

PERCEIVING GOD?:

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF WILLIAM ALSTON'S REFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of William Alston's contribution to the Reformed epistemology movement, which holds as its central claim the idea that belief in God can, under the appropriate circumstances, be properly basic. In particular this paper addresses Alston's arguments for his claim that belief in God is a form of, or closely analogous to, perception. The paper begins by setting out Alston's theory, before articulating the main lines of objection that have been raised against Alston's arguments. The paper concludes with an analysis of whether or not Alston's arguments offer genuine support to the Reformed epistemology project.

Key Concepts: Reformed epistemology; *De jure* objection to religious belief; Religious experience; Sense perception; Ethics of belief

Introduction

William P Alston, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Syracuse, is undoubtedly one of the leading figures of contemporary epistemology. His unquestionable impact on the field of epistemology in general has given quite some weight to his many incursions into the specific area of religious epistemology. Alston is unquestionably a central pillar of the Reformed epistemology movement, which is united by the epistemic claim that that belief in God is (at least in some cases) properly basic – that is to say, that “belief in God can be rational and warranted apart from being based on any other propositions” (Koehl, 2001, 168). The purpose of the arguments offered by Reformed epistemologists is to oppose what Plantinga calls the “*de jure*” objection to theistic belief – the idea that it is somehow irrational, a dereliction of epistemic duty, or in some other sense epistemically unacceptable, to believe in God. This objection is distinct from what Plantinga labels the “*de facto*” objection – the objection that, whatever the rational status of belief in God, is in fact, a *false* belief. The primary (and limited) goal of Reformed epistemology, then, is to defend Christian belief against the *de jure* objection, thereby showing that “everything really depends on the *truth* of Christian belief” (Plantinga 2000, xiii).

In what follows I shall begin by setting out Alston's theory of religious epistemology. I then articulate the main lines of objection that have been raised against Alston's theory, and conclude with an analysis of whether or not Alston's arguments offer genuine support to the Reformed epistemology project.

Alston's Theory

Like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, the two other pillars of the Reformed epistemology movement, Alston's first major contribution to the core project of Reformed epistemology came in his contribution to the book *Faith and Rationality* (1983), in a paper

entitled "Christian Experience and Christian Belief". Prior to that paper Alston had produced a number of papers in general epistemology that laid important groundwork for his contribution to Reformed epistemology¹. Though "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" was Alston's first contribution to Reformed epistemology proper, in that it explicitly deals with specifically Christian belief, it must, however, be bracketed with a closely related paper published the preceding year, entitled "Religious Experience and Religious Belief". It would in fact be quite legitimate to consider "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" to be a development of "Religious Experience and Religious Belief", for while the title and opening gambit² of the latter paper suggest that it is religious belief in general that Alston is dealing with, it soon becomes clear that it is specifically Christian belief that he has in mind.

In "Religious Experience and Religious Belief" Alston deals broadly with what he calls "M-beliefs" (where "M" stands for "manifestation"). These are "beliefs to the effect that God, as conceived in theistic religions, is doing something that is directed to the subject of the experience – that God is speaking to him, strengthening him, enlightening him, giving him courage, guiding him, sustaining him in being, or just being present to him" (Alston 1982, 4). The question on which the paper focuses is whether such beliefs might be epistemically justifiable. Alston approaches his subject by setting up a comparison between "Christian epistemic practice" (CP), which involves "M-beliefs", and "the practice of forming beliefs about the physical environment on the basis of sense-experience" which he calls "perceptual practice" (PP).

Before embarking on this mission of epistemic comparison, however, Alston adds an important rider – that he takes it that both sensory experience and religious experience could at most only provide *prima facie* justification for the beliefs that they give rise to. With regard to sense experience he writes that beliefs arising from these will only be justified under "favourable circumstances" – "If I am confronted with a complicated arrangement of mirrors, I may not be justified in believing that there is an oak tree in front of me, even though it looks for all the world as if there is. Again, it may look for all the world as if water is running uphill, but the general improbability of this greatly diminishes the justification the corresponding belief receives from that experience" (Alston 1982, 5). Likewise with religious perception: "It would seem that direct experiential justification for M-beliefs, is also, at most, *prima facie*. Beliefs about the nature and ways of God are often used to override M-beliefs, particularly beliefs concerning communications from God. If I report that God told me to kill all phenomenologists, fellow Christians will, no doubt, dismiss the report on the grounds that God would not give me any such injunction as that" (Alston 1982, 6).

Alston's central argument here begins with the observation that the perceived difference in epistemic legitimacy between CP and PP, as argued by CP's detractors, exists because of certain widely recognised differences between CP and PP – differences that (as van Inwagen helpfully summarises) "center around the fact that PP prescribes standard ways of checking the veridicality of particular sensory episodes and the (alleged) fact that the prescriptions of PP are followed by all normal adults of every age and clime" (Van Inwagen

¹ See for example his "Varieties of Privileged Access" (1971), "Has Foundationalism been Refuted?" (1976a), "Self-Warrant: A Neglected Form of Privileged Access" (1976b), and "Two Types of Foundationalism" (1977).

² "Can religious experience provide any ground or basis for religious belief? Can it serve to justify religious belief, or make it rational? This paper will differ from many others in the literature by virtue of looking at this question in the light of basic epistemological issues. Throughout we will be comparing the epistemology of religious experience with the religious epistemology of sense perception" (Alston 1982, 1).

1982, 13). Alston argues, however, that the commonly cited differences between PP and CP in fact offer no reasons for taking CP not to be reliable. Van Inwagen helpfully illustrates this by asking us to imagine the following entirely feasible account of God and his ways:

"God exists and is so 'wholly other' that we can only dimly grasp his nature and can discover no 'regularities' on the basis of religious experiences. He decrees that religious experiences will be comparatively rare, owing to the fact that they are reserved for very special people in very special circumstances. Nonetheless people who do have these experiences experience God and come to know truths about him thereby." This story entails both that religious experiences are (sometimes) veridical and that these experiences differ from sense experience in the ways commonly cited. Since no one has ever given any good reason for supposing that this story is false, no one has any reason for supposing that the commonly cited differences between CP and PP are a compelling reason for supposing CP to be unreliable. And, therefore, CP is justified in the only sense in which PP is justified: there is no known compelling reason for supposing it to be unreliable (Van Inwagen 1982, 13-14).

This argument-trajectory is continued in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief". Having already argued that there is no relevant difference between "perceptual practice" and "Christian epistemic practice", Alston moves on to look more closely at the idea that one is epistemically justified in each of these practices. Going back to the famous confrontation between William Clifford and William James over the ethics of belief, Alston develops two tests for epistemic justification. From Clifford he draws the view that "one is obliged to refrain from engaging in a practice unless one has adequate reasons for supposing it to be reliable". James, on the other hand, provides a less demanding test – "one is justified in engaging in a practice provided one does not have sufficient reasons for regarding it as unreliable" (Alston 1983, 116). Alston assumes, without argument, that PP is justified by the Jamesian test. The Cliffordian test, not surprisingly, provides a greater challenge. Alston points out that PP is very difficult to assess in terms of the Cliffordian test, since it is not a belief or even a set of beliefs that is facing the test, but an entire practice. "Since this practice, and what is based on it, constitutes our sole access to the subject matter, we cannot carry out a direct investigation into its reliability by comparing its deliverances with how the subject matter is, since we have no other way of determining the latter" (Alston 1983, 117 – 118). How then to establish a non-circular justification for PP? Alston conducts a brief survey of the main attempts at doing this. Firstly, he points out there are those who attempt to justify PP on the basis of premises that have not been obtained from PP itself – Descartes' appeal to the goodness of God being one such case. Secondly, there is the attempt to justify PP on the basis of some sort of transcendental argument, in which PP is seen as inescapably necessary to the existence of experience itself (or some similar claim). Finally Alston draws his readers' attention to pragmatic arguments for the justification of PP. All of these approaches, however, fall short, in Alston's approximation. Attempts to justify PP on the basis of premises not obtained by PP are all vulnerable to scepticism. Transcendental arguments can at most show us something about the nature of our experience, but are unable to tell us about how things actually are. And finally, pragmatic arguments are just straightforwardly circular – "We have to use PP to determine that the predictions we make on the basis of perceptual beliefs often turn out to be correct, and to determine that there is a large measure of agreement in perceptual beliefs. We do not discover this by using a crystal ball or being told by an angel" (Alston 1983, 118).

From this brief survey Alston concludes that the likelihood of finding an approach that will provide a noncircular Cliffordian justification for PP is not good. But apart from the extreme skeptic, most epistemologists would take it as more or less given that PP is reliable. This, therefore, leaves the Jamesian test as the only viable approach to epistemic

justification with regard to PP³. Alston states that as he is unaware of any compelling argument showing that PP ought to be regarded as unreliable, he takes it that PP is justified. Alston links his approach with the epistemology characterised by the thought of Thomas Reid. Here the Cartesian inspired reliance on intuition and reason in establishing which beliefs are justified is taken to be a case of "arbitrary partiality". "Why accept intuition and reason without any basis, while refusing to do the same for sense perception?" (Alston 1983, 119) In avoiding this arbitrariness, Reid and like-minded thinkers are left only with the option of taking as justified beliefs gained from our normal faculties – sense perception, memory, rational intuition, reasoning, self-consciousness and the like – unless presented with reasons for believing otherwise in specific instances. Here again, then, is the Jamesian epistemological test.

With this analysis in place, Alston goes back over the ground covered in "Religious Experience and Religious Belief" – that is to say, he moves on to assess the question of whether CP can be thought of as being justified in the same way as PP. Alston identifies four central differences between CP and PP which opponents of CP take as being important in distinguishing the justifiability of CP (which they take to be unjustified) from that of PP:

- Within PP there are standard ways of checking the accuracy of any particular perceptual belief ...
- By engaging in PP we can discover regularities in the behavior of objects putatively observed, and on this basis we can, to a certain extent, effectively predict the course of events.
- Capacity for PP, and practice of it, is found universally among normal adult human beings.
- All normal adult human beings, whatever their culture, use basically the same conceptual scheme in objectifying their sense experience (Alston 1983, 121).

As in "Religious Experience and Religious Belief" Alston concludes for each of these that the difference is not sufficient to show that CP is importantly different from PP for the purposes of Jamesian justification, and that therefore beliefs arising out of CP are justified where there are no compelling reasons for thinking otherwise.

The zenith of Alston's contributions to Reformed epistemology comes in his book *Perceiving God*, which Brian Hebblethwaite described as "unquestionably one of the most important philosophy of religion books to have been published during the [preceding] fifteen years", an assessment made all the more impressive by Hebblethwaite's identification of that period as one of "remarkable growth in both the quantity and the quality of work in this field" (Hebblethwaite 1994, 116). *Perceiving God* is the culmination of "at least fifty years" (Alston 1991, xi) of work of varying degrees of intensity in this area of epistemology of religion. The ideas developed in the two papers considered above remain central to the project, and the book is also foreshadowed by a number of other papers on the subject⁴. The overall thesis is inevitably more developed than in its earliest incarnations, particularly, as George Pappas points out, in the general epistemology that lies "behind" the Reformed epistemology (Pappas 1994, 877).

³ From this it seems that Alston views the Cliffordian and Jamesian options as exhaustive, which seems unlikely. Perhaps a more sympathetic reading of Alston would see him claiming rather that the Clifford/James distinction is the one generally accepted by those with whom he is engaging, and so these are the only two options he is forced to take seriously.

⁴ "The Christian Language-Game" (1981); "Religious Experience as a Ground of Religious Belief" (1986a); "Is Religious Belief Rational?" (1986b); "Perceiving God" (1986c); "Religious Diversity and the Perceptual Knowledge of God" (1988a); and "The Perception of God" (1988b).

One of Alston's leading critics, Richard Gale, succinctly sums up the thrust of *Perceiving God* when he writes that its aim is:

to show that we are rationally justified in believing that our apparent direct perceptions of God's presence (called "M-experiences") are reliable and thus for the most part veridical, the objective, existentially-committed beliefs based on these experiences thereby being *prima facie* justified, subject to defeat by certain overrides supplied by some background religion. It is argued that our rational justification for believing this is of both an epistemic and pragmatic (or practical) sort, in which an epistemic reason for believing a proposition is truth conducive, rendering the proposition probable, while a pragmatic one concerns the benefits which accrue from belief (Gale 1994, 135).

The concepts deployed in *Perceiving God* have developed somewhat from their starting points in Alston's earlier papers. Foundational to his argument is what he calls "mystical perception" (MP), which is an awareness of the presence or activity of God, which is parallel to sensory perception. It is important to Alston's argument that MP not be understood as a subjective feeling that is interpreted as being the result of the presence or activity of God – he vigorously defends the notion that MP is *perceptual*, in that it involves a presentation, "givenness" or appearance of its object (God). It is *mystical* perception because of its object – though Alston is careful to leave open the question of whether, in any particular case, the experience in question is, in fact, caused by God.

In the second chapter of the book Alston sets up his general theory of epistemic justification, an externalist theory according to which "To be epistemically justified in believing that *p* is for that belief to be based on an adequate ground, which could either be experiences or other things one knows or justifiably believes. A ground is adequate provided it is a sufficiently reliable indication of the truth of the belief" (Alston 1994, 864). This justification is, however, defeasible – such beliefs are subject to "over-riding reasons" (and undercutting reasons) that may afterwards become evident. MP is treated the same way – to be taken as epistemically justified this practice must be a reliable (true-making) source of beliefs, and individual beliefs must also be considered to be subject to over-riding reasons.

In an extended treatment of the argument in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief" Alston goes on to show the impossibility of showing a doxastic practice like sense perception (SP)⁵ to be justified in an independent, non-circular way. Alston then generalises this conclusion to include all doxastic practices, including MP, and argues that only internal grounds can be used to assess the reliability of any doxastic practice. For MP the internal support for the practice is, in Alston's view, to be found in the spiritual development that results from MP. Alston then moves on to focus on specifically *Christian* mystical practice (CMP).⁶ This part of the book is again an extended version of the argument that first appeared in "Religious Experience and Religious Belief" and in "Christian Experience and Christian Belief". As in those papers, Alston analyses the general reasons that are put forward to show that CMP differs from other doxastic practices in ways that disqualify it from being a justified doxastic practice, and concludes that the differences identified do not, in fact, disqualify CMP in this way.

In the latter part of the book Alston tackles two of the most central objections that have been raised against his thesis – naturalist accounts of CMP and the problem of religious

⁵ A slight modification of "perceptual practice" or PP in "Religious Experience and Religious Belief" and "Christian Experience and Christian Belief".

⁶ This is basically equivalent to CP in "Religious Experience and Religious Belief" and "Christian Experience and Christian Belief".

pluralism. In response to the former, Alston argues that none of the arguments offered undermine CMP as a justified practice, though he does admit that CMP may not be as reliable as SP. The latter challenge presents, Alston admits, the greatest difficulty for his position. The problem lies with the internal nature of justification that he has been arguing for – if one assumes that there are no sufficient external reasons for accepting CMP over any other form of mystical practice, then on what grounds can it be rational to prefer CMP over any of its competitors? Alston deals with this by setting up the “worst case scenario” in which there are, indeed, no external reasons for preferring CMP (Alston does suggest that there may be, in reality, external metaphysical and historical external reasons for preferring CMP, but he does not pursue this suggestion). Alston addresses his worst case scenario by examining a number of analogous practices, and concludes that “though this is not epistemically the best of all possible worlds, it is rational in this situation for one to continue to participate in the (undefeated) practice in which s/he is involved, hoping that the inter-practice contradictions will be sorted out in due time” (Alston 1991, 7). Related to this is a discussion of the relationship between beliefs based on perception and beliefs based on testimony about perception.

The final chapter of *Perceiving God* is dedicated to a discussion of the place of mystical experience within the “larger picture” of religious belief. The relationship of mystical perception to nonperceptual sources of belief such as natural theology, tradition, and various kinds of revelation is examined. Alston concludes that all these sources of religious belief can be reduced to two main types – “perceptual presentation” and “inference to the best explanation”. “It is then suggested that the different grounds interact not only by adding up to a total case that is greater than any of its components, but also in more intimate ways – for example, by one source contributing to the background system presupposed by another source, or by one source helping to remove doubts about another” (Alston 1991, 8).

Responses to Alston

Responses to Alston's *Perceiving God*⁷ fall mainly into four broad categories: challenges to his claim that no plausible non-theistic alternative explanations of mystical experience exist or are likely to exist; attempts to undermine his analogy between perceptual practice and mystical practice; arguments against Alston's contention that mystical experiences constitute a form of perception; and, finally, claims that the fact of religious diversity in some way undermines Alston's thesis. In what follows I will give a brief outline of each of these lines of attack as proposed by their main proponents.⁸

Non-theistic Explanations of Mystical Experiences

The idea that there exists some alternative explanation of the experiences that religious believers accredit to an encounter with God or some other spiritual being, an explanation that does not require any departure from what Plantinga calls “metaphysical naturalism”

⁷ As stated above, *Perceiving God* represents the zenith of Alston's Reformed epistemology-related work thus far, in that it brings together in revised form all the central arguments of his work in Reformed epistemology preceding the publication of the book. I will take it, therefore, that the main responses to *Perceiving God* represent the central thrust of responses to Alston's Reformed epistemology.

⁸ Of course it goes without saying that not all the attacks on Alston's thesis fall into these categories, and nor do those that do fit into them neatly. Ward (1994), for example, seems to be deploying the fact of religious diversity (the fourth category I outline here) as a means of undermining Alston's idea that mystical experiences can be properly considered as perception (the third category).

(the idea that there is no supernatural realm and that there are no supernatural beings), is one with a long history and one which has been put forward by such thinkers as Freud, Feuerbach and Marx. Usually some psychological explanation of the phenomenon is given – for Freud such experiences are the phenomenological product of an unconscious attempt to “re-create the world, to build up in its stead another world in which its most unbearable features are eliminated and replaced by others that are in conformity with one’s own wishes”, in effect a form of delusion resulting from wish fulfilment (Freud 1961, 18), while for Feuerbach and Marx social alienation is the key explanatory factor.

Evan Fales has directed a response of this kind specifically against Alston’s position. He claims that “theists recognise ... that the plausibility of [the view that mystical experiences provide perceptual contact with God] would be significantly compromised by the possibility of scientifically explaining mystical experiences – especially if a scientific explanation were incompatible with, ruled out, or made unlikely the supposition that God has anything to do with the occurrences of these experiences”. Fales holds that this is particularly relevant to Alston, who argues in *Perceiving God* (Alston 1991, 228-234) that “the various scientific disciplines do not have anything to offer by way of plausible competitors to the theistic view of mystical experience, and that there is no real prospect of their ever doing so” (Fales 1996, 297).

In response to Alston’s claim, Fales (1996a, 1996b) tests the theory proposed by social anthropologist IM Lewis against the reported experiences of St Theresa, whom he chooses because of her prominence and the “considerable” amount of biographical data available on her. He concludes that “Alston’s claim that mystical experience is by its very nature not amenable to scientific explanation is borne out neither by the data nor by the record of what has been achieved” (Fales 1996b, 311). Moreover he claims, in response to Alston’s claim that naturalistic accounts fail to show that at least some mystical experiences can be more justifiably (or at least not less justifiably) claimed to be veridical, that “Theism cannot hope to match the explanatory power or empirical backing of Lewis’ theory” (Fales 1996b, 311).

Analogy with perceptual practice

Foundational to Alston’s argument for the epistemic justifiability of beliefs based on mystical practice is the analogy he draws between mystical practice and perceptual practice. As we saw above, Alston distinguishes between a strong, Cliffordian approach to epistemic justification on the one hand, and a weaker, Jamesian approach on the other, and he concludes that the likelihood of finding an approach that will provide a noncircular Cliffordian justification for PP is not good. Alston argues that this leaves the weaker test for justification. He contends further that, on any comparison between PP and MP, no differences can be found that would make it such that PP would be justified according to the Jamesian test but MP not be justified.

Charles Daniels claims that “all sorts of practices we deem superstitious are free of ineradicable inconsistencies and so qualify as [justified in the Jamesian sense]”, and that “whether a practice is ... justified in this weak sense turns out to be of very little interest” (Daniels 1989, 488)⁹. He contends, however, that PP *is* in fact justified in the strong sense. He then goes on to offer reasons why MP cannot be considered to be justified in the strong sense, because it is lacking in a number of areas where PP succeeds, namely the existence

⁹ While Daniels does not develop the theme, his argument here seems to presume that this fact constitutes some form of a defeater for the claim that beliefs arising from Christian mystical practice are (meaningfully) justifiable in this weak sense. This is one version of the objection that will be considered below in terms of the challenge of religious diversity.

of agreement independent of authority and alternative explanation; success in actions explained by the sense or refinement of discriminatory power; the existence of trivial yet complex webs of beliefs due to the sense or heightened discernment; and the persistence of beliefs among the educated as more comes to be known about how things actually work in the universe (Daniels 1989, 492-494).

The overall thrust of Daniels' argument is that "none of these reasons gives the non-religious grounds to think a religious side of reality is there to be experienced and the religious at times experience it" (Daniels 1989, 487).

Matthias Steup takes on Alston's analogy between perceptual practice and mystical practice from a slightly different angle. He tackles Alston's claim that perceptual practice is justified in terms of practical rationality, a claim that arises from two central considerations: "(i) there are no alternative doxastic practices available to us, we're stuck with [PP]; (ii) even if there were alternatives to [PP] available to us, we could not possibly have any reason to prefer these practices to [PP]. Because of these two considerations, we are acting rationally when we engage in [PP]" (Steup 1997, 416). Steup argues, however, that this is simply not so, even in the case of PP. In response to consideration (i) above, Steup points out that there are in fact two alternatives available – "to suspend [PP], and to judge [PP] to be unreliable" (Steup 1997, 416). Moreover he argues, in response to (ii) above, that there are in fact very good reasons for preferring the option of suspending judgement regarding the reliability of PP. As we have already seen, Alston's justification of mystical practice depends in large part on his claim that PP is practically rational, and that, by analogy, so is MP. But by Steup's argument, if there are good reasons to suspend judgement regarding the reliability of PP, then, by the same analogy that Alston is at such pains to set up, the same must be said for MP.

Mystical Experiences as Perception

The third main counterthrust to Alston's thesis comes as an attack on his claim that mystical experiences can be properly considered as perceptual in their nature. As George Pappas points out: "It is crucial to this argument overall that mystical experiences be *perceptual*. This is the foundation of Alston's analogical argument, without which the argument does not get started. Is Alston right about this? Are mystical experiences really *perceptions*, as he says?" (Pappas 1994, 877-878). Pappas thinks there are real doubts about this. He challenges Alston's claim that "in mystical experiences something is presented to one's consciousness in a way analogous to what happens in perception", on two main fronts. Firstly he points out that "Alston's way of definitively specifying the generic concept of perception seems too broad, allowing vivid object and even memory to count as perceptions, contrary to fact". He then argues that "several of the sources [of MP that Alston singles out] are disanalogous with ordinary perception in a way that seems to show that, whatever those reported experiences are, they are not direct presentations of God to one's consciousness" (Pappas 1994, 883).

Richard Gale's attack is similar, but with different weaponry. He wields the sword of subjectivity against Alston: "In order for [mystical practices] to qualify as *objective*, not just reliable, it is necessary that their M-experience inputs really be perceptual as advertised. This requires that they admit of the veridical-unveridical distinction and take objective rather than just cognate or internal accusatives when veridical, unlike the experiential inputs for the reliable but merely subjective [doxastic practices] based on sensations and introspection, in which an objective accusative is one that exists independently of experience" (Gale 1994, 869). Gale argues that there are two generic conditions for an experience being perceptual – a

metaphysical requirement and an epistemological requirement. The former is the requirement that "the object of a veridical ... perception be perceivable by different perceivers at the same time and the same perceiver at different times" (Gale 1994, 871), while the latter is the requirement that "there must be a system of background overrides that make it possible for a belief to be shown to be epistemically unwarranted or even false" which conveys on the relevant experience a "cognitive status", "in that it bestows a prima facie justification upon the objective belief based on it" (Gale 1994, 873). Both of these requirements are fulfilled by sense experiences, thus qualifying them as objective. But, Gale argues, it is "at least dubious" whether mystical experiences live up to the epistemological requirement, and "it is certain that they completely fail to meet the metaphysical requirement" (Gale 1994, 875). Thus Gale concludes that mystical experiences are therefore subjective and are as a result not properly considered perceptual. If Gale and Pappas are successful in their arguments, then, as Pappas puts it, "a key premise in that argument has been lost" (Pappas 1994, 883).

Religious Diversity

Of all the approaches in the offensive against Alston's arguments in *Perceiving God*, the most widely deployed is what could be called "the problem of religious diversity", or, more accurately, "the problem of mutually incompatible forms of mystical perception across religious traditions" (Schlamm 1993, 562).

Schlamm rejects Alston's argument that "where the 'fruits of the spirit' (e.g. sanctity, serenity, peace, joy, fortitude, love, etc.) are realized in an individual's life, it is reasonable for that individual to claim that Christian mystical perception provides genuine cognitive access to ultimate reality, even if he cannot see how to solve the problem of religious pluralism" (Schlamm 1993, 562). Schlamm bases his rejection of Alston's argument on his observation that it must be unconvincing to "sophisticated" Christians who must of necessity recognise that the "fruits of the spirit" may be present in believers from other religious traditions, and may, indeed, be more pronounced among non-Christian believers. "Such a disturbing realization will hardly be reassuring to the Christian mystic, or to the mystic of any other religious tradition" (Schlamm 1993, 562).

While this "problem of religious diversity" seems to be one that resonates with many of Alston's critics, quite how the problem is seen by those critics differs. In Steup's opinion, for example, the problem is that Alston's epistemological account is too narrow to do justice to the diversity of mystical practices that exist among the range of religious traditions. He writes that "Alston's reliability constraint is too stringent a condition to impose on epistemic justification. For if it is imposed, then, precisely because there are so many different and incompatible religious traditions, perceptual beliefs about God cannot, contrary to the book's thesis, be epistemically justified – except perhaps within the one and only one religious tradition that might be reliable" (Steup 1997, 419).

Adams, on the other hand, concludes that it is the *similarity* of mystical practice among divergent religious [t]he ways in which people form beliefs about God's speaking to them, reproving them, forgiving them, and calling them to various tasks often remain largely the same" and concludes from this that "there is no short or uncontroversial route from [MP] to the justification of any doctrinal system" (Adams 1994, 889-890).

Evaluation of Alston's Reformed Epistemology

As can be seen from the responses to Alston's thesis that we considered above, one of the biggest limiting factors of his approach to the topic is the centrality of his claim that mystical experiences constitute a form of *perception*. This is not to say that all of Alston's

critics who have focused their attention on this point and the related analogy between perceptual practice and mystical practice are necessarily successful in their attacks. Alston has responded to many of his critics, often in telling ways.

Daniels (1989), for example, claims that perceptual practice is, *contra* Alston, justified in the strong, Cliffordian sense and that mystical practice is disanalogous with perceptual practice as a result. But as Alston points out (1989, 501) Daniels offers no convincing argument to show that perceptual practice is, in fact, justified in the stronger (evidentialist) sense. Furthermore, some of Alston's reviewers base their criticisms on misunderstandings of his thesis. Again Daniels provides an example – he contends that he has shown that none of what Alston argues “gives the non-religious grounds to think a religious side of reality is there to be experienced and the religious at times experience it” (Daniels 1989, 487). But of course this is not Alston's purpose: “I do not wish to argue that the non-religious have, in these kinds of considerations, a sufficient reason for supposing that some people genuinely perceive God” (Alston 1989, 503). Instead, Alston's goal is more limited, namely to show that the non-religious have sufficient reason to hold that the religious are not irrational (or epistemically careless, or showing signs of malfunction, or some such), in believing that they perceive God (even if the non-religious contend that these beliefs are, in fact, false).

Still, it is hard to deny the impact of many of the criticisms levelled against Alston's Reformed epistemology. There does, for example, seem to be something clearly unsatisfactory about the central pole of Alston's theory, his attempt to account for religious epistemology solely in terms of *perception*, and it is this that lies behind many of the objections set out above. Pappas' point that Alston's account of perception is too broad, in that it allows even phenomena such as memory to count as perceptions (Pappas 1994, 883) seems hard to ignore. Indeed Alston admits that Pappas' argument “bothers” him, and that he “cannot claim to have the knock-down contrary argument [he] would like to deploy” (Alston 1994, 894), though he does try to respond by engaging with the specific cases that Pappas employs to back his claim.

The concern here is compounded by the fact that in his magnum opus *Warrant and Christian Belief*, fellow Reformed epistemologist Alvin Plantinga argues that what Alston considers “putative perception of God”, by his own description, often does not involve sensory content, and therefore cannot, strictly speaking, be considered as perception. Plantinga grants that there have often been reported cases of non-sensory encounters with God in which nonetheless “the presence of God is ... palpable” (Plantinga 2000, 181), and that this, while not strictly perception, is something very like it. While Alston might be happy enough to accept “something very like perception” as adequate to his goals, even this concession leaves concerns about the sufficiency of Alston's model – “there is also a sort of awareness of God where it seems right to say one feels his presence, but where there is little or none of the sort of sensuous imagery that typically goes with perception” (Plantinga 2000, 181-182).

In addition to the problems linked to Alston's specific attempt to defend Christian mystical practice, there is the broader difficulty that the sort of epistemic status he is attempting to secure for Christian belief is of questionable value. As Daniels put it, “whether a practice is ... justified in this weak sense turns out to be of very little interest” (Daniels 1989, 488). This accounts in large part for the difficulties Alston faces in dealing with the challenge of religious pluralism.

Once again we see that it is Plantinga who is among the sharpest critics of his fellow Reformed epistemologist. Among his criticisms of Alston's account is the fact that there are important kinds of belief, such as *a priori* belief and memory belief, that are obviously

epistemically sound but which seemingly cannot be accounted for in Alston's schema. Another biting criticism is that Alston's account of justification is unable to fully account for what we take to be rational or reasonable beliefs:

there are also beliefs that do have a truth-conducive ground (explained as Alston explains it) but [which] are nonetheless not sensible or reasonable. ... So suppose I am extraordinarily gullible when it comes to set theory and believe, say, Cantor's Theorem ... not because I have understood a proof or been told by someone competent that it is true, but just because I picked up a comic book on the sidewalk and found therein a character who claims it is his favourite theorem. Then this belief of mine has a truth-conducive ground, but isn't rational or reasonable (Plantinga 2000, 107).

The impact of this on the Reformed epistemologist's goal of defending belief in God is made clear when Plantinga continues as follows: "Suppose God is indeed a necessary being; then if I believe in God just to please my friends, or because I am brainwashed or hypnotized, or because I am part of an evil social system, I will be justified in the Alston sense¹⁰" (Plantinga 2000, 107). But this clearly will not do, and so Plantinga concludes that the sort of justification in terms of which Alston is defending Christian belief is too easily achieved, and that "the *de jure* question is not the question of whether Christian belief is Alston justified" (Plantinga 2000, 107).

Enough has been said to enable us to draw our analysis of Alston's contributions to Reformed epistemology to a close. As we have seen, his theory has drawn formidable responses, and the most telling criticisms have been echoed, and expanded upon, by Alston's fellow Reformed epistemologist, Alvin Plantinga. The most critical weakness in Alston's attempt to show that basic belief in God is justified has fallen short as a result of arguing for a form of justification that seems insufficient to the task of meeting the objections of Reformed epistemology's opponents. We can therefore conclude that supporters of Reformed epistemology must look beyond Alston's work if they hope to find a theory that will achieve their goal of addressing the *de jure* challenge to Christian belief.

¹⁰ That is, in the broadly Jamesian sense that Alston affirms in "Religious Experience and Religious Belief", as discussed above.

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