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Harold A. Netland

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Whereas natural theology traditionally has been understood as an attempt to demonstrate the truth of Christian theism in light of the critiques of agnosticism or atheism, our increased awareness of religious diversity in the West presents fresh questions demanding attention. Several ways in which recent philosophers such as John Hick, William Alston, and Alvin Plantinga have responded to challenges from religious diversity are explored, with limitations of their approaches noted. I argue that something like Ninian Smart's "soft natural theology" or worldview analysis is necessary for an adequate response to religious diversity today.

Natural theology, understood as the attempt to establish claims about God's existence and/or nature apart from appeal to special revelation, presupposes significant disagreement over religious beliefs. Thus the agenda of natural theology, as well as prospects for its success, depends in part upon the nature of the alternative perspectives to which it is a response. Whereas until fairly recently the available alternatives to Christian theism were rather limited (during medieval times, Judaism and Islam; in the modern era, religious agnosticism or atheism), from the 1960s on the West has been marked by increased awareness of religious diversity. Our neighborhoods, schools and businesses include Buddhists, Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Bahai's, Mormons, Muslims, Jews, Christians, and New Agers, as well as atheists. The cultural landscape of North America is being transformed, so that Diana Eck is only slightly guilty of hyperbole when she states, "The United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth."[1] In this essay I will explore some implications of our increased awareness of religious diversity for philosophy of religion, arguing that, for Christian thinkers, natural theology in some form can and should play a significant role in Christian responses to religious diversity.

Natural theology is generally linked to the Christian theological traditions of medieval Europe, culminating in the magisterial system of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. For many today natural theology continues to be defined largely in terms of the agenda and methodology of Aquinas. Scott MacDonald characterizes this tradition, which I will call classical natural theology, as "a kind of demonstrative science" consisting of "truths about God which are either (1) self-evident or evident to sense perception, or (2) derived by deductively valid proofs the (ultimate)

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premises of which are self-evident or evident to sense perception."[2] Even a cursory survey of the philosophy of religion in the West from the thirteenth through the early nineteenth centuries indicates the enormous attraction of this vision of conclusive, demonstrative theistic arguments.

But we should not restrict natural theology to the search for such demonstrative theistic arguments. In the early modern period, for example, John Locke, Joseph Butler and William Paley advanced inductive and probabilistic arguments for Christian theism. Thus, Eugene Long observes that "natural theology is also used in a broader and more inclusive sense to refer to all natural knowledge of God arrived at without appeal to the authority of revelation and faith as manifested in a particular community of faith."[3] Whether understood in the classical deductive sense or more broadly, MacDonald correctly notes that natural theology "is justificatory in nature; that is, it is concerned with establishing the truth of certain theological propositions using standard techniques of reasoning starting from propositions that have some appropriate degree of epistemic justification."[4] With the numbers of religious agnostics and atheists increasing during the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, the disagreements which natural theology was called upon to resolve were those between Christian theism and increasingly influential forms of non-religious naturalism. Since the question of God's existence was at the heart of the debate, special attention was given to theistic arguments.

But the intellectual currents of modernity have not been kind to Christian theism. By the mid-nineteenth century it was widely accepted, by Christians and non-Christians alike, that Christian belief is irrational unless such belief could be shown to be justified. Moreover, in some intellectual circles the assumption that classical natural theology had been thoroughly discredited by David Hume and Immanuel Kant became virtually axiomatic. Writing in 1961, for example, Ninian Smart stated, "Natural theology is the Sick Man of Europe. In view of the subtle and exhaustive objections adduced by Hume, Kant and modern empiricists against the traditional arguments for God's existence, it is no longer reasonable to rely upon these particular supports for theistic belief."[5]

In one of the great ironies of modern intellectual history, however, by the 1970s and 80s there was a remarkable resurgence of interest in natural theology — including theistic arguments. And yet by the late twentieth century the intellectual and cultural contexts in the West had changed considerably, so that traditional questions were being addressed in fresh ways and new issues were demanding attention. Three changes are especially significant. First, there was a clear move away from earlier attempts to demonstrate conclusively the truth of Christian theism to the more modest agenda of showing that it can be reasonable for the Christian in appropriate circumstances to hold Christian beliefs.[6] In part, this reflects a shift away from metaphysics (does God exist?) to epistemology (under what circumstances can it be reasonable for one to believe that God exists?). It is also indicative of the more modest expectations today in religious epistemology. Second, there was a move away from relying upon deductive theistic arguments in favor of an appeal to religious experience as providing the grounds for the rationality of Christian belief. Both of these changes

were responses to the increasingly vigorous critique of religious belief from agnostic or atheist skeptics, and they signal a departure from the methodology and expectations of classical natural theology.

Third, whereas in the past the major intellectual rivals to Christian theism were regarded as religious agnosticism and atheism, more recently there has been recognition that increased awareness of religious diversity itself poses significant questions for Christian claims. No longer are the options merely Christian theism and atheistic naturalism. The question is not simply *whether* to adopt a religious framework but *which* religious perspective to accept. Peter Berger takes us to the heart of the challenge from religious diversity when he states, "We do have a problem of belief, and it not only raises the question of why we should believe in God but why we should believe in *this* God. There are others, after all, and today they are made available in an unprecedented way through the religious supermarket of modern pluralism."[7]

Religious diversity stems from fundamental disagreement over the nature of the cosmos, the religious ultimate, the human predicament and how this predicament might be overcome. Each of the major religious traditions understands itself as having the correct answer to these questions. Which, if any, is right? Or are all to be rejected? It seems clear that awareness of religious diversity does, for many people, reduce epistemic confidence in the beliefs of their own tradition. Should it do so? What are the epistemic implications of deeply rooted religious disagreement?[8] These are not merely academic questions. Ordinary people regularly evaluate alternative perspectives and make choices. Baptists become Buddhists; atheists convert to Baha'i; Hindus become Roman Catholics; and Mormons turn into agnostics. A basic issue for religious epistemology, then, is the basis upon which one should choose among competing claims to religious truth. From the perspective of Christian theism, a viable religious epistemology should provide guidance in answering the question, *Why should one be a Christian instead of accepting one of the many other religious and non-religious alternatives?*

Given the above, we might expect Christian philosophers today to devote considerable attention to this question. But this is not the case, and undoubtedly one reason for this is the much lower degree of confidence many philosophers today have in the capacity of rational reflection to settle fundamental disputes between worldviews. Many — Christian and non-Christian alike — would embrace what can be called the epistemic parity thesis. This is the view that evidential and rational considerations relevant to religious belief are such that no particular religious tradition can be said to be rationally superior to others; the data are sufficiently ambiguous that the major religions enjoy more or less epistemic parity. In his important work *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*, Robert McKim articulates the thesis in terms of religious ambiguity:

> To say that the world is religiously ambiguous is to say that it is open to being read in various ways, both religious and secular, by intelligent, honest people.... The presence of disagreement suggests that the matters about which there is disagreement are ambiguous. In partic-

> ular, disagreement in the area of religion suggests that this is an area in which the available evidence does not point clearly in one direction rather than another, and it suggests that the matters about which religions purport to speak are matters about which it is unclear what we ought to believe.[9]

McKim claims that in light of such ambiguity we ought to adopt a moderate skepticism and tentativeness in our beliefs. "It is unlikely that *certainty* about the details of the doctrine of any particular religion about God is either obligatory or appropriate, and it is likely that tentative belief, at most, is appropriate." An appropriately tentative approach "will view different accounts of the nature or purposes of God, especially the details of those accounts, as equally likely to be true, as stabs in the right direction of something about which it is difficult to be certain. The implication is that theists ought to be skeptical of many of the claims about God that are made by the dominant theistic traditions, including their own."[10] Whether such tepid commitment can be religiously satisfying is at least debatable. Moreover, it is far from obvious that the epistemic parity thesis is the best way to understand implications of religious diversity and disagreement.

II

The epistemic implications of awareness of religious diversity have been understood in various ways, which in turn prompt quite different responses. I will note four possible perspectives, mentioning the first briefly and then giving greater attention to the other three. My concern throughout is with each perspective's capacity to answer the question why one should accept Christian claims rather than other religious alternatives, and the place of natural theology within each perspective in addressing this question. I will argue that while the recent emphasis upon the rationality of Christian belief, as distinct from the truth of Christian claims, and the attempt to ground such rationality of belief in religious experiences can be effective in responding to certain critiques, they are less helpful in dealing with the challenges from religious diversity. For this, some form of natural theology is necessary.

One possible response to religious diversity is skepticism about all religious claims. Religious disagreement, it is said, undermines the claims of any single religion to distinctive truth, and provides positive reasons for rejecting the claims of any particular religion as well as the claims of all religions collectively. Given deeply embedded incompatibilities in truth claims among religions, and the absence of any clear procedure for adjudicating such conflicting claims satisfactorily, the wisest course surely is to dismiss all such claims as false or, at best, to withhold judgment concerning their truth or falsity.

This is an important perspective which deserves a much more comprehensive response than can be provided here. A few brief comments will have to suffice. An adequate response to such skepticism would involve demonstrating that religious disagreement by itself does not demand rejection of the claims of any particular religion nor even a general suspension

of judgment. Moreover, the skeptical response is often supported by appeal to the epistemic parity thesis, so that, it is said, no single religious tradition is in a rationally privileged position. Thus, an adequate response should also involve showing the inadequacy of the epistemic parity thesis, something that the fourth option to be considered below attempts to do.

Religious pluralism is another possible response to awareness of religious diversity. Pluralism holds that it is unreasonable to reject the claims of all of the major religions as simply false; we should assume that despite clear differences among them the major religions can be said to be "in touch" with the same ultimate reality, thus providing equally legitimate religious alternatives. Religious pluralism is thus said to be rationally preferable to either philosophical naturalism, which dismisses all religious claims as unjustified, or any form of religious particularism, which maintains that it alone is rationally superior to other religious traditions. John Hick, the most influential advocate of religious pluralism in recent years, adopts a kind of natural theology to defend two theses: (1) It can be rational for persons in appropriate circumstances to adopt a religious interpretation of the universe rather than a naturalistic interpretation; and (2) The skeptical response to awareness of religious disagreement can be mitigated only if we adopt a pluralistic understanding of the religions as the best explanation for the similarities and differences across religious traditions.[11]

Hick's writings over the years both exemplify and have helped to influence the shift away from demonstrative theistic arguments to the rationality of religious belief, as well as the attempt to ground such rationality in religious experience. For example, already in *Faith and Knowledge* (1957) Hick rejected the agenda of classical natural theology and acknowledged that the traditional theistic arguments are either clearly unsound or at best inconclusive. Rather than try to demonstrate the *truth* of Christian theism, he argued that it could be entirely *reasonable* or *rational* for a Christian in appropriate circumstances to believe in God, and that the rationality of Christian belief is grounded in what Christians take to be experiences of the presence and activity of God.

> We become conscious of the existence of other objects in the universe, whether things or persons, either by experiencing them for ourselves or by inferring their existence from evidences within our experience. The awareness of God reported by the ordinary religious believer is of the former kind. He professes, not to have inferred that there is a God, but that God as a living being has entered into his own experience. He claims to enjoy something which he describes as an experience of God.[12]

Thirty years later, Hick expressed the principle as follows: "It is as reasonable for those who experience their lives as being lived in the presence of God, to believe in the reality of God, as for all of us to form beliefs about our environment on the basis of our experience of it."[13]

In *Faith and Knowledge* Hick also introduced the notions of "experiencing-as", or the inherently interpretive nature of all experience, and the religiously ambiguous nature of the world. Both themes have been influential

in subsequent philosophy of religion and are integral to his later model of religious pluralism. Hick distinguished three dimensions of reality implicit in our experiences — the natural or physical, the human and ethical, and the divine or religious realms. On each level there is an irreducible element of interpretation in our experience, with the greatest degree of epistemological ambiguity on the religious dimension. Given such ambiguity, the determinative factor in rational assessment is the nature of one's own experience. The person who experiences God interprets the totality of life theistically; the one who fails to experience God interprets life naturalistically. Either response *can* be rational, depending upon's one's particular circumstances and experiences.

Interestingly, although *Faith and Knowledge* was written in an attempt to defend the reasonableness of Christian belief against atheistic critiques in the 1950s, several decades later Hick had abandoned Christian orthodoxy and was an apologist for religious pluralism. But in spite of the theological changes, his basic epistemological framework remained intact. What became apparent in his later work, however, is that some of the earlier epistemological assumptions which were so effective in defending Christian belief against attacks from atheism can also be used, when modified slightly, to argue in a more general way for the rationality of non-Christian religious beliefs on the basis of religious experiences within other religious traditions. This was recognized by Hick as early as 1971, in *Arguments for the Existence of God.*

> The principle which I have used to justify as rational the faith of a Christian who on the basis of his own religious experience cannot help but believing in the reality of "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ", also operates to justify as rational the faith of a Muslim who on the basis of *his* religious experience cannot help believing in the reality of Allah and his providence; and the faith of the Buddhist who on the basis of *his* religious experience cannot help accepting the Buddhist picture of the universe; and so on.[14]

Thus, although Hick's appeal to a rather modest notion of rationality and the centrality of religious experience in justifying Christian belief was effective in deflecting the challenge from atheism, it did so by allowing in principle for the rationality of adherents of other religions in holding *their* respective beliefs. While it provides for the justification of a Christian believing as she does, it does not give positive reasons for someone else who does not already interpret the world "Christianly" — a Buddhist or atheist — to accept Christian claims as true. The later Hick, of course, rejects the idea that Christian theism *can* be shown to be distinctively true in favor of a model of religious pluralism which sees the major religions as roughly equally legitimate responses to the divine reality, the Real.

Natural theology can play two quite different roles with respect to Hick's model of religious pluralism. Hick uses a kind of natural theology to support his model as the preferred alternative to both a reductionistic naturalism and various forms of religious particularism. On the other hand, critics of religious pluralism can also appeal to natural theology to

argue against Hick's model, pointing out problems with Hick's thesis and providing reasons for regarding orthodox Christian claims, for example, as distinctively true. As an explanatory model for religious diversity, Hick's proposal must be evaluated in terms of internal consistency and its capacity to account for phenomena of actual religious traditions, and I have argued elsewhere that, in spite of its undeniable appeal, it is fatally flawed on both counts.[15]

The third response to religious diversity maintains that although it is not possible for any single religion (including Christianity) to be shown to be rationally preferable to other religious and non-religious alternatives, it can be reasonable for a Christian in appropriate circumstances to believe that Christianity is distinctively true and efficacious. This perspective, embraced by many Christian thinkers, has the merits of combining epistemic modesty with recognition of the epistemic propriety (in some sense) of Christian beliefs. William P. Alston and Alvin Plantinga have been especially significant in developing this response.

Perhaps the most influential recent attempt to ground the rationality of religious belief in religious experience is William P. Alston's *Perceiving God*[16]. Alston examines "doxastic practices", or belief forming practices which give rise to beliefs. His argument rests upon a crucial analogy between practices relying upon sense perception which provide access to the physical world around us, resulting in beliefs about the physical world, and religious practices, which provide the believer with experiences or "perceptions" of God, thereby producing beliefs about God. In both sense perception and perception of God beliefs are formed by engaging in certain "doxastic practices", or socially established practices resulting in formation of appropriate beliefs. In neither case is it possible to justify the reliability of the doxastic practices in a strictly non-circular manner. Yet in both cases we have established procedures for distinguishing appropriate from inappropriate beliefs. Thus, he argues, beliefs formed through the relevant doxastic practices can be granted prima facie justification, and if there are no sufficient "overriders" (factors which would rebut or undermine the beliefs) then they can be considered "unqualifiedly justified" as well. So the Christian can be rationally justified in believing in God based upon his experience or perception of God.

Now, as Alston himself recognizes, religious diversity presents a twofold challenge to his thesis. First, while Alston's argument supports the rationality of Christian beliefs, based upon Christian experiences of God, it also in principle supports the rationality of the beliefs of practitioners of other religions, based upon *their* respective religious experiences. At best, then, Alston's argument supports a weaker notion of rationality of religious belief, such that divergent religious communities all can be rational in holding their respective beliefs, even if these beliefs are in fact mutually incompatible. But, more significantly, religious diversity itself actually seems to undermine Alston's thesis about the general reliability of religious doxastic practices for religious belief formation. Here the differences between sense perception and religious perception are important. While the doxastic practices for sense perception produce similar beliefs about the external world among diverse peoples (water is wet for Buddhists and Christians alike),

the doxastic practices of different religious communities result in strikingly different, even incompatible, beliefs. Thus, religious diversity seems to call into question the reliability of any single doxastic practice, including that of the Christian community. For even if one form of practice is uniquely reliable in religious belief formation, we have no non-question-begging way of determining which one that is. While acknowledging the force of this objection, however, Alston concludes that it still can be rational for the Christian to "sit tight with the practice of which I am a master and which serves me so well in guiding my activity in the world" and to continue to hold Christian beliefs on the basis of experiences of God.[17]

In responding to Alston, however, Hick argues that if a Christian is justified in this manner in believing that Christianity is uniquely true then it follows that the Christian should conclude that most of the beliefs of adherents of other religions, based upon their respective experiences, are actually false. But if so, then it also follows that most of the religious beliefs based upon religious experience worldwide are in fact false. And thus, for one particular religious community to assume that *its* doxastic practices are reliable and that *their* beliefs are justified, when those of the other religious communities are not, is simply arbitrary unless this assumption can be justified on independent grounds.[18] In an incisive assessment of Alston's thesis, William Wainwright similarly concludes that if the rationality of Christian beliefs is to be established then the acceptability of Christian doxastic practices for Christian belief formation will need to be supported by "introducing empirical and metaphysical arguments that establish the superiority of (e.g.) the Christian worldview" — a task normally associated with natural theology.[19] Significantly, Alston is open to some role for natural theology in establishing the epistemic superiority, to some degree, of Christian theism to other alternatives, although he does not develop this possibility. Toward the end of *Perceiving God*, he states that "the attempt to argue from neutral starting points for the truth of Christian beliefs deserves much more serious consideration than is commonly accorded it today in philosophical and (liberal) theological circles. I believe that much can be done to support a theistic metaphysics, and that something can be done by way of recommending the 'evidences of Christianity'.[20]

Alvin Plantinga has also addressed the issue of religious diversity from the perspective of Reformed epistemology. Plantinga has provided a trenchant critique of "classical evidentialism", which is said to provide the epistemological framework within which both classical natural theology and its critics operated. Contrary to earlier assumptions, Plantinga claims that there is no need for the Christian believer to demonstrate the truth of Christian theism, or even to provide "sufficient reasons" for Christian faith. As Plantinga famously put it, it can be "entirely right, rational, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all."[21] For the Christian in appropriate circumstances, belief in God can be "properly basic" and thus be epistemically appropriate apart from any appeal to supporting evidence.[22] More recently, Plantinga has argued that Christian beliefs can be warranted, where warrant is understood as that which, when combined with true belief, results in knowledge. Warrant is connected with proper function, so that "a belief has warrant just if it is produced by cogni-

tive processes or faculties that are functioning properly, in a cognitive environment that is propitious for the exercise of cognitive powers, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at the production of true belief."[23]

With respect to the challenge of religious diversity, Plantinga maintains that even when confronted by radical religious disagreement the Christian exclusivist need not defend his beliefs by appealing to reasons for accepting Christian claims rather than embracing religious skepticism or the beliefs of another tradition.[24] There is no need for the Christian to engage in natural theology in order to show that Christian belief is rational.[25] But this position, whatever its merits on other grounds, provides little help in resolving the question raised earlier, Why should one be a Christian rather than a follower of another religious tradition?

Let us assume that Plantinga is correct in saying that it can be entirely reasonable for belief in God to be properly basic in appropriate circumstances. Philip Quinn, among others, notes that this move comes with a price, for "this is a game any number can play. Followers of Muhammed, followers of Buddha, and even followers of the Reverend Moon can join the fun."[26] Quinn's point is an important one. It is difficult to see why belief in God can be properly basic for Christians but fundamental beliefs of other religions cannot also be properly basic for their adherents.[27] For example, the central insights of Zen Buddhism — including the belief that ultimate reality is *sunyata*, or emptiness — are said to be perceived directly in the experience of *satori* or enlightenment. They are not the product of rational argument, indeed evidence and argument are counter-productive in attaining enlightenment. Moreover, the experience of *satori* grounds the relevant claims. Thus, belief in emptiness as the ultimate reality is a basic belief for Zen Buddhists. Is it also properly basic for Buddhists? Nothing that I have seen shows why this could not be the case.

Nor will it help matters to appeal to Plantinga's discussion of proper function at this point, for the dispute then simply shifts to the question of what constitutes proper function. Many Buddhists, for example, maintain that belief in a personal creator God is both false and the product of malfunctioning cognitive faculties. The dispute, then, between the Christian and Buddhist is not merely a disagreement over what beliefs can be properly basic. It also concerns what constitutes proper function of the cognitive faculties, and settling *that* question requires determining the truth value of some of the central metaphysical claims of the Christian or Buddhist traditions. Why should one be a Christian rather than a Buddhist? In spite of its strengths in other respects, Plantinga's discussion of proper basicality, proper function and warrant provides little guidance in determining whether Christian theism is true or rationally preferable to other alternatives.[28]

The move away from the agenda of classical natural theology to the attempt to establish the rationality of Christian belief based upon the experiences of Christians, while significant in some respects, is inconclusive. It can provide an effective response to some critiques of Christian theism from philosophical naturalism, and the arguments of Hick, Alston and Plantinga do support the rationality of holding Christian beliefs in appropriate circumstances. However, as we have seen, this involves a rather weak notion of rationality which cannot rule out the rationality of others —

non-religious naturalists as well as adherents of other religions — also holding beliefs incompatible with Christian theism. Moreover, it provides no reason for the secularist, who does not have religious experiences, to embrace any particular religion. Thus, what is required is an approach to religious diversity which takes us beyond appeal merely to religious experience and reliance upon a weaker notion of rationality, and for this some form of natural theology is inescapable.

III

A fourth response to religious diversity maintains that it is possible to show, in some sense, that Christian theism is rationally preferable to other religious and non-religious alternatives. Those advocating this option reject a strong notion of religious ambiguity. At the same time that John Hick wrote *Faith and Knowledge*, Ninian Smart, an acknowledged authority on Hindu and Buddhist thought as well as a Christian analytic philosopher, challenged Christians to address the question, "Why be a Christian rather than a Buddhist?"[29] In the same 1961 essay in which he referred to natural theology as the "Sick Man of Europe", Smart also argued:

> Any appeal to religious experience (whether intuitive or otherwise) must inevitably lead to a consideration of the experience not merely of Christians but of Buddhists and others, and thereby to an examination of the way experience is linked to different sorts of doctrines. Through this investigation one is bound to ask what the criteria are for choosing between different formulations of religious belief. And from the apologetic point of view it is necessary to give reasons for accepting one's own faith rather than some other.[30]

While rejecting the methodology and expectations of classical natural theology, Smart advocated a fresh kind of natural theology that takes seriously the issues of competing truth claims across religions. Smart understood religions as complex, multi-dimensional phenomena, with each religious tradition manifesting a particular worldview or set of core beliefs in terms of which it interprets humanity, the cosmos, and the religious ultimate. Worldviews make explicit or implicit claims about the way things are, or should be, and Smart called for "worldview analysis", by which he meant both the analysis of the ways beliefs function internally within a system as well as the relation between core beliefs of diverse worldviews. Smart contended that such analysis was incomplete unless it included assessment of the truth or rationality of different worldviews, and thus a primary task for "cross-cultural philosophy of religion" is "to clarify the criteria for determining the truth as between worldviews".[31]

Smart spoke of this project as "soft natural theology", and although in later years he became increasingly preoccupied with the phenomenology of comparative religion, up until his death he continued to call for a responsible form of worldview analysis. In speaking of "soft" natural theology Smart distinguished his proposal from classical natural theology. While recognizing that there are some non-arbitrary criteria that can be

applied in evaluating worldviews, and that there may be good reasons for accepting Christian theism as opposed to other religious alternatives, Smart did not think that we have demonstrative knock-down arguments which resolve the issues conclusively. A degree of ambiguity and uncertainty is unavoidable. So even as he called for a soft natural theology in the context of religious diversity, Smart was fairly modest in his expectations for this enterprise.

There are, of course, degrees of softness. While Smart correctly recognized that with respect to religious diversity natural theology is not likely to be conclusive, he was perhaps excessively modest in his expectations for what can be accomplished through worldview analysis. To be sure, the complexity of the issues should not be minimized. But, contrary to the epistemic parity thesis, is it really the case that the proposition "God exists" has no greater evidential or rational support than its denial? Or is it really true that the central claims of Theravada Buddhism or Jainism have the same degree of rational support as those of orthodox Christianity? I think not.

Undoubtedly one of the most impressive recent attempts at natural theology is the sustained probabilistic argument of Richard Swinburne. Over the course of seven books, Swinburne argues for the coherence and plausibility of orthodox Christian theism.[32] After rich and rigorous discussion (and repeated application of Bayes Theorem) Swinburne concludes that "on our total evidence theism is more probable than not."[33] If Swinburne is correct then strong views on religious ambiguity will need to be modified and there would be strong reasons for preferring Christian theism to its denial.

But Swinburne constructs his argument in reference to two options — Christian theism and its denial, atheism. As we have noted, however, there are many religious alternatives to Christian theism, and J. L. Schellenberg correctly points out that Swinburne has conducted his lengthy argument with almost no reference to the plausibility of other religious worldviews, nor does he include in his calculation of probabilities the impact of awareness of religious diversity. Schellenberg contends that Swinburne must show that Christian theism is "*more* probable than *all other contenders*".[34] Swinburne, in turn, rejects Schellenberg's claim.

> I do not need to make a detailed investigation [of all other religions] if I can show that none of those religions even claim for themselves characteristics to be expected a priori of a true religion and claimed by Christianity, and that there is enough evidence that Christianity does have these characteristics. For then I will be in a position to argue that there are reasons adequate to show that the Christian religion is more likely to be true than they are.[35]

While Swinburne cannot be expected to investigate the claims of every other religion, surely the phenomena of the major religious traditions – particular experiences and metaphysical claims in Buddhism and Hinduism, for example – are relevant to the calculation of the overall probability of Christian theism. But it is far from clear how such factors should be assessed within the Bayesian probabilistic framework of Swinburne's argument.

Alternatively, soft natural theology in the context of religious diversity might focus upon the epistemic credentials of a few particular beliefs central to certain religious worldviews. To take an obvious example, if it can be established that God, as understood within theism, exists, this provides strong reasons for rejecting the claims of religions such as Theravada Buddhism, which are generally regarded as incompatible with theism. While classical theistic arguments should continue to be explored, in light of the perhaps impossibly high expectations that accompany deductive arguments, and the lack of consensus after centuries of debate, this is probably not the most fruitful approach.[36] More promising might be the cumulative case, or inference to the best explanation, argument, which maintains that a strong case for the truth of Christian theism can be established through the careful accumulation and analysis of a wide variety of data from various dimensions of our experience and the world.[37] While none of the phenomena, either individually or collectively, entail the truth of Christian theism, the argument claims that Christian theism provides a more plausible explanation for the data than other alternatives. There is of course an inescapable measure of personal judgment in such arguments, but this does not mean that such judgments are necessarily arbitrary. As William Abraham puts it, "Personal judgment simply means the ability to weigh evidence without using some sort of formal calculus."[38]

Soft natural theology can also proceed through critique of particular claims made by other perspectives. We might consider the epistemology of religious experience and claims based upon certain kinds of introspective experiences, and in so doing challenge the epistemic parity thesis. Is it really the case that it is just as rational to accept as veridical purported experiences of Nirguna Brahman among Hindus or of Emptiness among Buddhists as it is to accept purported experiences of the personal God of Christian theism? Keith Yandell, among others, has persuasively argued that certain introspective enlightenment experiences at the heart of Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Buddhism *cannot* be veridical.[39] If he is correct, this has significant implications for religious claims based upon such experiences. Similarly, if the notion of *anattta* (no self) in classical Buddhism is indeed incoherent, as many argue, then this provides positive reason for rejecting a central tenet of many Buddhist traditions.[40] And so on.

Soft natural theology should be appropriately modest in expectations. There is no reason to expect that an appropriate natural theology in contexts of religious diversity requires a simple algorithmic procedure for testing worldviews or even that it should seek a conclusive deductive argument for theism. Nor should we suppose that all reasonable persons, when presented with the relevant evidence and arguments, will be readily convinced. Few issues of any real significance meet these expectations. Nevertheless, the claim that worldview analysis can result in identifying good reasons for preferring Christian theism to other alternatives seems eminently reasonable.

That rational considerations of this sort can be significant in a person's abandoning a non-Christian worldview and embracing Christian theism is illustrated in the recent conversion of Paul Williams from Buddhism to Roman Catholicism. Williams, Professor of Indian and Tibetan Philosophy

and Head of the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Bristol, was for twenty years a practicing Buddhist and is a widely published scholar of Buddhism. But he recently converted to Roman Catholicism, and he has shared his spiritual and intellectual journey in the remarkable book *The Unexpected Way: On Converting From Buddhism to Catholicism*.[41] Among the factors involved in his eventual rejection of Buddhism were his growing intellectual dissatisfaction with some central Buddhist metaphysical and epistemological claims, including the inability of Buddhism to account for the contingency of the universe. It was Buddhism's failure to address satisfactorily the question "Why is there something instead of nothing?" which prompted Williams to look again at theism. As he puts it, "I have come to believe that there is a gap in the Buddhist explanation of things which for me can only be filled by God, the sort of God spoken of in a Christian tradition such as that of St. Thomas Aquinas." Williams is worth quoting at length on this point:

> Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there anything at all? And why is there a world in which, among other things, the processes (causation, etc.) detected by the Buddha are the case? Why is it that this way of things *is* the way of things? As the Buddhist scriptures (*sutras*) have it: "Whether Buddhas occur or do not occur, the true way of things (Sanskrit: *dharmata*) remains." Why? Why is it like that? The *dharmata* is not what we call "necessarily existent". That is, there is no logical *contradiction* in a world in which things are not like that.... Thus the *dharmata*, the true way of things, is contingent. It could have been otherwise.... We have a contingent fact or state of affairs, how things happen to be in the actual world, for which we are entitled to ask the reason....
>
> Any answer to that question — if there is one — would have to be a *necessary* being, a being about which it would make no sense to ask the question why *that* exists rather than not. For the theist God is the answer to this question, and God is needed as the ultimate explanation for existence at any time, keeping things in whatever existence things have.
>
> I think I have to agree with the theist.
>
> For me the question "Why is there something rather than nothing?" has become a bit like what Zen Buddhists call a *koan*. It is a constant niggling question that has worried and goaded me (often, I think, against my will) into a different level of understanding, a different vision, of the world and our place in it.[42]

In teasing out the implications of contingency – in turning Leibniz's question into a Zen *koan* – Williams captures nicely what is at the heart of classical cosmological arguments and applies it effectively in worldview analysis, in this case, analysis of Buddhist metaphysics. Here is a creative and promising suggestion for soft natural theology with respect to religious diversity. The analogy to a Zen *koan* is intriguing, for just as the *koan* is used in Zen to prompt one to see reality from a radically new perspective, so too soft natural theology in worldview analysis ought to stimulate

reconsideration of basic ontological assumptions, prodding one to the recognize the plausibility of Christian theism.

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

NOTES

1. Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a 'Christian Country' Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) p. 4.
2. Scott MacDonald, "Natural Theology", in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed Edward Craig, vol. 6 (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) p. 708.
3. Eugene Thomas Long, "Introduction", in *Prospects for Natural Theology: Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, vol. 25, ed. Eugene Thomas Long (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1992) p. 2.
4. Scott MacDonald, "Natural Theology", p. 711.
5. Ninian Smart, "Revelation, Reason and Religions", in *Prospect for Metaphysics: Essays of Metaphysical Exploration*, ed. Ian Ramsey (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961) p. 80.
6. The term "reasonable", of course, bristles with controversy. Recent work has explored the complexities of notions such as rationality, justification and warrant. For our purposes the three concepts can be regarded as roughly overlapping concepts which refer to the state of being in an appropriate positive epistemic status with respect to one's beliefs. Disputes center upon the nature of this positive epistemic state and the necessary and sufficient conditions for its obtaining, issues which cannot be pursued here.
7. Peter Berger, *A Far Glory: The Quest for Faith in an Age of Credulity* (New York: Anchor, 1992) pp. 146-147.
8. For contrasting perspectives on some epistemological issues emerging from awareness of religious diversity see Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); David Basinger, *Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002); and Robert McKim, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
9. Robert McKim, *Religious Ambiguity and Religious Diversity*, pp. 25, 181-82
10. Ibid., pp. 123-124. Emphasis in the original.
11. Hick actually speaks of natural theology in a more restricted sense: "[T]he existence of God must be held to be possible — and not merely a bare logical possibility, but an *important* possibility — if 'the experience of living in God's presence' is to be taken seriously. This is where natural theology comes into its own. Its office is not to prove the existence of God, or even show it to be probable, but to establish both the possibility of divine existence and the importance (that is, the explanatory power) of this possibility. I believe that reason can ascertain both that there *may* be a God and that this is a genuinely important possibility. In that case theistic religious experience has to be taken seriously." Emphasis in the original. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) p. 219. But his argument for pluralism can also be taken in a broader sense as an exercise in natural theology defending the pluralist thesis against both philosophical naturalism and various forms of religious particularism.

12. John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, 2nd ed., (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, [1957] 1966) p. 95.

13. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 210.

14. John Hick, *Arguments for the Existence of God* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971) pp. 117-118. Emphasis in the original.

15. Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001) chapter 7. See also Paul Rhodes Eddy, *John Hick's Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002); and Philip L. Quinn and Kevin Meeker, eds. *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

16. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). Alston acknowledges Hick's *Faith and Knowledge* as a formative influence upon his own approach to religious epistemology. See William P. Alston, "John Hick: Faith and Knowledge", in *God, Truth, and Reality: Essays in Honour of John Hick*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993) p. 25.

17. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 274.

18. John Hick, "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism", *Faith and Philosophy* 14:3 (1997) p. 278.

19. William J. Wainwright, "Religious Language, Religious Experience, and Religious Pluralism", in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, ed. Thomas D. Senor (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995) p. 187.

20. William P. Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 270. While he "find[s] certain of the [theistic] arguments to be not wholly lacking in cogency," Alston is clearly more sympathetic to a broader conception of natural theology as the attempt "to show that we can attain the best understanding of this or that area of experience or sphere of concern — morality, human life, society, human wickedness, science, art, mathematics, or whatever — if we look at it from the standpoint of a theistic, or more specifically Christian.... metaphysics." Ibid., p. 289.

21. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Belief in God", in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983) p. 17.

22. Although not generally construed as such, Caroline Franks Davis correctly points out that Plantinga's thesis can be understood as an argument from religious experience, "for belief in God turns out to be properly basic only because it is generated by experiences — religious experiences — which there is no good reason to think delusive." Caroline Franks Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) p. 87.

23. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. xi.

24. See Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism", in *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*, pp. 191-215; and Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, pp. 422-457.

25. Plantinga adopts a rather ambivalent position on natural theology itself. On the one hand, he clearly rejects the idea that natural theology is necessary for rational belief in God, even in cases of awareness of radical religious disagreement. Nor is he optimistic about the prospects of natural theology settling basic issues of religious disagreement. Nevertheless, he does allow for a limited role for natural theology and acknowledges that it might have some benefit for some people. See Alvin Plantinga, "The Prospects for Natural Theology", in *Philosophical Perspectives, 5: Philosophy of Religion, 1991*, ed. James E. Tomberlin (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1991), pp. 287-315; and *idem*, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology", in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, 54, (1980) pp. 49-62.

For a helpful discussion of his views on natural theology with respect to religious diversity see Julian Willard, "Plantinga's Epistemology of Religious Belief and the Problem of Religious Diversity", *Heythrop Journal*, 44:3, July 2003, pp. 275-293.

26. Philip Quinn, "In Search of the Foundations of Theism", *Faith and Philosophy* 2:4 (1985) p. 473.

27. See Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, pp. 269-275.

28. On this point see Richard Swinburne, "Plantinga on Warrant", *Religious Studies*, 37, 2001 pp. 206-207. William Hasker makes a similar point in "Proper Function, Reliabilism, and Religious Knowledge: A Critique of Plantinga's Epistemology", in *Christian Perspectives on Religious Knowledge*, eds. C. Stephen Evans and Merold Westphal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) pp. 82-83.

29. See Ninian Smart, *A Dialogue of Religions* (London: SCM, 1960) p. 11.

30. Ninian Smart, "Revelation, Reason and Religions", p. 92.

31. Ninian Smart, "The Philosophy of Worldviews, or the Philosophy of Religion Transformed", in *Religious Pluralism and Truth: Essays on Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Thomas Dean (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) p. 24. See also Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine, *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) chapters 2-4; Ninain Smart, *Reasons and Faiths: An Investigation of Religious Discourse, Christian and Non-Christian* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958); *idem*, "Soft Natural Theology", in *Prospects for Natural Theology*, pp. 198-206; *idem*, pp. 17-31; and *idem*, *Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs*, 2nd ed., (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995).

32. See *The Coherence of Theism* (1977, rev. ed., 1993); *The Existence of God* (1979, rev. ed., 1991); *Faith and Reason* (1981); *Responsibility and Atonement* (1989); *Revelation* (1992); *The Christian God* (1994); and *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (1998). All volumes published by Oxford University Press (Clarendon Press).

33. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, p. 291.

34. J. L. Schellenberg, "Christianity Saved? Comments on Swinburne's Apologetic Strategies in the Tetralogy", *Religious Studies*, 38, 2002, p. 288. Emphasis in the original.

35. Richard Swinburne, "Response to My Commentators", *Religious Studies*, 38, 2002, pp. 310-311.

36. For a good discussion of the classical theistic arguments see Stephen T. Davis, *God, Reason and Theistic Proofs* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

37. On cumulative case arguments see Basil Mitchell, *The Justification of Religious Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); and William J. Abraham, "Cumulative Case Arguments for Christian Theism", in *The Rationality of Religious Belief: Essays in Honour of Basil Mitchell*, eds. William J. Abraham and Steven W. Holtzer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) pp. 17-37.

38. William J. Abraham, "Cumulative Case Arguments for Christian Theism". p. 34.

39. See Keith Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999) chapters 12-13; *idem*, *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993) chapters 8-9, 13-14.

40. See Keith Yandell, *Philosophy of Religion*, chapter 12.

41. Paul Williams, *The Unexpected Way: On Converting From Buddhism to Catholicism* (Edinburgh and New York: T & T Clark, 2002).

42. Ibid., pp. 27, 29-30. Emphasis in the original.