

# Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

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Volume 14 | Issue 3

Article 1

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7-1-1997

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### Recommended Citation

Hick, John (1997) "The Epistemological Challenge of Religious Pluralism," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 3 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol14/iss3/1>

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# THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHALLENGE OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

John Hick

A critique of responses to the problem posed to Christian philosophy by the fact of religious plurality by Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen, and George Mavrodes in the recent *Festschrift* dedicated to William Alston, and of Alston's own response to the challenge of religious diversity to his epistemology of religion. His argument that religious experience is a generally reliable basis for belief-formation is by implication transformed by his response to this problem into the principle that Christianity constitutes the sole exception to the general rule that religious experience is an *unreliable* basis for belief-formation, thus undermining his central thesis. Plantinga's and van Inwagen's defenses of the logical and moral permissibility of Christian exclusivism fail to address the problem posed by the existence of other equally well-based religious belief-systems with equally valuable fruits in human life. Mavrodes' discussion of polytheism, and his clarifying questions about religious pluralism, are also discussed.

Many of us today who work in the philosophy of religion are in broad agreement with William Alston that the most viable defense of religious belief has to be a defense of the rationality of basing beliefs (with many qualifying provisos which Alston has carefully set forth) on religious experience. From the point of view of a Christian philosopher—as distinguished from a philosopher simply as such—there is however an obvious challenge to this in the fact that the same epistemological principle establishes the rationality of Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, etc in holding beliefs that are at least partly, and sometimes quite radically, incompatible with the Christian belief-system. Belief in the reality of Allah, Vishnu, Shiva, and of the non-personal Brahman, Dharmakaya, Tao, seem to be as experientially well based as belief in the reality of the Holy Trinity. Alston himself acknowledges this as “the most difficult problem for my position”<sup>1</sup> and this view is reflected in the fact that a third of the *Festschrift* recently published in his honor<sup>2</sup> is devoted to this topic.

Alston's own solution to the problem is (in briefest summary) that since we have at present no neutral way of establishing which of the world religions is right, and since our own religion is both theoretically and practically satisfactory to us, it is much more reasonable for us to stay with it than to switch to another. On analogy with the rival doxastic



practices—Aristotelian, Cartesian, Whiteheadian etc—in terms of which we construe the physical world, “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 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. . . Hence, by parity of reasoning, the rational thing for a practitioner of CP [Christian doxastic practice] to do is to continue to form Christian M-beliefs [beliefs about God’s self-manifestation to us], and, more generally, to continue to accept, and operate in accordance with, the system of Christian belief.”<sup>3</sup> Alston is here assuming that there can be at most one ‘true religion’, so that the big question is, which of the competing religious belief-systems is the true one? But this widespread assumption is fatal to Alston’s thesis that it is (with all the proper qualifications and safeguards) rational to base beliefs on religious experience. For if only *one* of the many belief-systems based upon religious experience can be true, it follows that *religious experience generally produces false beliefs*, and that it is thus a generally *unreliable* basis for belief-formation. This is a reversal of the principle, for which Alston has argued so persuasively, that religious experience constitutes as legitimate a ground for belief-formation as does sense experience. Further, whilst it is possible that the doxastic practice of one’s own community constitutes the sole exception to a general rule, the claim that this is so can only appear arbitrary and unjustified unless it is supported by good arguments. And so William Wainwright, in his chapter in the *Festschrift*, holds that “To be fully successful [Alston’s defence of ‘sitting tight’] must form part of a persuasive cumulative case argument for the Christian world-view” (188).

The arbitrariness of Alston’s position is highlighted when we remember that if he had been born into a devout Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist family he would, using the same epistemology, be equally arbitrarily claiming that his Muslim, or Hindu, or Buddhist beliefs constitute the sole exception to the general rule that religious experience produces false beliefs! (Strictly speaking, since it would not then be the same Bill Alston, one should say that when *someone* is born into a devout Muslim etc family . . . But this does not affect the point).

However Alston might at this point retreat to a fall-back position prepared in *Perceiving God*, where he describes the absence of neutral grounds for preferring the Christian world-view as only a “worst case scenario” (270). A more desirable scenario would be one in which there are compelling metaphysical arguments for theism and in which in addition “historical evidences give much stronger support to the claims of Christianity than to those of its theistic rivals—Judaism and Islam” (270). However Alston does not suggest that this better scenario actually obtains. “Perhaps”, he says in the end, “it is only in God’s good time that a more thorough insight into the truth behind these divergent perspectives [i.e. of the different religions] will be revealed to us” (278). His fall-back position is thus a hope rather than a reality.

However, even if it were a reality it would still undermine Alston’s basic principle. For on his only-one-true-religion assumption the argu-

ments and evidences establishing the truth of Christian beliefs would thereby establish the falsity of the beliefs of other religions, at least in so far as they are incompatible with Christian beliefs. And this incompatibility is clearly very considerable: God cannot be, for example, both personal and not personal, triune and not-triune, exclusively self-revealed to the Jews, and to the Arabs, and so on. And yet religious experience within the different traditions has produced these incompatible beliefs. It thus follows as directly from Alston's best case scenario as from his worst case scenario that religious experience is *not* generally a reliable ground for belief. On the contrary, it follows equally inescapably from either scenario that religious experience generally produces false beliefs, with Christian experience claiming to stand out as the sole exception.

It therefore does not seem to me that Alston has met, or can without a more radical adjustment meet, the challenge of religious diversity to his experience-based apologetic. On the other hand, his central argument that religious experience constitutes a valid basis for belief-formation still seems correct, and indeed (in my view) constitutes the most valuable current contribution to the epistemology of religion. But would this not be a much stronger contribution if the doxastic practices of the other world religions could be seen as further instances of it rather than as contradicting it?

Fortunately there is a fairly obvious way to reconcile the two desiderata (a) that the principle that we properly form beliefs on the basis of our experience applies impartially to religious as well as to sensory experience (subject in each case to possible defeaters), and (b) that this principle holds impartially for non-Christian as well as for Christian forms of religious experience. This is by appealing to the distinction between God/the Ultimate/the Real/the Transcendent *an sich* and that ultimate reality as variously humanly conceived, and thus variously humanly experienced, and hence variously humanly responded to in historical forms of life. Such a recognition of variety in our human response to the Transcendent depends upon the epistemological principle propounded by St Thomas, "Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower,"<sup>4</sup> and developed in the modern world by Kant in a way that has affected nearly all western philosophy since. In the case of religion the mode of the knower, i.e. the conceptuality in terms of which the divine presence comes to consciousness, differs as between different human religious cultures and epochs. I shall not develop the pluralistic hypothesis further here, having done so elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> Alston himself discusses this Kantian option, but rejects it on the ground that it must be seen "as a proposal for a reconception of religious doxastic practices, rather than as a description and evaluation of those practices as they are. It seems clear to me that most practitioners of one or another religion are pre-Kantian . . . They think that [their] beliefs embody true accounts of the Ultimate as it really is in itself . . ." <sup>6</sup> I accept that this is so, but I suggest that the alternative to some kind of religious pluralism is to leave unexplained the immensely significant fact that the other great world faiths are as epistemically well based as Christianity; and also that they seem, when judged by their fruits, to be morally on a par with Christianity.

The next essay in the Alston *Festschrift*, Alvin Plantinga's "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism", affirms Christian exclusivism in unqualified terms. His response to religious diversity is the straightforward claim that Christian beliefs are true and all beliefs inconsistent with them therefore false. He does not offer any positive reasons for this but thinks it sufficient to argue, negatively, that it is not morally reprehensible or epistemically out of order to adopt an exclusivist stance. To be a religious exclusivist is, he argues, neither irrational, unjustified, egotistical, intellectually arrogant, elitist, a manifestation of harmful pride, self-servingly arbitrary, dishonest, or oppressive and imperialistic. His argument is characteristically thorough and elaborate, involving among other matters the examination of four different senses of rationality and three different conceptions of justification. But what emerges at the end is simply that Christians are free to be (as throughout Christian history Christians have nearly always been) exclusivists in their attitude to non-Christians. One is not "arrogant and egotistic just by virtue of believing what I know others don't believe, where I can't show them that I am right" (200); and one who believes that Christians are right and non-Christians wrong has "violated no intellectual or cognitive duties or obligations in the formation and sustenance of the belief in question" (202). The scale of philosophical argumentation leading to this conclusion suggests that Plantinga supposes himself to be addressing the central issue between religious exclusivism and religious pluralism. But in fact his argument has not even come within sight of the central issue. Certainly, when people sincerely believe (whether rightly or wrongly) that their own group has a monopoly of the final religious truth, they are entitled to hold and propagate that view, so long as their so doing does not harm others. And this applies impartially not only to evangelical Christians but also to evangelical Muslims, Hindus etc., and likewise to much smaller and more recent religious communities such as Christian Scientists, or Kimbanguists, or the followers of the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, and so on. But to establish this principle is not to have addressed the epistemological challenge of religious diversity.

Instead Plantinga is concerned to defend Christian exclusivism against the moral indignation that it has sometimes aroused, and which has sometimes been expressed in the contemporary philosophical and theological debates.<sup>7</sup> He deflects this by defining exclusivism so narrowly that only people who are "rather fully aware of other religions" and aware also "that there is much that at least looks like genuine piety and devoutness" within them (196) are to be counted as exclusivists. He thus ignores by stipulative definition the aspect of the Church's stance through the centuries that has been expressed in the persecution and murder of Jews, in violent crusades against Muslims, in the validation of European imperialism, and in the often ignorant denigration of other religions. As regards the latter, there are plenty of cases in Christian literature of theological exclusivism expressed in arrogant, proud, oppressive and/or unthinking and unfair ways. But it is of course also true that a knowledgeable, thoughtful and ethically sensitive Christian exclusivist, such as Plantinga himself, is morally as well as intellectually enti-

tled to his exclusivist faith. But is this fact sufficient to dispose of the problem of religious diversity ?

Plantinga does however at one point take up an issue in the debate. He refers to the fact, noted above, that religious allegiance depends in the great majority of cases on the accident of birth: someone born into a devout Muslim family in Pakistan is very likely to be a Muslim, someone born into a devout Hindu family in India to be a Hindu, someone born into a devout Christian family in Spain or Mexico to be a Catholic Christian; and so on. The conclusion that I have myself drawn from this is that a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' is appropriate in relation to beliefs that have been instilled into one by the surrounding religious culture. "Having thus noted that Ptolemaic [i.e. exclusivist] theologies tend to posit their centers on the basis of the accidents of geography, one is likely to see one's own Ptolemaic [exclusivist] conviction in a new light. Can we be so entirely confident that to have been born in our particular part of the world carries with it the privilege of knowing the full religious truth, whereas to have been born elsewhere involves the likelihood of having only partial and inferior truth ?"<sup>8</sup> The relativity of religious belief to the circumstances of birth does not, of course, show that claims to a monopoly of religious truth are unjustified; but it does I think warn us to look critically at such claims. Plantinga's response is to point out that if he had been born elsewhere, such as in Madagascar, he would have had some different beliefs—for example, he would not have had the belief that he was born in Michigan. And, he says, "the same goes for the pluralist. Pluralism isn't and hasn't been widely popular in the world at large; if the pluralist had been born in Madagascar, or medieval France, he probably wouldn't have been a pluralist" (212); but, he points out, it does not follow that he is therefore not entitled to be a pluralist. This is true; but how relevant is it ? One is not usually a religious pluralist as a result of having been raised from childhood to be one, as (in most cases) one is raised from childhood to be a Christian or a Muslim or a Hindu, etc. Surely the cases are so different that the analogy fails.

The next *Festschrift* essay is Peter van Inwagen's "Non Est Hick". Although this refers to Hick only in the title and the last sentence, van Inwagen's account of religious pluralism seems to be loosely based on my *An Interpretation of Religion*. He finds the whole idea offensive and even perhaps contemptible: "the defense of religious pluralism", he says, "has always been entirely rhetorical" (219). And so instead of engaging critically with it he presents his own understanding of religion, adding however that "I do not expect this theory to recommend itself to anyone who is not a traditional, orthodox Christian" (219).

van Inwagen outlines Western Augustinian-Calvinist orthodoxy: God, the primordial catastrophe of the Fall, redemption by the death of God's Son, the choice of Israel, the divine founding of the Catholic Church. As to the world religions, "they are the work of human beings, and their existence and properties are not a part of God's plan for the world" (225)—although God may nevertheless make use of them, as He makes use of other human acts and products that He has not willed. van Inwagen makes much of the contention that whilst there are Christians,

Buddhists, Muslims, etc., there are no such reified entities as Christianity or Buddhism or Islam, for these are 'compression' words naming abstractions. He holds that "the concept of a 'religion' is a piece of misdirection intended to advance what I shall call the 'Enlightenment agenda' " (231), which he associates with religious pluralism. It is ironic that Wilfred Cantwell Smith's classic work *The Meaning and End of Religion* (first published in 1962 and widely influential ever since<sup>9</sup>) deconstructed the concepts of 'religion' and of 'a religion' as modern western creations which distort the reality of human faith throughout the world, this deconstruction leading to Cantwell Smith's well-known pluralist conclusion!

van Inwagen also makes much of the 'uniqueness' of western Christian civilization. But of course every civilization, including our own, is unique! And of course the Church has been a major factor throughout the history of the west. But some who speak of the uniqueness of Christian civilization do not merely mean to say, uncontroversially, that it is unique, but to make the substantial claim that it is morally superior to all other civilizations. van Inwagen wisely does not make this claim which is, as he says, highly controversial and "could be argued interminably" (233). He does however imply that but for Christianity science would never have come about. This is a highly debateable view that some (such as A.N. Whitehead) have suggested, but that others have rejected, seeing the origins of modern science in a confluence of cultures made possible by the Renaissance recovery of the spirit of free enquiry. But this is a big historical debate which it would not be appropriate to pursue here.

van Inwagen holds that the Church is "the unique [meaning the one and only] instrument of salvation" (237). He then takes up the obvious challenge, " 'Well, isn't it fortunate for you that you just happen to be a member of this "unique instrument of salvation" ' . . . Yes [he answers], it is fortunate for me, very fortunate indeed" (238). He then, like Plantinga, seeks to dispose of the problem with an analogy. He points out that whilst "one's adherence to a system of political thought and action is conditioned by one's upbringing", this is not "a reason for doubting that the political system one favors as—if not the uniquely 'correct' one—clearly and markedly superior to its available rivals. And yet any argument to show that the Church's belief in her own uniqueness was arrogant would apply a fortiori to this universally held belief about politics" (238). But has van Inwagen not here overlooked the crucial differences? The Church *has* traditionally claimed to be "the uniquely 'correct' one", in the sense of being the sole instrument of salvation. The Church's claim is not about the relative merits of different political systems but about the eternal fate of the entire human race. One can accept that a loving God leaves humans free to devise their own political systems, but can one suppose that the Heavenly Father, who loves all human beings with an equal and unlimited love, has ordained that only those who have the good fortune to be born in certain parts of the world shall have the opportunity of salvation? Is there not a major problem here that is merely concealed by the analogy with political systems?

That there is such a problem is implicitly acknowledged when van

Inwagen goes on to say that "It is not necessary for Christians to believe that there is no salvation outside the *visible* Church" (239). Indeed, only one "who has accepted Christian belief and rejects it and rejects it still at the moment of his death—and rejects it with a clear mind, and not when maddened by pain or grief or terror—is damned" (239). Such people must, fortunately, form a very minute group. But "What provision God makes for those who have never heard the Christian message, or who have heard it only in some distorted and falsifying form, I do not know. That is God's business and not ours." (239).

This is a standard, indeed classic, evasion of the problem. It covers virtually everyone throughout the world and throughout history other than a soundly orthodox Christian minority. But if only God knows what provision God has made for the large majority of the human race, how does van Inwagen know that God has not caused the Buddhist *Sangha*, and the Muslim *Ummah*, and so on, as well as the Christian Church, to come into existence as "instruments of salvation," and how does he know that each community's (including the Church's) affirmation of the unique religious superiority of its own faith is not an expression of our fallen human nature? How can he profess a genuine ignorance about God's ways with the hundreds of millions of people of other faiths, and at the same time be entitled to assert a dogmatic Christian exclusivism? Surely, if anyone knows that God is *not* working salvifically through other religions, as well as through Christianity, *non est* van Inwagen!

The next essay is Joseph Runzo's "Perceiving God, World-Views, and Faith: Meeting the Problem of Religious Pluralism". Since Runzo is an advocate of religious pluralism, though of a different version from my own, I shall not treat this as the place to discuss our intra-pluralist differences.

The final essay is George Mavrodes' "Polytheism." At the outset the reader is faced with what appears to be either an extravagant compliment or an splendid insult! Hick is, says Mavrodes, "probably the most important philosophical defender of polytheism in the history of Western philosophy" (262). He adds "I think that [Hick] does not much care for that description himself" (262). He is right about this. But the appropriateness of the label in one limited sense and its inappropriateness in other senses is easily clarified and need not detain us long. One who accepts the distinction between, on the one hand, an ultimate and (in Kantian terms) noumenal Real *an sich*, and on the other hand its phenomenal appearances to human consciousness as the experienced god-figures (Jahweh, Allah, Holy Trinity, Shiva, etc) and experienced non-personal absolutes (Brahman, the Dharmakaya, the Tao, etc), is at one level a poly-something, though not precisely a poly-theist, and at another level a mono-something, though not precisely a mono-theist. So the "polytheist" attribution requires a somewhat contrived hermeneutic, and I shall take Mavrodes' compliment/insult as a friendly jest. It could even turn out, in view of Mavrodes' interesting and original discussion of polytheism in the ordinary sense of that word, and his qualified defense of it—he thinks that "there are many beings who satisfy Swinburne's definition of a god" (278)—that it is he who has become the main defender of polytheism in western philosophy!



But Mavrodes also has important things to say about the pluralistic hypothesis. He is interested in a "deep ambiguity in Hick's way of thinking about the relation of the Real to the gods" (272). He describes two different and mutually incompatible models or analogies for this relationship. One is the disguise model. A prince, wishing to observe his people without their being aware of his presence, travels amongst them disguised in different ways, sometimes as a mendicant monk, sometimes as a journeyman stonemason, and so on. Thus the same person, the prince, appears to different groups in different ways, presenting himself to some as a monk, to others as a stonemason, etc. The analogous possibility in relation to the Real is that the various gods and absolutes are each identical with the Real, which however takes these different forms in relation to different human groups. Here the diversity is all the work of the Real, with no special input on the part of the human perceivers. Mavrodes' alternative analogy is that of several artists painting the same landscape. But because they paint in abstract and nonrepresentational styles one painting does not look much like another and none looks much like the landscape itself; for the artists' creative powers result in their producing very different aesthetic constructs. Analogously, the gods and absolutes are not identical with the Real, but each "*is a human creation* in reaction to some influence, input, or the like from the noumenon" (272. Italics original). And Mavrodes asks, which of these models am I using ?

The answer is, neither. The disguise model, first, would be radically misleading. As Mavrodes points out, "according to this model, there is just one god who appears in all the various religions" (276). Presumably that one god, like the prince in the story, has his/her own definite, describable characteristics, including the intention to appear in a variety of ways. But such a god is not analogous to the postulated ineffable Real. This has no humanly conceivable intrinsic characteristics (other than purely formal, linguistically generated ones), and is accordingly not a person carrying out a revelatory plan. And the construct model is also radically misleading, though in one respect less so. It suggests that as the artists directly perceive the landscape, and then through their own creativity represent it in their different ways, so religious people directly experience the Real but respond to it by creating different concepts/images/mental pictures of it. But on the pluralistic hypothesis, as I have tried to formulate it, there can be no direct experience of the Real *an sich* which could then be imaged in a range of ways analogous to that in which the painters creatively represent the landscape. On the contrary, in religious awareness the organizing and form-giving activity of the mind operates at a pre-conscious level, so that religious (including mystical) experience already comes to consciousness as the awareness of a specific personal god or non-personal absolute. The Real is thus not experienced as it is in itself, but is postulated to satisfy (a) the basic faith that human religious experience is not purely projection but is at the same time a response to a transcendent reality or realities, and (b) the observation that Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism etc, which are communal responses to these different gods and absolutes, seem to be more or less equally effective

contexts of human transformation from self-centeredness, with all the evils and miseries that flow from this, to a recentering in the Transcendent as experienced within one's own tradition.

But Mavrodes' two models do nevertheless each single out an aspect of the pluralistic hypothesis. The disguise model points to their being only one Real, whose impact upon us is experienced in different ways. And the construct model points to the positive contribution of the human mind in all awareness. The general truth that the form in which we perceive our environment, both natural and supernatural, depends upon the nature of our cognitive equipment and conceptual resources, suggests another analogy which, although still capable of misleading, is less so than Mavrodes'.

This is the difference between, say, the wooden table top that we experience as a solid, hard, brown, partly shiny, enduring three-dimensional object, and the account of it given by the physicists, as (very roughly) mostly empty space in which infinitesimal packages of discharging energy are moving about at a great pace, none of these having any of the properties of the table top that we perceive—neither colour nor weight nor extension nor density nor even fixed position. Let us now add other non-human observers—say angels, Martians, and Alpha Centaurians,—each species being equipped with quite different sensors and processing the input of those sensors through their own quite different conceptual systems. Let us suppose that as a result of this each species perceives something quite different both from what the others perceive and also from the table top that we perceive. This now provides a partial analogy for the way in which different spiritual practices (I-Thou prayer, non-I-Thou meditation) and different sets of religious concepts lead to very different awarenesses of the Transcendent. But even this more far-fetched analogy would be only some degree less misleading than Mavrodes', for it still does not reach to the notion of the ineffable. There can indeed be no true analogy for the unique relationship between the postulated ultimate, ineffable, reality the universal presence of which gives rise, in collaboration with the our human spiritual practices and conceptual schemes, to the range of forms of religious experience reported in the history of religions.

The purpose of this paper, however, has not been to expound a particular version of religious pluralism, but to suggest that we do not yet have any adequate response from conservative Christian philosophers to the problem of religious diversity.<sup>10</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. William Alston, *Perceiving God*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 255.
2. Thomas D. Senior, ed., *The Rationality of Belief and the Plurality of Faith*:

*Essays in Honor of William P. Alston*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995.

3. William Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 274.

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II/II, Q. 1, art. 2.

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

6. William Alston, *Perceiving God*, p. 265.

7. Although in the case of those remarks of my own that Plantinga cites I think he has been a little over-sensitive. That we should "avoid the implausibly arbitrary dogma that religious experience is all delusory with the single exception of the particular form of the one speaking" (quoted, *Festschrift*, p. 197) is not a moral condemnation but an invitation to debate. And that "The only reason for treating one's tradition differently from others is the very human but not very cogent reason that it is one's own" (quoted, p. 198) is not a charge that an exclusivist is "arrogant or egotistical" but, again, a provocation to debate. And my *Interpretation*, p. 234, does not say what Plantinga (210) cites it as saying—though possibly the page number that he cites here is a misprint. He is however accurate in quoting me (194) as saying that "natural pride . . . becomes harmful when it is elevated to the level of dogma and is built into the belief system of a religious community . . . implying an exclusive or a decisively superior access to the truth or the power to save"—though this is not the same as saying that all exclusivist believing is an expression of human pride.

8. John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1982, pp. 37-8.

9. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 1962, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

10. I am grateful to William Alston for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.