

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND PERCEPTUAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

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The existence of a plurality of religious communities, each with its own belief system that is incompatible in various respects with each of the others, poses a serious and well advertised problem for the claims of each community. After all, it looks as if Moslems, Hindus, and Buddhists have grounds of the same general sort (revelation, religious experience, miracles, authority, etc.) as my fellow Christians and I have for the truth of our respective systems of doctrine. But then, unless I have sufficient reason for supposing that Christians are in a superior position for discerning the truth about these matters, why should I suppose that we are right and they are wrong? How can I be justified in continuing to affirm my Christian beliefs?

Note that this is hardly a crucial epistemological problem unless there are substantial grounds of belief within each community. If Christian beliefs are without any significant internal justification, then they lack positive epistemic status quite apart from competition from other religions, and so for the others.¹ I have no time in this essay to argue that this condition holds for the major religions of the world. I shall simply assume that it does, so as to throw the distinctive difficulties posed by religious pluralism into sharp relief.

One response to this problem is to argue that, despite appearances, there are no incompatibilities, or no fundamental incompatibilities, between the major world religions, thereby removing another fundamental condition of the problem. This line can take different forms. (1) The strongest would be the contention that the existent doctrinal systems, as generally understood, are not incompatible. To show this would be a brilliant feat indeed. (2) A more modest and feasible-seeming project would be to try to trim each system of various "excesses" so that what is left in each case is compatible with what is left in the others. (3) We might follow John Hick and others in introducing a level distinction, contending that though the various belief systems conflict with each other that is because they constitute different "pictures", "images", or "representations" of the one ultimate reality, which is represented in each adequately enough for practical (salvific) purposes but the real nature of which is adequately captured in none of them. And there are other variants. However, for purposes of this paper I am going to take none of these enterprises to succeed in eliminating at least a stubborn residue of incompatibilities.



The most obvious move, in the face of genuine incompatibilities, is to try to show that the beliefs of one's own religion are true and those of the competition are false. If this maximally direct approach is to have any chance of success it must proceed on the basis of considerations that are common to all parties, like sense perception, rational self-evidence, and common modes of reasoning. For if the Christian tries to show that her beliefs are true, and that Hindu beliefs are false, by appealing to God's self revelation in the Bible, we are, if would seem, no further forward. Now I do not want to assert that it is impossible to show by general metaphysical and empirical arguments that the system of Christian belief is superior to its rivals; nor do I want to assert the contrary. Again I shall simply set that enterprise aside and consider the epistemic situation on the assumption that it cannot succeed.

A less direct solution would be to argue, on the basis of common grounds, that the Christian is in a better epistemic position to get the truth about these matters than the adherents of other religions. I have no idea how this would go, and so I shall ignore this maneuver.

My discussion presupposes a realist theory of truth and its applicability to religious belief. I assume that religious beliefs are true or false according to whether what is believed is the case, whether or not we have any way of deciding this. Philosophers sometimes avoid the whole problem of religious pluralism just by eschewing a realist theory of truth, at least in application to religious belief. If the truth of religious belief simply means something like 'passes the standard tests of that "form of life", "language game", or whatever', then the beliefs of all the major world religions could be equally true. I refrain from taking this easy way out.

The form our problem takes for my own work on the epistemology of religious belief is determined by the major thesis I have been concerned to defend.

- P. The experience (or, as I prefer to say, the "perception") of God provides *prima facie* epistemic justification for beliefs about what God is doing or how God is "situated" *vis-a-vis* one at the moment ("M-beliefs", 'M' for 'manifestation').

Examples of M-beliefs would be the belief that God is sustaining one in being, pouring out His love into one, communicating a certain message to one, or simply presenting Himself to one as supremely good or powerful. The experiences I take to constitute (putative) perceptions of God range over any cases in which the subject takes herself to be aware of God as presenting Himself to her experience. This includes, but is not restricted to, "mystical" experiences of the classic type in which one seems, momentarily, to lose one's identity in merging with the divine. It also includes dim background experiences of the presence of God as well as more vivid and shorter lasting focal experiences. And it ranges over

both experiences that are and those that are not mediated by sense perception of the physical and social environment. I take it that perception of God, thus broadly construed, is a widespread phenomenon among religious folk.

To explain how religious pluralism poses a problem for this thesis I will first have to lay out the general epistemological framework in which the thesis is set.

We engage in a plurality of more or less distinct “doxastic practices”, i.e., practices of belief formation, each of which involves distinctive sorts of input to “belief-forming mechanisms” and distinctive “input-output functions” that yield beliefs related in particular ways to the outputs.² Thus, to take the easiest case to describe, a deductive inference practice will feature a variety of mechanisms that take beliefs as inputs, each mechanism operating according to a function defined by some form of reasoning. (Unfortunately these are not restricted to valid inference forms.) The sense perceptual practice involves functions that are harder to describe, each of which goes from some characteristic pattern of sensory experience to a belief about the physical environment. Other familiar examples of doxastic practices involve the formation of beliefs on the basis of memory, introspection, and non-deductive reasoning of various sorts. Built into each practice is also a set of checks and tests for the beliefs so formed, in other terms, a series of possible “overriders” for the *prima facie* justification conferred on a belief by its emergence from that practice. For the sense perceptual practice (hereinafter ‘SP’), e.g., a particular perceptual belief may be overridden by sufficient independent reasons to think the belief false (I seemed to see an elephant, but there couldn’t have been one there), or sufficient reasons to suppose that one’s perceptual faculties were not working properly. A doxastic practice will typically operate on certain basic assumptions that cannot be justified within the practice but rather serve as presuppositions of any exercise thereof. Thus SP presupposes the independent (of experience) existence of physical objects and the by and large reliability of sense perception. In some cases a practice will also deal with a distinctive subject matter and will feature a distinctive conceptual scheme. This is true, e.g., of SP, but not of the inferential practices. Finally, a doxastic practice is typically acquired and engaged in well before one is explicitly aware of it. When one arrives at the age of reflection one finds oneself with a mastery of many such practices and ineluctably involved in their exercise. And whatever role innate mechanisms play in the matter, such practices are socially established by socially monitored learning and are socially shared.³

I don’t want to give the impression that different doxastic practices (hereinafter ‘DP’) operate in isolation from each other. On the contrary, they depend on each other in various ways. Inferential practices obviously depend on others for their

(ultimate) belief inputs. And the overrider system connected with, e.g., SP, makes use of a general picture of the physical world built up by applying memory and reasoning to the output of SP.

How are DP's to be assessed, epistemically? My answer is based on the point that our belief forming activity essentially aims at maximizing truth and minimizing falsehood. Therefore our basic term of positive epistemic evaluation, 'justification', 'rationality', or whatever, should be truth-linked, should be such that a positive rating carries with it at least a strong probability of truth. That is, I am justified in believing that p only if the belief is formed in such a way that it is thereby likely to be true. Hence, getting back to DP's, a practice will yield mostly justified beliefs only if it is reliable, only if it is such that the input-output mechanisms it involves are, by and large, reliable ones.⁴ But then the most fundamental epistemological question to ask of a DP is as to whether it is reliable.

But how do we determine whether a DP is reliable? The most direct approach would be to compare its output beliefs with the facts that make them true or false, and determine the track record of the practice in a suitable spread of cases. Sometimes this is possible. It is possible, e.g., when we are dealing with what we might call "partial" or "restricted" practices, like determining temperature on the basis of mercury thermometers, or recognizing vintages of wine by taste. In these cases we have other modes of access to the facts in question, modes which we can use to check the accuracy of the practice under examination. But we fairly quickly arrive at more inclusive practices where this technique is no longer available. If we are assessing SP in general, e.g., we have no independent access to the facts in question (facts concerning the physical environment of the perceiver), i.e., no access that neither consists in nor is based on reliance on sense perception; and so we have no non-circular check on the accuracy of the deliverances of SP. We might try a more indirect approach, e.g., arguing "pragmatically" that the success in predicting and controlling nature we have achieved by basing our activities on sense perception indicates that SP is a reliable guide to the environment. But this exhibits circularity in a more subtle form. How do we tell that we have been successful in prediction? By making observations to determine whether what was predicted actually happened. We aren't informed of this by an angel. Thus it appears that when we try to assess the reliability of the likes of SP, we are unable to find any otherwise cogent argument for reliability that does not involve a reliance on the very practice under scrutiny. And the same holds, I make bold to say, for memory, introspection, and deductive and inductive reasoning. Let's call any socially established DP for which this is true "basic".

What, then, is the most rational attitude to take toward basic DP's? When we eschew circular arguments none of them can be shown to be reliable, and if such arguments are admitted a demonstration of reliability is, of course, quickly forth-

coming in each case. If we use the outputs of a DP to check the accuracy of that DP it can easily score 100%; we simply use each output twice, once as testee and once as tester. In this respect all DP's are on a par. Insofar as reliability is the crucial consideration, and pending the possibility of a demonstration of unreliability, it would seem that we are confined to either taking all of them to be acceptable (i.e., regarding them as reliable) or taking all of them to be unacceptable. It would be arbitrary to distinguish between them. Clearly, abstention from all such practices is not a live option; therefore the only rational alternative open to us is to accord *prima facie* acceptance to all basic socially established practices (regard them as *prima facie* reliable), pending a demonstration of unreliability, or the invocation of any other disqualifying consideration.

Just a word as to how a basic practice might be shown unreliable. First, there is the possibility of a massive and persistent inconsistency in its output (not just the sporadic inconsistency that pops up from time to time in the best behaved DP's). Second, there is inconsistency between its outputs and the outputs of more firmly established DP's. To be sure, even if a DP runs into trouble in one or more of these respects it may well be modified so as to get back in line without losing its distinctive character. I take it that this has repeatedly happened with religious DP's.

We should also note that there is a kind of "self-support" by which a basic DP can strengthen its claim to rational acceptance. This is illustrated by the predictive success we attain on the basis of SP and associated practices (call the whole complex the "empirical DP"). This is not a non-circular support, for, as we have seen, we have to use the practice to ascertain that the success was forthcoming. Nevertheless it is far from trivial, since it is quite conceivable that the practice should not display it, and, in fact, many empirical DP's, e.g., the reading of tea leaves, do not exhibit anything analogous, even on their own showing. From now on I shall take it that the secular DP's I have been discussing are all basic, free from massive intra- or inter-inconsistency, and significantly self-supporting. Even after it has passed all these tests a practice is still only *prima facie* rationally acceptable, since there is always the possibility that trouble may develop in the future, particularly in the way of inconsistency with more firmly established practices. But a practice that satisfies all the conditions specified is in a very strong epistemic position indeed.

Now consider the practice of forming M-beliefs about God on the basis of experiences one takes to be direct experiential presentations of God: e.g., forming the belief that God is pouring out His love into one on the basis of what one takes to be an experience of God's doing just that. I want to suggest that this too is a basic DP, or rather, as we shall shortly see, more than one such DP. The phenomenology of religious experience indicates that we have distinctive sorts of experiential inputs here, especially where the experiences in question are non-sensory. And with this come distinctive input-output functions for going

from a certain kind of experience to a correlated belief content. Finally, there are distinctive checks and tests to be used in the assessment of particular M-beliefs. It is at this point that we are forced to recognize that, unlike the SP situation, there is not one unique DP of forming M-beliefs about God, much less one unique DP of forming M-beliefs about Ultimate Reality. For the overrider system will vary from one religious tradition to another. It will be heavily based on the canonical scriptures of a tradition, together with whatever other sources there are for its general picture of the Ultimate and our relations thereto. For the major constraint on particular M-beliefs is that they do not conflict with that authoritative picture of the situation. Other tests too will vary from one tradition to another, e.g., whether the M-believer exhibits in his/her life the marks of genuine communion with the Ultimate; for these marks will vary somewhat from one tradition to another. The present point is that if we consider a particular religious community we will find an overrider system of the sort just indicated. For present purposes let's construe 'religious community' fairly broadly so as to embrace many differences on points of detail. In that spirit we can identify what I shall call a "mainline Christian community" that relies on the picture of God and His relations to mankind derived from the Bible and from church tradition, allowing, of course, for changes in the understanding of these through time, and allowing for differences of emphasis and of detail. Let's use the acronym 'CP' for the practice of forming M-beliefs within the Christian community, subject to the Christian overrider system.⁵

I am going to assume for purposes of this paper that CP is a basic practice, that it is impossible to establish its reliability in a non-circular way.⁶ Since it is a socially established basic practice it will count, by the general epistemological principles I have enunciated, as *prima facie* acceptable, i.e., as *prima facie* reliable. I will also assume that we have, if necessary, purified the practice, and the system of Christian beliefs it embodies, so that it exhibits no massive and persistent inconsistencies, either internally or *vis-a-vis* other more firmly established practices. Finally, I will take it that it exhibits an appropriate kind of self-support. This will be quite different from the self-support that attaches to SP, just because the character of the practices are so different. Whereas SP is significantly self-supported by its success (as judged internally) in prediction and control, CP, to which those aims are foreign, is significantly self-supported by the fact that the promises held out to its devotees in the way of spiritual development can be seen (from within) to be fulfilled significantly often. As a result of all this CP makes a strong *prima facie* claim to reliability and hence to rational acceptance.⁷

T. CP is *prima facie* reliable, and hence *prima facie* rationally acceptable.

I have in previous writings examined a number of objections to this thesis,

e.g., that there are no objective intersubjective tests of particular M-beliefs, that the experience involved can be adequately explained in term of natural factors, and that many people claim to have no such perceptions. I have argued that all these objections, and others as well, are based either on epistemic chauvinism (arbitrarily using the standards of one DP to judge another) or on arbitrarily holding different practices subject to different requirements (the double standard).⁸

However there is one difficulty I have not been able to deal with in these ways and that is the one posed by the diversity of religions. To bring religious diversity to bear on my thesis T, I will further stipulate that, in addition to CP, there are other experiential DP's in other religious traditions that are basic practices, not discredited by internal or external inconsistencies and enjoying the same degree of self-support.⁹ Thus CP is confronted with DP's that yield outputs incompatible (on the whole) with its own, each of which has the same sort of claim to rational acceptance and none of which are discredited by any neutral standards. All this being the case, how can it be deemed rational for me to form M-beliefs in accordance with CP rather than in accordance with one of the rival religious DP's?

It might appear that the problem posed by religious pluralism for my thesis is much more restricted than the problem posed for total systems of religious belief. For M-beliefs constitute only one segment of the beliefs of a religion, and not the most prominent at that. However important they may be for the individual believer, their importance for the community as a whole lies in the empirical support they provide for the system, rather than in being themselves components of the basic faith of that community. It is no part of the common faith of the church that God sustained *me* in being yesterday. Nevertheless, in attempting to deal with the problem as it impinges on the empirical support of M-beliefs we will be led into the larger problem. First, M-beliefs make use of the basic conceptual and doctrinal scheme of the religion. In supposing that I have been directly aware of God communicating a certain message to me, I suppose that it is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, creator of heaven and earth, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is communicating that message to me. I do not learn from that experience that the source of the message is the creator of heaven and earth, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, etc., but it is part of what I take to be true in forming the M-belief.¹⁰ And hence the complete M-belief cannot be *prima facie* justified for me, unless I am *prima facie* justified in that identification of the communicator. Second, as we have seen, the idea that a particular experience provides *prima facie* justification for a particular M-belief presupposes an overrider system that involves the general picture of God (the Ultimate) and our relations thereto that has been built up in the community over the centuries. But this means that in defending, or assessing, the general *practice* of basing M-beliefs on experience, we have to defend or assess the

general system of belief in the community. Hence it is impossible to isolate the epistemology of M-beliefs from the epistemology of that wider system. And so anything that threatens the epistemic status of the latter will *ipso facto* threaten the epistemic status of the former.¹¹

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Against this background let us try to be as explicit as possible as to the difficulty the fact of religious pluralism is alleged to pose for my thesis T. Just how is the fact of conflicting religious doxastic practices supposed to make it irrational for me to regard CP as a source of epistemic justification for M-beliefs? Given what I have been saying, religious pluralism would have such a bearing only if it constitutes a reason for thinking CP to be unreliable. And why should we suppose that it does? In considering possible answers to this question I shall move from the less to the more weighty reasons.

First, religious pluralism shows that practitioners of CP cannot appeal to a general consensus, even among those who take themselves to experience Ultimate Reality. All normal adults engage in pretty much the same doxastic practice of forming perceptual beliefs about the physical environment, but the ways of finding out about the Ultimate on the basis of experience differ sharply among the world religions. Therefore, with sense perception we will get general agreement both on particular perceptual beliefs and on the reliability of a particular doxastic practice, while no such consensus exists for CP.

This difference obviously holds, but it is not so clear what its bearing is on the case at hand. Why suppose that it has any tendency to show that CP is *unreliable*. As pointed out earlier, CP has a claim to reliability just by virtue of the fact that it is a “going concern.” Even though that claim cannot be strengthened in one of the ways the claim of SP is strengthened, we cannot conclude that it is unreliable. We could draw that conclusion only if we had reason to think that if it were reliable it would be used world wide. But why should we suppose that every reliable doxastic practice will be universally shared? I see no reason to assume this; it is a mere prejudice, based on the overwhelming prominence that universally shared practices have in our lives.

A more serious line of argument is this. The best explanation of religious pluralism will leave the claims of CP, or any other religious DP, discredited. We can distinguish a more and a less strong form of this argument. The stronger form takes a hard naturalist line and contends that the best explanation of the facts of religious diversity is that there is no objective reality with which any of the contenders are in cognitive contact. For if there were, there would not be such persistent disagreements as to what it is like and how we are related to it. But this is only a rehash of the contention we have just dismissed, to the effect

that any genuine cognitive contact with an objective reality would be shared across all cultural boundaries. There is no (sufficient) reason to suppose that religious diversity is best explained by an internal, non-veridical origin of all the experiences on which the beliefs are formed. The facts are at least as well explained by the hypothesis that there is a transcendent reality, or dimension of reality, with which some or all of these practices are in touch, though of course they cannot all have it exactly straight.¹²

A more modest argument would be that the diversity is best explained by supposing that none of the competing practices is reliable. For if one of the practices were reliable, that would show itself to us in such a way as to distinguish it from the rest. But no such distinguishing marks are evident. Therefore the best explanation of the diversity is that they all miss the mark to such a degree that none of them can be considered sufficiently reliable for rational acceptance.

But why should we suppose that any reliable doxastic practice will bear external marks of its reliability for all, participants and non-participants alike, to see. That is not the case for familiar, universal, non-controversial practices like SP. SP's marks of reliability are displayed, as we have seen, only from within the practice. Why should we suppose it to be otherwise with respect to religious, non-universal practices? Why suppose that if CP is a by and large reliable cognitive access to certain aspects of God, that reliability could be ascertained from other practices, when that is not the case with SP? And from *within* CP, just as from *within* SP, there are abundant indications of reliability. For example, God is experienced within CP as telling us that He will be present to us.

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What's happening here? Is religious pluralism merely a paper tiger? Surely there is something to the idea that I have less reason to trust the reliability of CP than I would have if it were not for religious diversity? What about the idea presented at the outset, that since the participant of one religious DP has no non-question begging reason to suppose herself in a superior epistemic position to her competitors, she is not justified in supposing that it is her DP that is the reliable one? Well, I think there is something to that idea, and I will now try to bring out just what there is to it and what there isn't.

Let's begin by spelling out the idea more fully. "We have premised that only one religious doxastic practice can be (sufficiently) reliable. But why should I suppose CP to be that one? I would need some reason for supposing that it puts me in a superior epistemic position for getting the truth about God. But I have no such reason. That is, I have no such reason that proceeds from ground common to all the contenders. Within CP I have such reason; CP "tells" me that God has revealed Himself to mankind in the Old and New Testament and in the Christian

church. But the adherents of other religions have analogous reasons within their traditions for their epistemic superiority. And why should I suppose that my internal reasons are more likely to be correct than their internal reasons? The same difficulty again. Unless I have some external reason to suppose that my practice provides a more reliable cognitive access to the Ultimate than the others, I am being arbitrary in picking mine as the one that is sufficiently reliable for rational acceptance".

Note that there is no claim here to show that CP is *unreliable*, but only a claim to undermine the antecedent reasons for supposing it to be reliable. Religious diversity is a reason for *doubting* the reliability of any particular religious doxastic practice. Given religious pluralism, we lack sufficient reason for affirming the reliability of CP or any other particular religious DP.

In assessing the force of this argument it will be useful to focus on analogies that readily spring to mind, e.g., cases in which the witnesses to an automobile accident give divergent accounts of what happened. Unless a given witness, H, has sufficient reasons for regarding herself as in a better position to make accurate observations of the accident, the fact that she is confronted by several accounts that diverge from hers should reduce her confidence in her own. These disparities reduce, or nullify, her justification for believing that the accident was as she takes it to be.

However, there are two important differences between this kind of case and religious diversity. First, the former has to do with the epistemic status of particular beliefs, while the latter has to do with the status of entire DP's. We could find a closer analogue in this respect by switching to competitions between methods.¹³ Consider ways of predicting the weather: various "scientific" meteorological approaches, going by the state of rheumatism in one's joints, and observing groundhogs. Again, if one employs one of these methods but has no non-question begging reason for supposing that method to be more reliable than the others, then one has no sufficient rational basis for reposing confidence in its outputs.

But whether the examples concern particular beliefs or belief forming procedures, there is still a crucial difference between these cases, where it is clear that uneliminated alternatives reduce or eliminate one's basis for one's own belief or practice, and the religious situation. That difference can be stated very simply. In the clear cases the competitors confront each other within the same DP, and hence it is clear what would constitute non-circular grounds for supposing one of the contestants to be superior to the others, even if we do not have such grounds. We know the sorts of factors that would disqualify an observer of the accident (inattention, emotional involvement, visual defects, a poor angle of observation), and we know what would decisively show that one account is the correct one (e.g., agreement with a number of new witnesses). In the weather

prediction case it is, in principle, a simple matter to run a statistical test on the predictive success of the various methods and choose between them on that basis. It is just because of this that in the absence of sufficient reasons for supposing himself to be in a superior position, one the contestants, H, is not justified in continuing to be strongly confident of his alternative. It is because the absence of such reasons (for one's superiority to one's rivals) is the absence of something there is a live possibility of one's having, and that one knows how to go about getting, that this lack so clearly has strongly negative epistemic consequences. But precisely this condition is lacking in the religious diversity case. Since, as we are assuming, each of the major world religions involves (at least one) distinct DP, with its own way of going from experiential input to beliefs formulated in terms of that scheme, and its own system of overriders, the competitors lack the kind of common procedure for settling disputes that is available to the participants in a shared DP. Here, in contrast to the intra-DP cases, my adversary and I do not lack something that we know perfectly well how to go about getting. Hence the sting is taken out of the inability of each of us to show that he is in an epistemically superior position. And so this lack does not have the epistemically deleterious consequences found in the intra-DP cases. Or, at the very least, it is not clear that it has those consequences. To put the point most sharply, we have no idea what a non-circular proof of the reliability of CP would look like, *even if it is as reliable as you please*. Hence why should we take the absence of such a proof to nullify, or even sharply diminish, the justification I have for my Christian M-beliefs?

This conclusion, that the lack of a common ground alters drastically the epistemic bearings of an unresolved incompatibility, can be illustrated by secular examples. Consider the methodological opposition between psychoanalysts and behaviorists concerning the diagnosis and treatment of neurosis and, more generally, concerning human motivation. Psychoanalytic formulations are heavily based on clinical "insight" and "interpretation". Behaviorists typically reject these as data and restrict themselves to "harder" data, the observation of which can be easily replicated under controlled conditions. Since psychoanalysts do not reject the legitimacy of the behavioral data, but only hold that they are insufficient for dealing with the problems with which they are concerned, the issue is over the status of the analysts' "data". Let's say that there is no common ground on which the dispute can be resolved.¹⁴ Here we are not so ready, or should not be so ready, to judge that it is irrational for the psychoanalyst to continue to form clinical beliefs in the way he does without having non-circular reasons for supposing that his method of forming clinical diagnoses is a reliable one. Since we are at a loss to specify what such non-circular reasons would look like even if the method is reliable, we should not regard the practitioner as irrational for lacking such reasons.

Let's now consider a counter-factual analogue. Suppose that there were a diversity of sense perceptual DP's as diverse as religious experiential DP's are in fact. Suppose that in certain cultures there were a well established "Cartesian" practice of construing what is visually perceived as an indefinitely extended medium that is more or less concentrated at various points, rather than, as in our "Aristotelian" practice, as made up of more or less discrete objects of various kinds scattered about in space. Let's also suppose that in other cultures a "Whiteheadian" SP is equally socially established; here the visual field is construed as made up of momentary events growing out of each other in a continuous process.¹⁵ Let's further suppose that each of these practices serves its practitioners equally well in their dealings with the environment. We may even suppose that each group has developed physical science, in its own terms, to about as high a pitch as the others. But suppose further that we are as firmly wedded to our "Aristotelian" mode of conceptualizing what is visually perceived, as we are in fact. The Cartesian and Whiteheadian *auslander* seem utterly outlandish to us, and we find it difficult to take seriously the idea that they may be telling it like it is. However we can find no neutral grounds on which to argue effectively for the greater accuracy of our way of doing it. In such a situation would it be clear that it is irrational for us to continue to form perceptual beliefs in our "Aristotelian" way, given that the practice is proving itself by its fruits? It seems to me that quite the opposite is clear. In the absence of any external reason for supposing that one of the competing practices is more accurate than my own, the only rational course for me to take is 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. But our actual situation with regard to CP is precisely parallel to the one we have been imagining. Hence, by parity of reasoning, the rational thing for a practitioner of CP to do is to continue to form Christian M-beliefs, and, more generally, to continue to accept, and operate in accordance with, the system of Christian belief.

I have been suggesting that if there actually were a diversity of sense perceptual practices, we would be faced with an epistemological problem with respect to SP exactly parallel to that we actually face with respect to CP. But why shouldn't we say that the mere *possibility* of an SP diversity implies that the problem already arises. If it is so much as possible that human beings should construe what is presented in visual perception in a radically different way, and so much as possible that the practice so constituted should be as internally viable as our actual SP, then doesn't that *possibility* raise the question of why we should suppose that it is rational to form beliefs in the SP way, given that we have no reason to suppose it to be more reliable than these other possibilities? And if in that case it is rational to engage in SP, despite the lack of any non-circular reason for regarding our Aristotelian SP as more reliable than its possible alternatives, that conclusion should carry over to the CP problem.

And yet it is difficult to work ourselves up into worrying about these possibilities, and even difficult to convince ourselves that it is our intellectual duty to do so. Insofar as this has a respectable basis, it is that it is not really clear that the alleged possibilities are indeed possible. At least they may well not be real possibilities for us, given our actual constitution and the lawful structure of the world. It may be that we are innately programmed to perceive the environment in Aristotelian terms, and that this program does not allow for social reprogramming into a "Cartesian" or a "Whiteheadian" mode. Nevertheless, I want to reiterate that *if* these alternatives really are possible, then they give rise to difficulties for the rationality of engaging in SP that are quite parallel to those arising from the actual diversity of religions for the rationality of engaging in CP. And so, in that case, if it is rational to engage in SP despite these difficulties, the same conclusion follows for CP.

Although I have been speaking in the first person for the most part, it goes without saying, I hope, that the conclusions I have been drawing concerning my epistemic situation as a practitioner of CP hold, *pari passu*, for practitioners of the other internally validated religious DP's. In each case the person who is in the kind of position I have been describing will be able to justifiably engage in his/her own religious DP despite not being able to show that it is epistemically superior to the competition. It may seem strange that such incompatible positions could be justified for different people, but this is just a special case of the general point that incompatible propositions can each be justified for different people if what they have to go on is suitably different.

v

I have been arguing that despite appearances, religious pluralism does not show any irrationality in the use of CP, and, by parity of argument, in the use of any other such religious experiential DP. But does that imply that it in no way constitutes a problem for the Christian, Moslem, or Buddhist? By no means. In conclusion I will enumerate some of the problems that remain.

I will begin with the non-epistemic ones. First, there is, from within any particular religion, a theological problem. In a theistic religion this will take the form: why does God allow such a diversity of incompatible systems of belief about Himself? This is allied to the more general question: why doesn't He make at least the main outlines of the truth about these matters clear to everyone? And both are simply particular versions of the familiar problem of evil. As with other versions, there have been many attempts to deal with them. Then there are social-psychological problems as to what factors lead to the particular forms taken by religious belief, organization and practice in the various world religions. And so on.

Turning to epistemic difficulties, I have been arguing only that the facts of religious pluralism do not establish that it is *irrational* for one to engage in CP and other religious experiential practices. But I have not denied that religious pluralism should diminish the confidence one has in the reliability of CP. On the contrary. I think we can see that there is a negative influence here just by asking ourselves whether we would not be entitled to repose more confidence in CP if all religious persons formed M-beliefs in the CP way, than we are in the present situation. If all those who take themselves to be experientially aware of God's presence in their lives were to tell stories that agree with each other in broad outline, wouldn't we be more certain that we are in cognitive contact with God in CP than we are in fact? I think this cannot be denied. An epistemic as well as a theological load would be lifted from our shoulders. Thus, I would acknowledge that it is right and proper for one to be worried and perplexed by religious pluralism, epistemically as well as theologically, though not to the extent of denying the rationality of CP.

This conclusion is, admittedly, very imprecise. One's justification for engaging in CP is diminished by religious pluralism, but not to the extent of its being irrational for one to engage in that practice. But just what is the order of magnitude of this diminution from "ideal justification"? How far is the resulting degree of justification from each of the extremes of full justification and complete lack of justification? I don't see any basis for answering such questions. I don't see any basis for quantifying degrees of justification, in any event. I will have to content myself with saying that the degree of justification that remains is such as to make it not irrational for one to engage in the belief forming practice and to hold the beliefs so formed. The facts of religious diversity do not suffice to override the positive considerations on the other side (the presumptive reliability of any socially established DP, plus the internal self-support involved) to such an extent as to show that the practice lacks a degree of reliability appropriate to rational acceptance. We are warranted in supposing CP to be a reasonably reliable mode of belief formation, one that at least gives us approximations to the truth about God and our relations thereto that suffice for our condition.

I do not take the practical implication of this conclusion to be that the Christian, or the member of another religious community, is free to shut herself up within the boundaries of her own community and ignore the rest of the world. On the contrary. The knowledgeable and reflective Christian should be concerned about the situation, both theologically and epistemically. Actuated by the latter concern, she should do whatever seems feasible to search for common ground on which to adjudicate the crucial differences between the world religions, seeking a way to show in a non-circular way which of the contenders is correct. What success will attend these efforts I do not presume to predict. Perhaps it is only in God's good time that a more thorough insight into the truth behind these divergent perspectives will be revealed to us.

NOTES

1. Of course there would still be serious theological, apologetic, and evangelical problems posed by the persistence of incompatible faiths.
2. The use of the term 'practice' is not intended to carry any implication that this activity is under voluntary control. To avoid such a suggestion, terms like 'process', 'disposition', or 'habit', could be used as alternatives.
3. It will not have escaped the reader's notice that this account owes much both to Reid and to Wittgenstein, though in spirit it is closer to the former. As will become clear in the sequel, I do not accept Wittgenstein's verificationist, non-realist assumptions that we cannot so much as sensibly attempt to evaluate a practice, or the beliefs generated therein, from the outside, or that different practices involve different concepts of truth and reality.
4. I omit consideration of the complication that a belief might be determined by an unreliable input-output function that is involved in a mostly reliable doxastic practice.
5. At this point the reader may well wonder just what epistemic status I take this "general picture" to have. Is it based on the pooled experience (or the pooled M-beliefs) of the community throughout its history? Is it based on divine revelation, and if so are we thinking of this revelation as communicated otherwise than through the formation of M-beliefs from particularly crucial individual experiential encounters with God? Do innate tendencies play a role? And what about natural theology? These are all crucial questions for the epistemology of religious belief, but I will have to forego consideration of them at this time.
6. This is controversial. Traditional appeals to miracles, history, and natural theology have been used to do just that. But I shall take it that none of this suffices to give strong enough support to a claim to reliability.
7. CP is no more independent of other DP's than is SP and other secular practices. For one thing, reasoning of various sorts, as well as sense perception and memory, are used in building up the general system of doctrine that provides the overriding system and the scheme in terms of which God is identified and characterized.
8. See my "Religious Experience and Religious Belief", *Nous*, 16 (1982), pp. 03-12; "Christian Experience and Christian Belief", in *Faith and Rationality*, ed. A. Plantinga & N. Wolterstorff (U. of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 103-134; "Perceiving God", *Journ. Philos.*, 83 (1986), pp. 655-66.
9. To be sure, as I am depicting the situation, the outputs of each religious DP are in fundamental contradiction to the outputs of other religious DP's. Nevertheless, since I will also be taking it that none of these DP's are more "firmly established" than the others, these incompatibilities do not serve to discredit any of them.
10. See Fred Dretske's distinction between the "incremental" knowledge provided by a particular case of visual perception, and the "proto-knowledge" that is brought to that perception, in Chapter III of his *Seeing and Knowing* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969).
11. To be sure, we can consider a more rudimentary perceptual belief forming practice in which the beliefs formed on the basis of experience are much less specific than those that are formulated in terms of the conceptual and doctrinal scheme of a particular religion. Such a practice could be defended without getting into the defence of the basic belief system of any religion. And, indeed, if the beliefs involved are unspecific enough they may be confronted by no opposition from other religions. This is the tack taken by Gary Gutting in his *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*

(U. of Notre Dame Press, 1982). In Chapter V he argues that religious experience can justify a "core" belief in the existence of a very good and very powerful being, but that it cannot justify the more distinctive beliefs of any particular religion. Since I take it that belief formation on the basis of experience in religion always takes place in terms of the conceptual and doctrinal system of some particular religion, I do not feel that what Gutting defends is actually realized in human affairs, and therefore I shall not consider it further.

12. Whether one has it much more nearly straight than all the others, or whether some or all have it straight to varying degrees, or, indeed to the same degree, is a question we would need other resources to answer.

13. William Hasker puts forward an example of this sort in his "On Justifying the Christian Practice", *The New Scholasticism*, L, no. 2, Spring, 1986.

14. One might think that there is a predictive test in terms of the success of the therapies based on the respective methodologies. But, alas, parallel methodological controversy will break out over the assessment of therapeutic success. I am also assuming that psychoanalytic theories do not have implications that have been disconfirmed by ordinary empirical investigation; or if there have been such, the theories have been modified to take account of them without losing their distinctive thrust.

15. Many questions would have to be settled if we were to pursue these fantasies. For example, does the environment *look* different to the people in these different cultures, or is it only that they use a different conceptual scheme to form perceptual beliefs about what they are seeing? I think that the former alternative will be more suitable for present purposes.