RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY: THE COGNITIVE PENETRABILITY OF RELIGIOUS PERCEPTION

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Philosophical responses to religious diversity range from outright rejection of divine reality to claims of religious pluralism. In this paper, I challenge those responses that take the problem of religious diversity to be merely an instance of the general problem of disagreement. To do so, I will take, as my starting point, William Alston's treatment of the problems that religious diversity seems to pose for the rationality of theistic beliefs. My main aim is to highlight the cognitive penetrability of religious experience as a major source of such problems. I conclude by examining the consequences of cognitive penetration for the reliability of the monotheistic doxastic practice.

My aim in this paper is to address a neglected difficulty for the rationality of religious belief: the cognitive penetrability of religious experience. My main contention is that recent discussions of the rationality of religious belief have heavily focused on the output side of the religious belief formation—epistemic consequences of religious diversity—at the cost of ignoring its input side—for example, the experiences on the basis of which religious belief is formed. If it turns out that religious experience can be cognitively penetrated, this will have serious implications for the epistemic significance of religious diversity. The cognitive penetrability thesis says that just as perceptual experiences influence our beliefs and desires, our cognitive states can also affect our perceptual experiences by causally influencing them in an internal way. Accordingly, an agent's background states can influence the content of her perceptual experiences. This means that experiences can have rationally assessable etiologies which, under certain circumstances, can downgrade their epistemic force. The cognitive penetrability thesis equally holds for religious experiences, and so the suggestion is that, in addition to the standard ways in which religious diversity is said to threaten the rationality of religious belief, one should also look to the phenomenon of cognitive penetration as another significant source of that threat.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 1, after some introductory remarks, I elaborate on the bearing of the input/output distinction on the

question of the epistemic significance of religious diversity, followed by some general observations about the phenomenon of cognitive penetration and its relevance to that question. To emphasize this point, and to connect to the literature on the subject of religious diversity, I shall examine, in Section 2, some shortcomings of William Alston's response to the issue of religious diversity while also highlighting his recognition of the epistemic relevance of the input side to religious belief, namely, religious experience to its rationality. Section 3 explains how the phenomenon of cognitive penetration can be seen as a significant source of the threat to the rationality of religious belief presented by religious diversity. I conclude by examining the consequences of cognitive penetration for the reliability of the monotheistic doxastic practice.

1. Religious Diversity and Its Possible Epistemic Consequences

According to some well-known accounts of the epistemology of religious belief, just as we can talk about the justification of perceptual beliefs in terms of the reliability of the practices of forming beliefs on the basis of sensory experience (SP), we can also talk about the rationality of beliefs that result from belief-forming practices that involve religious or "mystical" experience (MP).[1] Accordingly, the question of whether the beliefs produced by MP are justified turns, at least in part, on the question whether MP is reliable. Despite their initial similarities, however, SP has features that are lacking in the case of MP, features that, though failing to establish SP's reliability, are nevertheless signs that it is a reliable practice. There is, in particular, a feature of SP whose absence seems to poses a serious problem for the claim about the rationality of engaging in MP. The feature in question concerns the fact that people, no matter which culture they belong to, make use of the same conceptual schemes to objectify the content of their sense experience. But when it comes to MP, we find ourselves confronted with a plurality of incompatible mystical doxastic practices which often yield incompatible doxastic outputs in virtue of invoking different conceptual schemes.

   This is, of course, an instance of the well-known problem of religious diversity, and it appears to undermine the reliability of MP. Consider, for example, the different ways in which Buddhists, Muslims and Christians express their experience of encountering God, or the Ultimate, in their lives. Accordingly, we will have to recognize as many mystical doxastic practices as there are different conceptual schemes. The existing responses to the problem of religious diversity constitute a spectrum from skeptical, anti-realist to realist, religion-friendly explanations as to why diversity obtains. An extremely skeptical response states that the best explanation of diversity is that there is no objective reality with which people strive to come into contact. A less extreme skeptical way of responding to the problem is to see religious diversity as arising not from the absence of any

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[1]For example, Alston, *Perceiving God*.

objective reality but from the unreliability of MP. The end result, however, is the same: Religious beliefs are epistemically unjustified.

Two major trends emerge from the realist, religious-friendly responses: exclusivism and religious pluralism. An exclusivist is someone who thinks that the religious perspective of only one basic theistic system is the truth or is closer to the truth than all its rivals.[2] A religious pluralist, on the other hand, denies that any theistic system enjoys a privileged position vis-a-vis truth but also suggests a positive account by which to explain religious diversity. Inspired by the Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal, John Hick, for example, has proposed to distinguish between the Real (or the Ultimate) and the various ways in which it is experienced and to which people respond within various cultural systems.[3] Just as for Kant the noumenal world exists independently of our conceptions of it, the Real is also an independently existing being which appears differently depending on which conceptual scheme or cultural tradition one utilizes to grasp it. But, as a number of philosophers have pointed out, it is far from clear that Hick can consistently claim that the Real can be experienced through our religious concepts while maintaining, at the same time, that it is "the unexperiencable ground of that realm [of human experience]."[4] Hick, then, succeeds in diminishing the impact of religious diversity on the rationality of religious beliefs only at the cost of radically restructuring their contents.

Religious diversity can challenge the rationality of religious belief in a number of ways. Some of these challenges are epistemic while others involve non-epistemic considerations. In the first group, one can mention the challenge from religious disagreement (to be discussed later). There is also the probabilistic challenge from religious pluralism which holds that if, say, a Christian takes his Trinitarian belief to be more probable than each of the alternatives in other religions, the combined probability of these alternatives still outweigh that of the belief held by him.[5] Another challenge concerns the common thought that religious beliefs are highly contingent depending on factors (e.g., who our parents are, which people we have met in life, which culture we were brought up in, etc.) that are not truth-conducive. So we could have easily ended up having different religious beliefs.[6] There is also the non-epistemic "explanatory" challenge

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[2]It has, for example, been claimed that a Christian can reasonably ignore the claims of other religions unless it can be proved objectively that the upholders of such claims are on equal epistemic footing, that is, that they are his or her epistemic peers (Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*). In response, it has been objected that one can also move in the opposite direction by shifting the burden of proof to the exclusivist and claim that practitioners of other religions are epistemic peers unless the exclusivist can demonstrate objectively that this is not the case.

[3]Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*.

[4]Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, 242.

[5]Schellenberg, "Pluralism and Probability." For a reply see Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*.

[6]See, for example, Bogardus, "The Problem of Contingency."

which is more concerned with the origins of diversity. The idea is that once it is assumed that a particular religious view is true and that God wants everyone to believe that view, we face the question of why there are so many competing religions in the world.[7]

All of these accounts of the challenge religious diversity for the rationality of religious belief have something in common: their heavy focus on the output side of the religious belief formation, the beliefs. What they seem to neglect is its input side. Consider one prominent sort of input: religious experience. To explain, recall that mystical perceptual practice (MP) was articulated as the practice of forming output beliefs about the Ultimate in response to inputs to the practice consisting of the experiential awareness of the Ultimate. Depending on where the emphasis is laid, either on the output side or the input side, the problem of religious diversity would assume different kinds of significance. If we focus merely on the output side of various forms of MP, highlighting their doxastic incompatibility, then religious diversity will be best viewed as an instance of the general problem of disagreement. If, on the other hand, emphasis is laid on the input side, religious experience, then the problem assumes a whole new dimension. And it seems that it is the input side that distinguishes MP from SP. After all, disagreement is also rife in SP.

This point is also noted by Alston who, when highlighting how MP differs from SP, points out that "whereas SP presents virtually an identical picture in these respects [subject matter, conceptual scheme and overriding system] across cultures, this is by no means the case with MP."[8] Alston particularly singles out the role of conceptual schemes in objectifying the content of mystical perceptual experience. While our perceived environment is, for the most part, conceptualized in the same way by people from different cultural backgrounds, adherents of various religious traditions differ enormously in their depictions of Ultimate Reality.

Now, if it turns out that one's antecedently held religious beliefs (and emotions, etc.) can infiltrate one's religious experiences, this might impact the epistemic status of the resulting beliefs (which can either be new or updated beliefs). When experiences are thus affected, they are said to be cognitively penetrated. The phenomenon of cognitive penetration has received a lot of attention in recent epistemology. Its significance is best seen in the context of the foundationalist accounts of the structure of perceptual justification and their distinction between basic and non-basic beliefs with the former acquiring their justified status directly from experience. Although the distinction between basic and nonbasic beliefs helps to bring the regress of justification to an end, it also underscores the question of how basic beliefs acquire their justification from non-doxastic states like perceptual experience.

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[7]Marsh and Marsh, "The Explanatory Challenge of Religious Diversity."

[8]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 188.

A popular recent view of the conditions of perceptual justification, known as "dogmatism," holds that the justification conditions of perceptual beliefs merely involve experiences with the same content.[9] The dogmatist view has, however, come under fire due to the (alleged) cases of cognitive penetration of perceptual experience.[10] The cognitive penetrability thesis says that just as perceptual experiences influence our beliefs and desires, our cognitive states can also affect our perceptual experiences by causally influencing them in an internal way (in the sense of being contained entirely within the subject). It is further claimed that cognitive penetration downgrades the epistemic status of perceptual experience, thereby diminishing its justificatory power.

Focusing on the phenomenon of cognitive penetration can illuminate an important angle on the epistemic significance of religious diversity that the aforementioned accounts have ignored. To motivate the relevance of the phenomenon of cognitive penetration to the debate, I shall examine Alston's response to the challenge of religious diversity and show why it falls short. Such a detour is instructive because, while Alston clearly recognizes the importance of the input side of the religious belief formation to the question of the epistemic significance of religious diversity, he chooses, in his account, to focus instead on the output beliefs, thus, failing to bring out the epistemic implications of his insight.

2. Alston's Response to the Problem of Religious Diversity: The Significance of the Input

Alston's main claim is that it is rational to engage in MP while acknowledging that we have no non-question-begging grounds for determining which particular form of MP is reliable. He points out, however, that while there is a common procedure for deciding between the competing alternatives in intra-practices in SP, such as weather prediction, there is no such procedure in the inter-practice case of MP where distinct perceptual doxastic practices not only differ in terms of their conceptual schemes but also in their doxastic outputs. This asymmetry between intra-practice and inter-practice cases shows that there is no reason why, say, a Christian should lose her justification for her pertinent religious beliefs in the face of an unresolved incompatibility. Alston emphasizes, however, that what grounds the justification of such beliefs is not just the mere fact that various forms of MP have not been shown to be unreliable.

To explain, he notes that just as the practitioners of SP, which has proved itself by its "fruits," namely, enabling the perceivers to deal competently with their environment, are justified to continue forming perceptual beliefs accordingly, even if they lack non-question-begging grounds for

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[9]See, for example, Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist" and Huemer, "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism."

[10]See, for example, Siegel, "Cognitive Penetrability and Perceptual Justification" and "The Epistemic Impact."

showing their accuracy, so are the practitioners of MP when forming their appropriate beliefs. Take someone who uses Christian practices of basing beliefs on mystical experiences (CMP) to form her Christian M-beliefs. It would be rational for her to do so if, as it turns out, CMP receives significant forms of self-support in terms of the fulfillment of God's promises within that practice such as growth in sanctity, peace, love and other "fruits of the spirit."

It seems questionable, however, that Alston's introduction of the self-support factor, understood in terms of the practical payoffs of religious beliefs, can help such beliefs sustain an *epistemically* rational status. At best, the payoffs of such practices confer practical rationality or justification on their doxastic outputs. Indeed, in an earlier part of his book, Alston emphasizes that he is "taking significant self-support to function as a way of a strengthening the prima facie claim of a doxastic practice to a kind of practical rationality, rather than as something that confers probability on a claim to reliability."[11] It is thus puzzling that, in the chapter on religious diversity, he seems to think that he has established the epistemic rationality of religious beliefs:

> Given the "payoffs" of the Christian life of the sort just mentioned, one may quite rationally continue to hold that CMP does serve as a genuine cognitive access to Ultimate Reality, and a trustworthy guide to that Reality's relation to ourselves, even if one cannot see how to solve the problem of religious pluralism.[12]

Still more puzzling is the fact that, by Alston's own admission, only one form of MP is genuinely reliable. If so, it is not clear how Alston could claim that it is possible to rationally engage in all such practices in an epistemic sense of that word. What has gone wrong?

The first thing to note is that, despite recognizing the important role of conceptual schemes in shaping and objectifying the content of mystical experience, in his official account of the epistemic significance of religious diversity, Alston chooses to focus on the output beliefs and their "internal support." But, if that is where the emphasis is to be laid, there would seem to be an easier route to establishing Alston's desired conclusion, namely, by seeing the problem posed by religious diversity as a special case of the more general problem of disagreement. Indeed there are passages in Alston's book chapter on religious diversity where he appears to see the problem as a problem of (religious) disagreement. For example, he says that "any genuine cognitive contact with reality will yield agreement, and we can measure its reliability by the extent of agreement."[13] Or, more pointedly, to show how religious diversity might diminish the rationality of engaging in CMP, he gives an example in which different people give

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[11]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 174.

[12]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 276. Note that having "genuine cognitive access to Ultimate Reality" constitutes an epistemic context.

[13]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 267.

conflicting sense-perceptual report of a car accident where there is no neutral ground on which to decide which account is correct. He then notes the following:

> [A particular eyewitness who] is confronted by several accounts that diverge from hers should drastically reduce her confidence in her own. Here it seems clear that the existence of these uneliminated conflicting alternatives nullifies whatever justification she otherwise would have had for believing that the accident was as she took it to be.[14]

Indeed, Alston's defense of the rationality of engaging in CMP can be seen to parallel a particular argument for a similar position in the disagreement controversy.

The fundamental questions in the disagreement debate consist of whether we can reasonably maintain our beliefs after becoming fully aware of each other's views, and, further, whether we can also have *mutually recognized* disagreement.[15] Current responses to these questions have, in general, formed a spectrum at one end of which sit the so-called "conciliatory" views and at whose other end are the "steadfast" views.[16] While the conciliatory views require us to make doxastic conciliation when faced with an epistemic peer who holds a different stance on a particular subject, the steadfast views allow us to maintain our confidence in our relevant beliefs. It is arguable that intellectual humility requires that the steadfast views have the resources to answer the second of the above questions in the positive.

Accordingly, one can see Alston as defending a version of the steadfast view where the practitioners of the world religions can rationally hold on to their views. In fact, the dialectic for his reasoning closely resembles that of an argument that Peter van Inwagen once suggested in support of his version of the steadfast view.[17] Van Inwagen suggested that it would be reasonable for him to stick to his views on free will after he and David Lewis (who holds a different view) are fully apprised of their reasons and arguments because he is in possession of some "incommunicable insight" or intuition that Lewis, for all his acumen, lacks.

Alston can also be seen to be treading a similar path. Recall Alston's appeal to the notion of "internal support" for mystical doxastic practices and his contention that the discernment of the spiritual fruits of a particular doxastic practice is open only to those who participate in that practice. We can now see that "spiritual fruits" for Alston plays a similar role that played by "incommunicable insights" for van Inwagen. Alston, however, differs from van Inwagen in one respect. Unlike the latter, Alston recognizes that other mystical doxastic practices also enjoy such internal

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[14]Alston, *Perceiving God*, 271.

[15]See, for example, Feldman, "Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement."

[16]See, for example, Christensen, "Epistemology of Disagreement" and Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement."

[17]Van Inwagen, "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone."

support. To put it differently, while Alston recognizes the possibility of mutually recognized reasonable disagreement in addition to reasonable disagreement, van Inwagen only recognizes the latter.[18] But if the problem of religious diversity is to be seen as *merely* an instance of the disagreement controversy, there is a much easier route in arriving at an Alston-style steadfast view. To resist the conciliationist pressures that disagreement exerts, one could simply dispute the claim that the parties to the dispute are epistemic peers by either denying that one can determine the epistemic credentials of the purported peers or by denying that they share the same body of evidence.[19]

The preceding considerations can provide the basis of a steadfast view in the face of religious diversity along the lines advocated by Alston without confounding the situation with issues involving practical rationality.[20] But is the problem of religious diversity just an instance of the problem of disagreement, namely, religious disagreement? For if it were, Alston could no longer single out, as we saw, the problem of religious diversity as a problem peculiar only to MP for disagreement is also rife in SP. One possible way of defending Alston's claim about the peculiarity of religious disagreement is to look at its sources, not in the context of philosophical discussions but, in the context of the inter-practice of MP and the various conceptual schemes it involves. Indeed, there are passages in Alston's book where he seems to be doing just that. Since I am going to defend a similar approach, it is worth briefly recounting what he says in order to connect the conclusions of this part of the paper to the positive view that will subsequently be developed.

Alston, as we have seen, is quite cognizant of the fact that while people with different cultural backgrounds conceptualize their shared perceived environments more or less in the same way, the practitioners belonging

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[18]Alston's argument differs, however, from Van Inwagen's for, while the sort of internal support that Van Inwagen receives from his "incommunicable insight" is epistemic, the kind of support that Alston receives from his "spiritual fruits" is, as we saw earlier, pragmatic. But the kind of rationality at stake in the disagreement debate is obviously epistemic. So, once again, it is not clear that Alston achieves his goal even when his argument is glossed in terms of the disagreement debate.

[19]The first alternative has two sources. First, one may argue that there are no disputes-independent ways of assessing the epistemic credentials of those who are party to religious disagreements. Moreover, one can deny that the credentials that are often emphasized by religious traditions are generally easily identifiable. As for the second alternative, one could argue that, unlike one's sensory experiences, the content of religious experiences cannot be communicated by means of verbal testimony since, by hypothesis, Ultimate Reality is responded to, within various religious doxastic practices, through one's peculiar conceptual and interpretive schemes. Moreover, even in those cases where the report of mystical experiences more or less overlaps, the verbal report may fail to reflect the intensity or the veracity of those experiences which are directly proportional to their probative force.

[20]I am suggesting only that since Alston is focusing on the output beliefs, he could help himself with the resources of the steadfast view to arrive at his desired conclusion. As long as CMP can provide the required "internal support," a Christian is within her rights to stick to her views. Of course, it is a further question whether the steadfast view is eventually coherent, especially if it also wants to recognize the possibility of mutually recognized reasonable disagreement.

to different religious traditions conceive of the Ultimate in radically different ways. These differences exist even among theistic religions with their "contrasting emphases on God's justice or love [and] quite different stories as to what God expects and requires of us, as to what his plans for us are, and as to his activities in history."[21] Alston then poses the following question: Even if we assume that, say, CMP is a genuine doxastic practice, does it allow us to form new beliefs on the basis of its experiential input? "It may be suspected," he says, "that what the practice amounts to is just *reading one's prior religious beliefs into a cognitively different experiential matrix*, rather than forming new beliefs on the basis of experience."[22]

To answer this question, Alston separates two concerns about the role of conceptual frameworks: (1) one's antecedently-possessed conceptual scheme infiltrates one's experience, and (2) one's thereby fails to acquire new beliefs. As regards the first charge, it is, says Alston, quite innocuous. We typically make use of our familiar sensory concepts such as "houses," "trees," and so on in perceiving our environment. SP and MP are on a par as far as the intrusion of our *background* beliefs into our experiences are concerned. As for the second charge, Alston notes that religious beliefs often pertain to God's specific relation to the individual perceiver to the effect that He is, say, reproaching him, forgiving him and so on, which information the individual may have lacked before entering into perceptual contact with God. Sometimes the individual only gets to reaffirm her already held belief through her experience with a loving God. But this kind of updating is also present in SP with one of its effects being to strengthen one's justification for the belief in question. In the quoted passages above, Alston comes very close to expressing one of the central ideas behind the phenomenon of cognitive penetration, though he fails to bring out its epistemic implications.

3. Religious Diversity and the Problem of Cognitive Penetration

As I have already remarked, the thought behind the thesis of cognitive penetration is that one's belief system or antecedent mental states can affect the epistemic potential of one's experience, thus undermining the justification that it would otherwise provide for the belief it gives rise to. If true, this would undermine accounts of perceptual justification (like dogmatism) that take the phenomenology of perception to underwrite its justificatory potential. To explain, it is a familiar fact that what we experience and perceive affect our beliefs, desires, and so on. What is controversial is whether the influence goes in the opposite direction, that is, whether cognitive states (doxastic or nondoxastic) affect the contents of our perceptual states. The thesis of the cognitive penetrability of perception holds that cognitive states influence the contents of perceptual states such that it is nomologically possible for two subjects (or for a subject

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[21] Alston, *Perceiving God*, 191.

[22] Alston, *Perceiving God*, 205 (my emphasis).

at different times) to have visual experiences that have different contents because of their beliefs, desires, or other cognitive states while their sensory inputs, the state of their sensory organ, and the orientation of their attention are fixed.[23]

Of course, not every sort of effect on our experiences counts as a case of cognitive penetration. When I turn my head in the direction of a noise and consequently have a new set of experiences, that is not cognitive penetration. Rather, the epistemologically important cases of the cognitive penetration of experience occur when some of the relevant factors such as the conditions of sensory organs and the orientation of one's attention are fixed. Under these circumstances, it is possible for two subjects with different prior cognitive states to end up of having experiences with different contents.[24] Perhaps the most common cases of cognitive penetration are those in which one's desires affect one's experiences by causally influencing them. Consider, for example, the following scenario (I will call it *Prospectors*) where two gold prospectors, Gus and Virgil, are mining for gold. Gus is an expert while Virgil is a novice. When they look at the shiny, yellowish pebble in their pan, the nugget looks gold to both. However, for Gus, it is his knowledge of the identifying marks of gold that makes it seem to him as if the nugget is gold while, in the case of Virgil, it is his desire to get rich that brings about the seeming.[25] It is obvious that Virgil's case is one of wishful thinking as his seemings are caused by his desires (of course he is not aware that he is engaging in wishful thinking). Here are some further cases of cognitive penetration.

> *Angry-looking Jack.* Jill thinks (falsely and without any reason) that Jack is angry with her. Her belief makes her expect Jack to look angry. Thus, when she sees Jack, her belief makes him look angry to her. If she could be convinced of the error of her prior belief, she would see that Jack's posture is not one of anger.[26]

> *Sunset.* In the evening, I view a reddish Sun over a river which looks like a beautiful sunset to me. If I did not know that it was evening or morning, it would not seem to me to be a sunset.[27]

> *Snake.* My fear of snakes makes me more vigilant at detecting snakes in my path. On the other hand, if my fear is strong, my heightened awareness might make me see snakes almost everywhere.[28]

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[23]Macpherson, "Cognitive Penetration." This definition does not cover perceptual learning which is a different phenomenon.

[24]This has resulted in broader and narrower conceptions of cognitive penetration. In this paper, I shall work with both conceptions.

[25]See Markie, "Epistemically Appropriate Perceptual Belief."

[26]Siegel, "Cognitive Penetrability and Perceptual Justification."

[27]McGrath, "Phenomenal Conservatism and Cognitive Penetration."

[28]Lyons, "Circularity, Reliability, and the Cognitive Penetrability."

The fundamental question that such cases pose is what sort of epistemic influence can the psychological precursors of one's perceptual experience (such as beliefs, desires, etc.) have on that experience. There is no doubt that in some cases of cognitive penetration (i.e., the "bad" ones), there is something epistemically defective about the beliefs formed on the basis of cognitively penetrated experiences. For example, in *Angry-looking Jack*, Jill's false and unjustified belief that Jack is angry with her causes her to have the particular experience she has when she sees Jack. If she did not have that belief, Jack would not look angry to her. Her experience is more a reflection of her prior unjustified belief than a correct representation of the way things are. That is why we are disinclined to regard her belief about Jack's attitude towards her formed (or updated) after seeing him as justified. Intuitively, when Jill's antecedent belief impacts her experience, it would be unreasonable to expect the experience to provide support for that very belief.

Or, consider the case of a vain performer whose vanity makes him believe that the (neutral) faces he sees in the audience are all pleased with his performance. Again, since his experiences of those faces are influenced by his vanity, it would be unreasonable of him to take his experiences as providing justification for his view of himself. The situation described in these examples is not unlike a gossip circle in which a subject (S_1) tells another subject (S_2) that p which S_2 believes but soon forgets where she has got it from. Suppose S_2 then reports to S_1 that p. In such circumstances, it would be odd for S_1 to take S_2's testimony as further evidence for p beyond whatever evidence he had to start with.[29] The cases described above suggest that the etiology places constraints on when experience can *generate* justification for the belief it gives rise to. So, cognitive penetration can impede the generation of justification by experience. That is precisely why such a view is at odds with the dogmatist theories of perceptual justification which claim that perceptual experiences provide prima facie justification for the beliefs they cause.

But not all such cases are epistemically pernicious. In some (good) cases (as in the case of Gus in *Prospectors*) the resulting experiences are enriched by receiving more information. For a different example, consider the case of a pine tree expert and a novice who are both looking at the same pine tree. It would be plausible to think that the expert's belief that that is a pine tree is more justified than that of the non-expert since the expert's background knowledge puts more information into his experience.

It would not be unreasonable to blame the etiology of experience in bad cases as being responsible for downgrading its justificatory force. Following Siegel,[30] we call the thesis that the etiology of cognitively-penetrated

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[29]Siegel "Cognitive Penetrability and Perceptual Justification."

[30]Siegel, "The Epistemic Impact." We have seen how the cognitive penetrability thesis threatens the dogmatist view. This seems to suggest that perhaps it is the internalist character of justification (endorsed in dogmatism), requiring the justifiers to be introspectively accessible to the subject, that makes dogmatism vulnerable to the problem posed by the bad

experiences can remove some of their justificatory force, "The Downgrade Principle." This claim is particularly convincing in cases where the penetrating state is a desire, for everyone would grant that beliefs that result from wishful thinking are clear cases of unjustified beliefs. The idea is that just as, say, wishful thinking, fearful thinking, and prejudice can generate unjustified beliefs, so also wishful seeing, fearful seeing, and prejudiced seeing can generate epistemically downgraded experiences that lack some of the epistemic force that they would have had had they not been influenced by desire, fear and prejudice.[31]

Before I turn to how the cognitive penetrability thesis bears on the problem of religious diversity and the epistemic status of religious beliefs, a few important points are in order. The first thing to note is that in the typical cases of cognitive penetration, the subject is not aware of the etiology of her experiences, or the epistemic status of her penetrating states and their causal roles. Her experiences are downgraded if they are influenced by her cognitive states such as beliefs, fears, desires, etc., in the way described, even if she is not aware of that influence. Otherwise, bad cases of cognitive penetration would be no different from the mundane cases of belief formation involving defeaters. In *Angry-looking Jack*, for example, Jill does not know whether she is in a good or bad case. She need not even be able to determine which case she is in. Otherwise, there would be no puzzle to solve. The argument from cognitive penetration proceeds on the assumption that the subjects are unaware of the influence of their

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cases of cognitive penetration. In *Angry-looking Jack*, for example, Jill lacks conscious access to her (prior) belief's causal role. But it is important to note that not all versions of internalism are negatively affected. There is, for example, a metaphysical version of internalism ("Mentalism") according to which only the internal states of an agent at a given time determine whether her beliefs are justified (see, for example, Conee and Feldman, "Internalism Defended"). Since mentalism remains neutral on the question whether these mental states need be accessible to an agent, the etiology of experience can be an epistemic difference-maker. Accordingly, if two people who happen to share the same kind of experience, but with different etiologies, cannot be epistemically identical because they have different total mental states.

[31]For the purposes of this paper I am going to assume the Downgrade Principle. Of course, like other substantial philosophical theses, the Downgrade Principle is controversial. But there are also a number of arguments in its support. One such argument (Vance, "Emotion and the New Epistemic Challenge") focuses on emotions because emotions are quite similar to experiences (in terms of having phenomenological character). On the other hand, it is quite plausible to think that beliefs and other attitudes can cognitively penetrate emotional experiences. Furthermore, it is widely believed that emotions can be rational, justified or unjustified. Accordingly, when an irrational belief penetrate an emotional experience, it seems quite plausible to think that this emotion is not credible enough to justify the belief it give rise to because, by virtue of its etiology, the emotion itself is irrational. The analogy with emotions, thus, provides strong support for the Downgrade Principle. Another approach (Lyons, "Circularity, Reliability, and the Cognitive Penetrability of Perception") appeals to the reliability of the processes involving cognitively penetrated experiences themselves in order to argue for the principle. Finally, Siegel (*The Rationality of Perception*) has argued at length that perceptual experiences themselves could manifest an epistemic status i.e., be rational or irrational in the same way that the beliefs are. It is also worth noting that the ability of the Downgrade Principle to illuminate certain philosophical controversies such as the liberalism/conservatism debate, and, if the thesis of this paper is correct, the problem of religious diversity adds to its plausibility.

cognitive states on their experience. Still, the etiology of their experiences can affect their justification power so that the experiences fail to rationally strengthen the subjects' antecedent beliefs, fears, etc.

Moreover, as already indicated, the driving force behind the idea that the epistemic status of experiences can be adversely affected by how they are formed involves the sort of circularity that infects the subject's transition from her antecedent states (beliefs, fears, etc.) to her experiences and then back to those states again. If one's antecedent beliefs could influence one's experiences, it would be odd to take those experiences to provide support for the beliefs in question. So it does not matter whether one's antecedent states are well-founded or not. As long as our cognitively penetrated experiences display the above circular pattern, they will be downgraded. To give an example of such a cognitively penetrated experience, suppose, on the basis of your lifetime experiences, you have formed the well-confirmed belief that bananas are yellow. Suppose you then encounter a gray banana which appears to you to be yellow. Here, it would seem unreasonable if you were to take your newly acquired experience as providing further support for your belief in the generalization that bananas are yellow. The resulting experience is certainly not on epistemic par with your previous experiences that accurately represented the color of the bananas you had perceived. The reason is obvious. Your experience is being epistemically downgraded because, by influencing your experience of the banana, your (well-founded) antecedent belief prevents you from seeing its true color.[32]

Let us now see how the preceding remarks can illuminate the question of the epistemic significance of religious diversity. For the sake of concreteness, as well as ease of management, I am restricting the scope of religious diversity to monotheistic mystical practices (MMP). My principal claim is that we can view the doxastic incompatibility that emerges from Jewish, Christian and Islamic mystical practices as having its origin in the phenomenon of cognitive penetration, and that whether or not such an incompatibility is an indication that MMP is unreliable depends on how widespread we take the doxastic incompatibility to be. Of course, given the preceding observations, only the bad cases of the cognitive penetration of religious experience pose a threat to religious belief.[33] To explain, let us begin by considering what the good and bad cases of cognitive penetration look like within MMP.

Angry/Forgiving God. As Alston remarks, one finds contrasting emphases on God's attributes such as justice or love in different religions. Suppose then that there is a Muslim practitioner S_1 (belonging to a very

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[32]For further arguments see Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception*.

[33]In this paper, I am following the lead of philosophers like Alston and indeed the whole tradition of reformed epistemology which emphasize the (relevant) similarities between perception and religious experience. If it is conceded that both perception and religious experience can confer justification on the beliefs they give rise to, there is no *a priori* reason to deny why the justification-conferring ability of religious experience cannot be undermined by its etiology in the way perception's ability is.

strict sect within Islam) who believes that God is very unforgiving and strict. Suppose S_1 commits a sin in circumstances over which he does not have much control. Subsequently he happens to have an experiential awareness of God in which He seems to be very angry with him. Now consider S_2, say, a highly liberal Muslim who takes God to be very forgiving. She commits a sin that she could avoid if she had been more diligent. Subsequently, she happens to have an awareness of God in which He seems to be very loving and satisfied with her deed. In both cases, S_1's and S_2's prior beliefs penetrate their mystical experience rendering their beliefs about God's attitudes towards themselves unjustified. In both cases, if they had been convinced of the falsity of their prior beliefs, they would not have perceived God in the way they did.

God Incarnate. Just as in SP, where one's expertise and background knowledge can enrich one's experience, thus, enhancing its justification potential, one's expertise in the field of religion can also achieve a similar result. Suppose two practitioners, S_1 and S_2, of two different religions, say, Christianity and Islam, come to have experience of God after following similar meditative techniques such as fasting, praying, abstaining from worldly pleasures and so on. After a sufficient lapse of time, our subjects come to have visions of God. S_1 reports of "having 'seen' how God is three persons or how the divine and human natures of Christ are united."[34] This is actually what Alston quotes St. Teresa as having witnessed in one of her mystical experiences. The Muslim, on the other, reports of having seen God as a unitary being and so on.

The first scenario can be considered a bad case of cognitive penetration where the relevant mystical experiences are downgraded by prior mental states resulting in unjustified output beliefs. The case of God-Incarnate is good or bad depending on whether it is the Christian's or the Muslim's background belief system that correctly represent God's features. Whichever is correct, then the practitioner of that religion will be in the same position that the pine tree expert was when looking at the pine tree.[35] Her background knowledge of God enriches her experiences of Him, thus, enhancing its justification potential. As for the cases in which one's prior mental states bring about a shift of focus and attention, thereby, priming one's sensory perception while navigating in one's environment, one can refer to the spiritual techniques within different religions (like saying prayers, etc. that are interwoven with their main beliefs). The aim of such prayers and supplications is to prepare the believer for her spiritual quest by priming her mystical perception to detect more efficiently the signals that God sends her.

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[34]Quoted in Alston, *Perceiving God*, 207.

[35]When a tree expert and a non-expert look at the same pine tree, the expert gets more justification to believe that the tree is a pine tree because the expert's (phenomenally different) experience has the content *x is a pine tree*. Their routes to their experiences are different. See Siegel, *The Rationality of Perception*, 132.

Now, if you look at the various forms of MMP, Jewish, Christian and Islamic practices, through the prism of the thesis of cognitive penetration, we get radically different results in regard to the epistemic impact of religious diversity than if the latter is merely taken to be an instance of the problem of disagreement, namely, religious disagreement. To see this, suppose there are two practitioners, S_1 and S_2, belonging to different mystical practices, who attribute two contradictory properties to God in response to their respective mystical experiences that are penetrated by different background beliefs. Let us further assume that one of these sets of background beliefs is false and unjustified resulting in the downgrade of the relevant experience while the other actually enriches the content of the subject's mystical experience. S_1 and S_2 are subsequently apprised of their differences. The question is how we should evaluate the epistemic status of their beliefs.

To begin with, with a disagreement gloss on religious diversity, the situation is as follows. S_1 and S_2 are justified in engaging in their practices or in holding their incompatible beliefs before being apprised of their differences as long as those beliefs are proper responses to their respective religious experiences. The question is whether S_1 and S_2 are still justified in holding their beliefs after they become aware of the fact of religious diversity. On Alston's account, they are still justified (though to a lesser degree than if there was no such diversity) in holding on to their beliefs. On my account, however, at least one of the practitioners is already unjustified in his belief (even before disclosure), since, by hypothesis, his experience is penetrated by a set of false and unjustified beliefs which detracts from the reliability of the faculties that produced his belief. His case is one of cognitive penetration where his mystical experience (downgraded as a result of being penetrated by his prior mental states) fails to justify his belief. Dogmatists or phenomenal conservatives, of course, take both S_1 and S_2 to be justified in their beliefs on account of their seemings. But if the Downgrade Principle is correct, at least one of the seemings is being downgraded as a result of constituting a bad case of cognitive penetration.

Moreover, Alston, we may recall, formulated the problem of religious diversity for the rationality of religious belief in terms of whether religious diversity undermines the reliability of MP or MMP. On my account, such a connection is by no means necessary. While cognitive penetration also occurs in the sensory perceptual practice, it does not undermine the reliability of SP. Likewise, there is no reason why we should take the phenomenon of religious diversity, understood in terms of cognitive penetration, to undermine the reliability of MP. What *should* be conceded is that if the phenomenon of cognitive penetration is widespread in sensory practices involving mostly bad cases, then that would render sensory perception unreliable. Under these circumstances the sensory practice would yield mostly false beliefs. In other words, if most of the cases of perceptual belief formation turn out to be bad cases of cognitive penetration, that would constitute a strong case against the reliability of perception.

It might be thought that MP differs from SP in this respect. Doxastic incompatibility is quite widespread among mystical doxastic practices. I am inclined to agree with this claim. But I have already confined the scope of diversity to monotheistic religions and it is by no means obvious that within this range diversity outruns agreement. Alston himself admits that here there is a great deal of doxastic overlap among theistic religions. I am inclined to think that the diversity within MMP—at least with respect to the core beliefs—is somewhat exaggerated. However, I am going to conclude my discussion with a conditional claim. If religious diversity within MMP is not as widespread as it is made to appear, then, with the cognitive penetration gloss on such diversity, MMP can still be regarded as reliable, just as sensory perception is regarded as a reliable practice despite the phenomenon of cognitive penetration.[36] Of course, there is still the problem of what religious practitioners should do in the face of disagreement. But that is a general problem that involves all sorts of belief-forming practices, sensory or non-sensory, religious or nonreligious.[37]

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[36]It might be objected that diversity, even within a religion, is widespread. People may have different beliefs about God's power, moral nature, etc. So we get more bad cases than good cases. There are a few things that can be said in response. To begin with, I have formulated my conclusion in terms of a conditional. If it actually turns out that there are more bad cases, then we have to concede that the religious belief-forming faculty is unreliable. Secondly, in spite of diversity, there is also a good deal of uniformity. According to some recent cognitive science studies on religious belief, it looks like we are naturally inclined towards belief in a super-knower, who is the authoritative source of morality and who exercises moral providence (punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous) (see Norenzayan, *Big Gods*). Finally, the kind of differences that are cited in the objection seem more like philosophical differences which usually arise as a result of reasoning and argumentation. Moreover, those who wish to emphasize the relevance of such fine-grained philosophical differences in beliefs within MP should also be prepared to countenance the relevance of similar differences in beliefs within SP. For there are also philosophical views within SP that take objects to be collections of sense data, that consider causation to be a mere constant conjunction of events, that deny the reality of secondary qualities like color, that deny the reality of the mental and so on. It is not clear how such beliefs can penetrate one's sensory experiences. But, if they do, SP should also be regarded as unreliable.

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