Chapter 1
The Diversity Problem

Abstract For people with no religious beliefs, it is not clear what reasons can be given for why they should convert to any particular religion, particularly in the face of many competing claims. This book will employ William Alston's doxastic-practice epistemology to argue that religious experiences can be grounds for rational religious belief, and that the evidence provided by Theravada Buddhist meditation provides better evidence than Christian religious experiences.

Keywords William james · Religious experience · Religious diversity · Pascal's wager · William alston · Doxastic practice · Theravada buddhism

I, like many of my classmates in college, up through graduate school, grew up in middle-class, mostly Christian America. We took the general truth of Christian doctrine for granted, at least when we were young. Our picture of the world, even after some of us abandoned Christianity, was a largely Christian one. We saw ourselves as faced with a choice between Christianity and unbelief. To be sure, some included Judaism or Islam in their range of choices, some began in Judaism or Islam, but we all agreed that we must either accept a broadly monotheistic view, or reject it; *tertium quid non datur*. We were aware of the existence of Buddhism, and Hinduism, and a few other possible religious views, but for most of us, they did not present for us as psychologically possible choices—"live options," in James's terminology. Imagine now a young Thai student, pursuing higher education in philosophy. Her life history is significantly different from mine and my peers'; she grew up making periodic trips to the temple, taking vows before images of the Buddha, and taking for granted that she had lived past lives, and would live more lives in the future. Her religious life revolves around providing support for the monks in her neighborhood, as that is the way to secure merit for a better rebirth. She hears monks tell of their pursuit of enlightenment, and the experiences they have in meditation. She experiences a different range of possibilities: either accept the Theravada Buddhist view of the world, or reject it. Believe what the monks say about rebirth, karma, and enlightenment, or be "agnostic" about it, or form a

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secular, scientifically informed view. She, and most of her peers, are aware of the existence of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, but they do not present themselves as "live options."

In general, we do not think it is necessary to consider the possibility of unfamiliar world-views held by those at a geographical or temporal distance. This way of thinking, as natural and practical as it is, is epistemically naïve. Once you realize that people are generally doing the best they can with the resources that life has given them, and that they bring more or less the same cognitive equipment to bear on the same world, you realize its naïveté. From a neutral point of view, we have to say that people are faced with—and to varying degrees, have always been faced with—a variety of religious views recommended to them for their acceptance.[1] The average American college student is aware that, in addition to the religion (if any) in which he or she grew up, the world contains completely different religions, from completely different cultural traditions. Even if they do not have even the slightest temptation to believe them, they are aware of them as belief systems available to them. Many of those same college students have grown up practicing a religion different from that of the majority around them; their awareness of this situation is particularly sharp. For the more reflective of those students, the question sooner or later presents itself as to why he or she should think his or her own tradition has got it right. People respond in many different ways to this quandary, from retreating into dogmatic blind faith to becoming skeptical of all religious claims, to ignoring the issue as if no challenge had ever arisen. Some think this is more of an issue now than it has ever been before—part of our "postmodern condition"—but it has always been true to one degree or another. The chief practical problem facing people with respect to that choice is how to decide which religion, if any, has the best claim on truth. Is there an epistemically responsible middle way between dogmatism and skepticism? In other words, how can I decide, given all the choices before me, which religion to gamble my soul on?

I use the word 'gamble' advisedly. Pascal famously put the question of what to believe in terms of a wager:

> Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is. (Pascal 1958, 67)

Pascal thinks it is obvious how to wager, but it has not been so obvious to his successors in the philosophical tradition, since there seem to be more than the two choices Pascal envisions. One of the most important objections to Pascal's Wager rests on the claim that Pascal's analysis of the choices open to us is incomplete

[1] If we were to be completely candid, we would also have to admit that there are possibilities that no one has ever thought of, and they are just as possible as those that have been thought of. But there is no epistemic obligation, in general, to consider the possibility of views that have never been formulated or believed, and so have no evidence in their favor. On the other hand, a person who makes an argument based on the claim that evidence doesn't matter, like Pascal's Wager, then all possibilities are back on the table. This is the force of the Many Gods Objection, discussed below.

unless he includes choices other than belief in his God and atheism. This objection is known as the *Many Gods objection*. In a nutshell, the dialectic goes like this. Pascal argues that religious belief is a good bet, because we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by believing, no matter what happens to be true. In order for the argument to have any force, it must include all possible ways things could be, and also all possible choices, or else it doesn't show that belief in God is the best bet no matter how things happen to be. The Many Gods objection contends that Pascal's argument fails because it doesn't take into account all the possibilities. That is, the choice is not between belief in Pascal's Catholic God and unbelief, but between belief in one god, and another god, and another god, another something that is not quite a god, another that is a religiously significant absence of gods…and unbelief. Given that Pascal's argument cannot recommend any one of those options over another (and, crucially, given that one of those gods or whatnot might even reward unbelief), there is nothing to recommend belief over unbelief after all.[2] The existence of a diversity of options renders any particular choice unjustifiable. The Many Gods objection formalizes in the language of decision theory the problem of who or what to believe.

The problem that Pascal's Wager is supposed to answer shares structure with the problem I am concerned with, but it is not exactly the same problem. The problem I wish to examine is not the practical problem of how to maximize my own advantage, or what to do when there is no evidence to recommend any of the options available. My problem, which is a version of what is now called the *Problem of Religious Diversity*,[3] arises in much the same way that other, more mundane decision problems arise. If two mechanics, equally competent at their craft (as far as you can tell), give you mutually inconsistent stories about what is wrong with your car and what to do about it, you have a mechanical diversity problem. In practice, we have ways to solve this kind of diversity problem,[4] but when the diversity of views comes on matters that are not so easily settled empirically, it is not clear what to think. In particular, one might reasonably wonder what one's epistemic responsibility is in such a situation. What, if anything, is one entitled to believe in such a situation?

When our mechanics disagree about what is wrong with the car, it is obvious that at most one of them is right (unless their disagreement is not a genuine disagreement), and this situation is guaranteed by the objective reality of the car. There is only one way the car can be. When two friends disagree about what (say) God is like, one of the questions at issue for many of us is whether there is such a being at all. Could I be justified in accepting one person's religious claim over another's? Surely I could, if there were some relevant difference between my two friends. If

[2] The Pascalian continues to be defended and criticized. See Hajek (2003, 27–56), and Anderson (1995, 45–56), for discussions of various forms of the argument and various attacks on it.

[3] Griffiths (2001) has an extended and insightful discussion of the problem; see also Quinn and Meeker (2000).

[4] See Goldman (2001) for a useful discussion of this problem.

one of them is more gullible than the other, or one of them is more intellectually careful than the other, or if one of them is more perceptive than the other, I might have excellent reason to distinguish between them. But the gullibility and perceptiveness of the adherents of the various religions is to all appearances about the same, averaging over the whole populations involved. It might be tempting to conclude, in these circumstances, that there is nothing to decide between the various religions. The variety itself might be taken as evidence that there is nothing to any of them. It doesn't help that most religious claims rest ultimately on claims to have experienced the thing in question. We do normally afford people some degree of trust when they testify to their own experiences, but that normal authority, too, is undermined by the apparent equality of authorities who contradict one another. If one eyewitness reports seeing a man rob a bank, and another, equally trustworthy eyewitness to the selfsame event reports seeing a tiger eat a duck, it seems we have no good grounds to believe either.

This is not to say that, when claims of this kind disagree, none of them can be right. It would be gross error to make that inference. If we construe the religious claim as a real truth claim, capable of having a truth-value,[5] then there's no reason to suppose that mere disagreement shows there's no truth to any of the claims. It would also be a mistake to suppose that the multiplicity of claims shows that none of them is justified.[6] People can disagree about ordinary empirical matters, and some of them can be in a better position than others to know, even if we do not know which among them is better placed to know. Likewise, it might well be (though this claim is controversial) that taking part in a religious practice makes resources available to you that you couldn't have had otherwise, and so the adherents of one religion may well be better placed to know the truth than the adherents of others, even if we do not know which among them is better placed to know. Alston makes this kind of case for the rationality of Christian practice. But he also recognizes that this answer will not suffice to answer the question we are asking. He says

> It goes without saying, I hope, that the conclusions I have been drawing concerning the epistemic situation of practitioners of CMP [Christian mystical practice] hold, *pari passu*, for practitioners of other internally validated forms of MP [mystical practice]. In each case the person who is in the kind of position I have been describing will also be able to rationally engage in his/her own religious doxastic practice despite the inability to show that it is epistemically superior to the competition (1991, 274–275).

Alvin Plantinga likewise argues that the variety of religious experiences does not show that Christian belief is irrational, unjustified, or otherwise under par epistemically. It has been widely argued, though, that the strategy he employs is equally open to the adherents of the other religions. So, while it may provide some comfort to those already ensconced in a religious tradition, it does nothing for those looking to choose between the traditions, on their merits. The only way an Alstonian or Plantingan argument can suffice to solve the diversity problem is for

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[5] This assumption will be argued for in the next chapter.

[6] Or warranted, or whatever. I don't propose to make any hay from the various kinds of positive epistemic status short of the factive ones.

all of the other religious doxastic practices to have some internal defect that the Christian practice lacks (which is why Alston is careful to limit his concession of parity to "other internally validated forms of MP").

This present work is part of a venerable tradition, the philosophical examination of the epistemic claims of religious experience. William James, while categorizing experiences and discussing their various psychological types, felt the need to comment on their epistemic value as well.

> My next task is to inquire whether we can invoke it as authoritative. Does it furnish any *warrant for the truth* of the twice-bornness and supernaturality and pantheism which it favors? I must give my answer to this question as concisely as I can.
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> In brief my answer is this—and I will divide it into three parts:—
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> 1. Mystical states, when well developed, usually are, and have the right to be, absolutely authoritative over the individuals to whom they come.
> 2. No authority emanates from them which should make it a duty for those who stand outside of them to accept their revelations uncritically.
> 3. They break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness. They open out the possibility of other orders of truth, in which, so far as anything in us vitally responds to them, we may freely continue to have faith.
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> I will take up these points one by one. (1958, 323–324)

His raising the question of the "authority" of experiences, together with his trying to accommodate faith in the third part of his answer, constitute the first stab at a comprehensive, modern epistemology of religious experience. There has followed, in the Western philosophical tradition, a flood of works agreeing with, criticizing, and expanding on the Jamesian story. Some have approached the problem from sociological or anthropological angles. Some have defended a particular tradition. In general, there is an awareness that there is something here to be accounted for, one way or another.

This work fits into the part of that project called "Reformed Epistemology," so named by one of its guiding lights, Alvin Plantinga. In late twentieth-century analytic philosophy, Plantinga, Alston, and others developed a way of thinking about epistemology (tracing its inspiration to Thomas Reid[7]) that is not only a reasonable understanding of knowledge generally, but also has as a consequence that religious experiences could well be reasonable grounds for religious belief. They took the Jamesian proposal seriously, and showed how it could be part of a systematic epistemology. The vast majority of contemporary analytic philosophers have reacted in one of two ways: either they reject the entire epistemological picture, and religious epistemology with it; or they accept the epistemology, with its consequences for religious epistemology, and consider the matter closed. A few are trying to show that the general epistemology is right, but that it does not underwrite religious epistemology in the way they think. This work is part of that minority project. I accept, in particular, what William Alston has called the

[7] Especially in his *Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man* and *Inquiry into the Human Mind*. A useful selection of the relevant passages can be found in Beanblossom and Lehrer (1983).

Doxastic Practice Approach to epistemology (Alston 1989), including its application to religious experience, but I want to raise problems for the particular conclusions Alston draws for Christian mysticism, by comparing it another practice.

In what follows, I will grant that a practitioner of a religion may well be justified in believing as he or she believes and acting as he or she acts. I also grant that someone outside all religious practices who joins one, for whatever reason, may be (or become) justified, both pragmatically and epistemically, in so doing. My version of the problem of religious diversity is captured in the following question: What should a person outside all religious practices do? Should such a person withhold all belief, or is there a reason to prefer the purported evidence put forward by one religion over all the others? Does the total state of the evidence make it the case that a person outside all religious practices would be well advised to join a particular one of them? What is the best bet, epistemically speaking?

Is there anything to be said, then, to help people decide among religious traditions? I think so. Ultimately, the claims of particular religions rest on the experiences of somebody or other, whether it is the meditative practices of saints, seers, and Buddhas, or revelations of a personal god in Sinai or Bethlehem or Mecca. So, ultimately, the question as to which claimants to religious knowledge are right rests on the evidential value of those experiences. Further, there are ways to understand what goes on in religious experience that help us understand whether it is good grounds for religious belief.

This work is an attempt at comparative religious epistemology. A lot of the philosophical discussion in the analytic tradition has been couched in terms of Christian mystical experiences, because the analytic tradition has for decades been largely critical of religious belief, and the countries where analytic philosophy is dominant are largely Christian countries. The Christian philosopher has felt embattled, and so has been for some time engaged in defensive action. Philosophers in the Eastern traditions have had much less concern to show that they are rational. This work is an attempt to bring a particular Asian tradition, Theravada Buddhism, into the discussion, to see to whether the religious-experience claims made in that tradition compare favorably with the claims of the Jewish, Christian, or Muslim mystic.

Why Theravada Buddhism? The short answer is that it is the non-theistic tradition with which I have some familiarity, and for which I have some sympathy. You might say it presents itself to me as a "live option" in a way that other traditions do not. The Theravada tradition has a wealth of meditative experience to draw on that fits in with the Theravada system of thought in much the same way as mystical experience fits in with Catholic mystical theology, and Christian theology generally. What they report experiencing is not a personal god, or any other kind of god, but rather a metaphysical truth about the reality we all share.

Meditative experience is the ultimate ground of Buddhist doctrine. The central doctrines of Buddhism are about suffering, and its origin in desire. The reason that desire causes suffering is that reality itself is so constituted as to frustrate desire. All things are impermanent; all things are unsatisfying; no self is to be found among them. This doctrine was developed in the earliest Buddhist literature,

especially the *Abhidhamma*, to mean that reality consists in an ever-changing stream of momentary events (*dhammas*), not a collection of enduring substances and their attributes. The *dhammas* are the fundamental units one reaches at the end of the analysis of any reality or experience. These truths are revealed to us by the Buddha, but not because he is an omniscient deity. He was a man who discovered these truths, and taught others how to rediscover them; the reason the Buddha taught and others continue to teach that the world is made of streams of momentary events, not enduring substances, is that is what they discover in their meditations. Once the mind is under control, you "see things as they are," which means that one sees that there are no enduring substances, including what you take to be yourself.

The aim here is to compare the epistemic credentials of monotheistic religions with something quite different, and the choices are limited. The Chinese traditions, except when they are Buddhist or Buddhist-influenced, do not have religious experience as a crucial part of their epistemic foundations. There are Daoist and Confucian meditation practices, but the claims of what one encounters in those experiences do not figure in any kind of apologetic or evidence for the traditions. Yogic experiences do figure in the discussion of Hindu beliefs, but Hinduism is so variegated that it is hard to say anything general about it. Advaita Vedantin experiences of Brahman are both well defined and evidential, but the identity of the experiencer with the experienced makes for logical complications I do not wish to deal with.

Why not look at other forms of Buddhism, then? While all Buddhist traditions include a commitment to not-self (Harvey 1990, 50–52) and something like dependent origination, there was a turn at the beginning of the Mahayana movement to understand the object of meditative experience as something other than mere absence of enduring substances. They took the ultimate nature of reality to be emptiness (*sunyata*). While the philosophers and systematizers of early Buddhist thought who codified their results in the *Abhidhamma* thought that there were some basic units of reality, *dhammas*, each of which has its own nature (*svabhava*), the early Mahayanists—especially Nagarjuna and those who followed him—concluded that even those units were empty of inherent existence. I do not understand what this means. Any reading of it that makes it more than just plain dependent origination, the thing taught in *Abhidhamma*, seems to me to entail complete metaphysical nihilism. I do not see how such a view can be even self-consistent, never mind true and grounded in experience. The Mahayana schools that came later all built on this idea of emptiness in different ways. Notably, the Cittamatra school concluded that all *dhammas* are creatures of the mind, and end up with a kind of Berkeleian idealism, but without minds or God to hold it together. Ch'an, and later, Zen, despaired of the ability of language to do justice to the truth experienced in meditative practice. None of these schools can be described as having a definite object of religious experience, such that the experiences stand as evidence for the truth-claims about that object. So, for the purposes of this inquiry, there are really only two clean options: western monotheism and Theravada Buddhism. I aim to compare the epistemic credentials of experience

reports in these two traditions. In any case, it may turn out that the claims I make could also be made by an Advaitin yogi or a Daoist recluse; that is an open question. They are welcome to write their own books.

There are two distinct interlocutors addressed here: the philosopher who thinks there is something disreputable about religious experience claims in themselves, and the philosopher who thinks that the experiences of those in the monotheistic traditions are especially reputable. In what follows, I intend to argue against the first interlocutor that (1) religious language is intelligible as factual discourse, and so reports of mystical experience are unproblematically true or false; (2) religious experiences can be coherently and fruitfully thought of as perceptual in kind; (3) they are therefore good *prima facie* grounds for religious belief, in the absence of defeating conditions; but (4) there are defeating conditions that obtain to some degree in all religious experiences, though not to an unambiguously conclusive degree, so (5) while it may be rational for believers to embrace religious belief on the basis of their experiences, there is no rational compulsion for nonbelievers to accept the testimony of religious believers as evidence (this in spite of the fact that testimony can be, and often is, a perfectly reasonable ground for belief). I will then argue that reports from different traditions fall prey to this defeater to different degrees, and that Theravada Buddhist experiences of conditioned co-arising fare better than other experiences, and so are more rational to accept as veridical.

Terminological Aside

The phrase "religious experience" has been variously understood, and is so vague and multivalent that some philosophers have chosen to eschew it altogether; e.g., Alston (1991, 34–35). I will retain the phrase in order to emphasize the continuity of my inquiry with earlier ones, but it does need initial clarification. First of all, I intend to accept as a religious experience anything usually so called, unless there is overriding reason to exclude it. In other words, I think that the phrase as commonly used does pick out a set of experiences that have important things in common. They all, for example, purport to be experiences of some objective reality not a part of the perceiver, and not normally accessible to perception, which is central in some religion's doctrine, and is discovered by some means other than ordinary empirical practices. The intractable differences are isolated in the claims about the nature of the object/reality so discovered, rather than in the experiences themselves. One of the more intractable questions is the question as to what, if anything, is the essence of religion (or the definition of 'religion'). William James anticipated this difficulty, as he anticipated so much of what was to follow.

> Most books on the philosophy of religion try to begin with a precise definition of what its essence consists of. Some of these would-be definitions may possibly come before us in later portions of this course, and I shall not be pedantic enough to enumerate any of them to you now. Meanwhile the very fact that they are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence,

> but is rather a collective name. The theorizing mind tends always to the over-simplification of its materials. This is the root of all that absolutism and one-sided dogmatism by which both philosophy and religion have been infested. Let us not fall immediately into a one-sided view of our subject, but let us rather admit freely at the outset that we may very likely find no one essence, but many characters which may alternately be equally important in religion. (1958, 39)[8]

I propose to follow my illustrious predecessor in sidestepping that question entirely, but that should pose no problem. Since I will mean by 'religious experience' whatever people ordinarily mean, then 'religion' can be understood throughout as 'what people ordinarily take to be religion.' No analysis of the concept is needed.[9]

Many who write on this topic prefer to talk about mysticism, or mystical practice, rather than religious experience. That way of dividing things up makes too much of what is certainly an accidental property of the experiences. Mysticism is a very specialized practice, undertaken with a disciplined procedure by religious specialists. But I want to be able to account for the experiences of laypeople that come to them unbidden, without them having to engage in esoteric meditation or prayer practices; I want to include Saint Paul right along with Saint Theresa of Avila. The epistemic differences between sought and unsought experiences are minor compared to the phenomenological similarities between them.

For the purposes of this inquiry, then, 'religious experience' will be understood to refer to any and all experiences, sought or unsought, pleasant or unpleasant, that seem to reveal to their subjects an important truth about an otherwise empirically inaccessible reality, where that reality figures centrally in the doctrines of some religious practice.[10] This definition has some consequences that some might find unwelcome. First, a religious experience need not be of an 'ultimate reality,' like God or nirvana, but can also be of subsidiary beings like angels, saints, bodhisattvas, and the like. Second, the reality in question could be a fact or state of affairs, rather than a substance. This means that experiences of absences can be religious experiences. This is important because the central fact of some religious doctrines, including Theravada Buddhism, is in fact an absence or lack, and enlightenment—a paradigm of religious experience—consists in perceiving that absence. As a consequence, atheistic existential experiences of the meaninglessness of the world can count as religious experiences. Except for the discomfort of calling an atheistic experience 'religious,' this is as it should be; the experiences are of the same kind, in the same way that two scientific experiments, one of which finds a phenomenon and the other of which doesn't, are still of the same kind. While it would be

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[8] I am inclined to go a bit further than James and assert that there is nothing, or nothing interesting, that all religions and no non-religions have in common. See Webb (2009).

[9] Wall (1995) makes a case for a universal religious practice. While the universal practice is pretty thin, as there is so little in common to all religions, he is right that there is enough to warrant discussion of religious experience in general.

[10] Or, better, figures centrally in the doctrines of some practice commonly called 'religion.' Henceforth I will use the term 'religion' and its cognates without this cumbersome locution, but it should be understood as if the cumbersome locution had been used.

bizarre to call atheism a religion, it is not so bizarre to call atheistic experiences religious experiences, in that they purport to reveal the empirically hidden nature of the world, and reveal by something like perception the truth about the alleged realities central to religions.

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