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RESPONSE TO HICK

William P. Alston

This is a response to Hick's comments on my approach to the problem of religious diversity in *Perceiving God*. Before unearthing the bones I have to pick with him, let me fully acknowledge that I have not provided a fully satisfactory solution to the problem. At most I have done the best that can be done given the constraints within which I was working. But this best, if such it be, is not as bad as Hick makes it appear. To show this I need to make several corrections in Hick's depiction of the situation.

Hick says that on (my) assumption that at most one of the major world religious systems is true, "religious experience generally produces false beliefs", and hence is not a reliable source of belief. But this is too fast in more than one way. First, it assumes that most of the beliefs in each system contradict most of the beliefs in the others. But that is by no means clear, and in the absence of any definite way of counting beliefs it could not be clear. Indeed, my impression is that it is false. Second, Hick unduly inflates the role of religious experience in grounding religious beliefs. Though I argue at length in *Perceiving God* that it is one important ground of religious belief, I devote the last chapter to discussing the ways in which it interacts with other grounds - natural theology, revelation, etc. - each of which makes its own distinctive contribution. Thus, even if the major religious belief systems are mostly in contradiction, there is still the question of the extent to which this is to be laid at the door of religious experience. It could be that the differences are much more due to the other grounds and that, insofar as beliefs are based wholly or largely on religious experience, there is much less contradiction between the different religions.

But even if most beliefs based on religious experience were false, that would not contradict the epistemological claims (at least the most basic epistemological claim) I make for religious experience in the book. For that basic claim is that its seeming to one that some Ultimate Reality (UR) is presenting itself to one's experience as \emptyset makes it *prima facie* justified that UR is \emptyset . And this *prima facie* justification can be overridden by various contrary factors, including sufficient reasons for supposing that UR is not \emptyset . Such an overrider might take the form of a predominance of (perhaps more strongly) justified beliefs that contradict the supposi-



tion that UR is \emptyset . So even on my “worst case scenario”, on which there are no sufficient reasons independent of religious experience to prefer one world religion to others, religious experience can still render the beliefs based on it *prima facie* justified, even if much or most of this justification is overridden.

One final note. Though I did not in the book try to show that there are extra-experiential reasons for preferring the Christian beliefs-system to its rivals, and though I have no intention of embarking on that here, I am not prepared to admit that it is “a hope rather than a reality”. It is, indeed a hope, but one that, I believe, can be given some substance.

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