief in the reality of *nirvana*, of the universal Buddha nature, of the eternal Dharmakaya, of *sunyata*; and so on.

Thus, as David Basinger has recently insisted, 'when we survey the "world scene," a major difficulty arises. The problem, of course, is that on a worldwide scale, religious faculties consistently and pervasively produce a myriad of different, often incompatible, basic religious beliefs.'⁹ And apparently assuming Hume's principle that 'in matters of religion, whatever is different is contrary,'¹⁰ Basinger says that 'pervasive pluralism brings into serious question whether we ought to consider religious faculties to be analogous to other belief-forming faculties' (p. 71). He responds to this challenge in terms of the only-true-religion assumption that different religious truth claims are necessarily mutually exclusive. He therefore asks, 'can we determine which set of formed religious beliefs is true or most worthy of affirmation?' (p. 75). And after rejecting a series of other options he is left with the case of a theist 'who can find no compelling public or private evidential basis for holding either that her specific beliefs alone are true or that her faculties are superior' (p. 79). Basinger argues that in this situation she is nevertheless 'justified in resolving the conflict in her favor by an appeal to personal preference—a feeling (itself a basic, formed belief) that the set of basic religious truth claims she has formed in her better organizes and explains the relevant components of reality than any other' (p. 79). I wonder if Basinger has contemplated the

prodigious task of comparing all the different religious belief-systems, establishing and operating objective criteria for identifying the 'relevant components of reality' which such systems seek to organize, and then objectively assessing their different ways of doing this. But that difficulty apart, does not his proposal amount to a recommendation of irrationality? For having 'comparatively analyzed the various competing sets of religious...truth claims' and 'not uncovered any compelling evidential basis for affirming hers' (p. 79), she is nevertheless asked to believe that hers does nevertheless take better account of the relevant components of reality than any other. And yet this is just what she has discovered cannot be done! How can Basinger responsibly recommend her to believe because of personal preference what she had found by comparative analysis not to be the case—namely that her own belief system makes better sense of the facts than any other?

The basic weakness of Basinger's response to the religious pluralism (RP, for those who like initials) problem is that it is concerned—as indeed he has himself pointed out at an earlier stage of his discussion—with a private right to believe what we prefer to believe, rather than with the likeliness of a belief to be true. For the reliability of our Christian theist's basis of belief, namely her own religious experience, is apparently called into question by the fact that others, on the basis of their own religious experience, have formed different and incompatible beliefs. But Basinger's advice is, instead of addressing this problem, to retreat into her private circle of faith, disregarding the problem posed by the wider religious experience of humanity.

William Alston has also turned his attention to the RP problem. Like Basinger, he formulates it in terms of the assumption that there can only be one true religion (in the sense of a religion teaching true beliefs). Given this assumption, RP comes as a challenge to the rationality of our belief that *ours* is the true religion. Responding in terms of the only-true-religion assumption, Alston argues that in a situation in which no religion can show (except of course to its own satisfaction) that it is the true religion, we are entitled to go on assuming that ours is. For we have as good reason to think it true as the adherents of other religions have to think that *theirs* is true: and so 'the rational thing for a practitioner of CP [Christian doxastic practice] to do is to continue to form Christian M-beliefs [M=manifestation], and, more generally, to continue to accept, and operate in accordance with, the system of Christian belief.'¹¹

At the same time however Alston notes an uneasiness with the resulting situation. He says, 'I would acknowledge that it is right and proper for one to be worried and perplexed by religious pluralism, epistemically as well as theologically, though not to the extent of denying the rationality of CP' (p. 446). But the only way forward that he can see depends upon his only-true-religion assumption: namely to 'do whatever seems feasible to search for common ground on which to adjudicate the crucial differences between the

world religions, seeking a way to show in a non-circular way which of the contenders is correct' (p. 446).

However, as an alternative approach, perhaps the fact of religious diversity should not be seen as a challenge to the rationality of forming religious beliefs on the basis of religious experience, but to the assumption that all authentic religious experience must be of the same kind and produce the same sets of beliefs. Let us instead look again at what Alston calls the 'level distinction' (p. 433) between, on the one hand, the ultimate divine Reality and on the other hand the variety of different human conceptions and perceptions of that Reality. It will then be the case that instead of giving rival accounts of a common intended referent, the religious belief-systems each give an account of a different referent, namely their own culturally influenced communal perception of the ultimately Real. On this view, we postulate the transcendent divine Reality which lies (as each of the great traditions at some point asserts) beyond our networks of human concepts; which is the ground of all existence and the source of all salvific power; which is conceptualized in a variety of ways in terms of the two basic religious categories of personal deity and non-personal absolute, and under each category in a variety of concrete forms as Adonai, the heavenly Father, Allah, Vishnu, etc., and as Brahman, the Dharmakaya, the Tao, etc.; which is accordingly humanly experienced in correspondingly different ways; and which is responded to in correspondingly different forms of religious life. The Real is perceived in each case through the complex 'lens' of a human tradition, consisting of modes of thought, spiritual practices, sacred writings, theological and philosophical systems, great exemplars, and a web of historical contingencies of various kinds.

Thus, using the two levels distinction, the Jahweh of Israel, for example, exists at the interface between the transcendent Real and the Jewish stream of religious life and experience. Jahweh is part of Hebrew history, and Hebrew history is part of Jahweh's biography; and he cannot be extracted from this living context. As such, he is a different divine *persona* from the lord Shiva, who exists at the interface between the Real and the Shaivite stream of religious life and experience. Accordingly the one has a distinctively Hebraic and the other a distinctively Indian character. And yet the experience of each may be a valid awareness of the ultimately Real as perceived through these very differently shaped, molded, and coloured cultural windows.

If we thus reject Hume's principle (that in religion whatever is different is contrary), the result will be that instead of RP reducing the well-groundedness of the Christian basic belief in a divine Reality, it will reinforce it. For instead of having to claim, arbitrarily, that Christian belief is a sole exception to the general rule that religious experience produces false beliefs, the Christian can see her belief-system as another exemplification of the general rule that religious experience produces (subject to possible defeaters) true beliefs!

This is, needless to say, a very general delineation of a view which needs to be spelled out much more fully and which of course raises its own quota of questions and problems. I have tried elsewhere (particularly in *An Interpretation of Religion*)¹² to present it acceptably and to respond to its attendant problems. But my point at the moment is two-fold: (1) that the currently popular (and in my view correct) indirect approach to the question of the rationality of religious belief leads unavoidably to the problem of religious pluralism; and (2) that it is extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, to respond adequately to this problem in terms of the Humean assumption that in matters of religion whatever is different is contrary.

Claremont Graduate School

NOTES

1. Swinburne's probability argument, in *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), does however include a use of religious experience, based on the 'principle of credulity'—or, as I prefer to call it, principle of rational credulity.

2. John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 1st ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1957), pp. 132-33, shortened.

3. William Alston, "Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God," *Faith and Philosophy*, Volume 5, Number 4 (October 1988), p. 434.

4. Terence Penelhum, *God and Skepticism* (Boston: Reidell, 1983).

5. William Wainwright, "Mysticism and Sense Perception," *Religious Studies*, Volume 9, Number 3 (1973).

6. John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (London: Macmillan and New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), chapter 7, and *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), chapter 13.

7. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God" in *Faith and Rationality*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 80.

8. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding*, Section II, paragraph 12.

9. David Basinger, "Plantinga, Pluralism and Justified Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy*, Volume 8, Number 1 (January 1991), p. 71.

10. David Hume, *Enquiries*, Section X, Part II, paragraph 95.

11. William Alston, "Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God," p. 444.

12. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).