

Realism and religious experience

DAVID BROWN

*Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts, St Mary's College,
University of St Andrews, KY16 9JU, UK
e-mail: dwb21@st-andrews.ac.uk*

Abstract: In this article three types of objection to a realist account of religious experience are explored: (1) the unusual character of its object; (2) its unusual accompanying conditions; and (3) the conflicting content. In response to (1) it is noted that despite divine freedom not all types of encounter preclude predictability, while parallels are drawn with perception of other complex objects such as persons. At the same time the whole notion of simple perceptions is challenged. In response to (2) parallels to the affective element are found not only in moral and aesthetic experience but more widely. Finally, in response to (3) apparent irreconcilable conflicts are lessened by observing how all such experiences take place within the context of traditions whose surface incompatibility does not necessarily indicate deep divisions.

One way of approaching the issue of realism in theology is to explore the explanatory value of its concepts and see how far the principles underlying scientific realism might be stretched to include traditional theology's own rather distinctive type of metaphysical realism. However, rather than engaging primarily with the scientific model, another possibility is to investigate how far parallels with ordinary common-sense realism can be sustained. Here the status of religious experience would seem the obvious question to examine, not least because some of the most influential philosophical treatments of such experience have sought to draw parallels with ordinary perception. Perhaps still most familiar is Richard Swinburne's appeal to what he calls 'the principle of credulity', that how things appear to an observer are good grounds for believing that that is the way they are (Swinburne (1979) [2004]).¹ While still pursuing the parallel with perception, two later writers, William Alston and Keith Yandell, acknowledge a much more complex reality. For Alston (1991) Christian perception needs to be set within the rationality of specific 'doxastic' practices, and so his argument is meant to apply only to the reasonableness of accepting the veridical character of Christian experience, and not religious experience in general.² By contrast, Keith Yandell

(1993) intends his argument to apply to all forms of religious experience but he does so by questioning the coherence of 'enlightenment' experiences of the self in Buddhism and Jainism, and of an undifferentiated ultimate reality in Advaita-Vedanta Hinduism.³ The result is that the argument is deemed only to hold in respect of certain types of experience across the major religions.

In this essay, rather than consider such arguments directly, I will instead explore three types of objection that might be raised against the viability of any such project based on parallels with ordinary perception. My immediate goal here is thus rather more modest than Swinburne's, Alston's, and Yandell's, but may still serve in broad support of their respective approaches. The three types of critique are (1) those based on the unusual character of the nature of the object of perception in this case, (2) the unusual conditions associated with such perception, and finally (3) the oddness of the content of such perception. In each case I shall indicate various ways in which the objections might be countered. As will emerge in due course, 'ordinary perception' is not quite as straightforward a category as it is often taken to be, but for the moment my discussion may proceed by taking as standard perception of material objects and their attributes.

The oddness of its object

There are at least two general features of the divine that make it problematic as an object of perception: first, as the divine is essentially not of this world (transcendent, infinite, etc.) it is hard to make sense of what it might mean to talk of 'perception' of such a reality; second, even if such sense can be sustained, there is the difficulty of indicating, as with other perceptual claims, under what circumstances the divine might be repeatedly perceived. Initially, it might be thought that in this matter God is no different from any other free agent such as human beings. But there is this important difference, that it is possible to predict most of the situations under which a particular human being might be perceptible and also the forms under which they will appear whereas there has been traditionally ascribed to the divine a much more radical type of freedom that is in no way subject to human whim or expectation. The difference comes from human beings exhibiting marked continuation in appearance and also usually acting in character (e.g. picking up their children each day from school), whereas it is frequently contended that there are no such easily identifiable parallels in respect of God.

Both points – divine non-natural otherness and predictability – merit consideration. I shall begin with what I take to be the weaker of the two contentions, the question of predictability, for it seems to me questionable whether the theological commonplace of such divine freedom actually accords with such evidence as we have of how God has chosen to relate to the world. So, for example, throughout Jewish and Christian scriptures are to be found promises of divine presence

and powers under certain circumstances: in the Temple, where two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, in the power to remit sin, in defending oneself before secular authority and so on.⁴

Again, there is a large body of literature where it is claimed that certain types of music or landscape, for example, will commonly initiate a consistent pattern of experience of the divine – for instance, a sense of the grandeur of God before certain types of landscape. However, against such putative experience of God mediated through nature or arts exhibiting such predictive capacity it is sometimes objected that such a claim cannot possibly be sustained precisely because it can so easily be thrown in doubt by all those people who claim to have no such tendencies towards belief when placed under similar circumstances. But is the counter-evidence really that clear? Is it not more common for objectors to suggest, not that they have experienced nothing at all, but that, although their experience had similar characteristics, none of this necessitates a further inference to belief in God? So, for example, the distinguished music critic Wilfrid Sellers, in *Celestial Music?* (2002), the last book he wrote, on the one hand did not hesitate to concede that certain forms of music make individuals more open to the infinite while on the other hand as a non-believer he continued to insist that he wanted to resist that pull.⁵ But, if that is so, I take it that the lack of a parallel with the predictability of ordinary perception may be more apparent than real: there is a similar perception even if it is sometimes read quite differently.

However, an unsympathetic critic might object at this point that all I have demonstrated is the possibility of similar experience that might be described more neutrally (for example, in aesthetic terms), and the role of God then remains a further questionable inference. But in response I would observe that this is not how such experiences are characteristically described, as though the religious believer identifies a further layer within them. Indeed, Sellers portrays himself as resisting what he sees as in some ways the more natural reading.

Of course, it still needs to be conceded that other types of religious experience would exhibit no such predictive capacity, most obviously where we would like to talk of God interacting with human persons (responding to their prayers, and so on). Here a more personalist or interactionist account would seem more appropriate. However, while certainly not denying that some divine action is best explicated in this way, this is surely not the form of encounter with the divine most easily allied with ordinary perception since it will indeed be God at the least predictable. That is why I believe it important also to acknowledge an alternative kind of divine relation to the world through which the sort of religious experience that I have hitherto been delineating also becomes possible.

Unfortunately, there is no agreed terminology, but 'numinous' might be a usable term. One possible way of understanding this kind of relation that is quite distinct from the personalist or interactionist model would be to think of the divine presence always (under certain conditions) available to the world that it has made

but that it remains at least to some extent up to an individual how that presence (under those conditions) is read. That God might be available in this way should scarcely be surprising as the divine is by definition ubiquitous (omnipresent) and is also responsible for sustaining all things in existence. Nonetheless, theologians concerned to defend the freedom of God may take particular umbrage at the notion of the divine allowing itself to be experienced and yet individuals allowed to deny that this is the nature of their experience. But to Christianity at least this should present no real difficulty since at its heart lies a claim to similar abuse in the events at the heart of its faith, namely in the crucifixion: God present, yet that presence denied.

To talk thus of experience of the numinous or transcendent makes an easy transition to the other objection I said I would consider in this section, and that is the oddness of talking of the perception of something which is essentially 'beyond' this world. The contrast must seem most extreme to those still influenced by classical British empiricism, and in particular Hume's ideal of simple, clear perceptions, and the more complex form this took in twentieth-century notions of basic sense data.⁶ However, none of the various arguments in the latter's favour (to do with certainty, illusion, and the partial character of perception) seems decisive. In fact, even the simplest of perceptions preclude any form of naive realism, with something like the apparently incorrigible red of the tomato, for example, only appearing so in a particular light. Equally, there is no reason why seeing part of the object should not be described as seeing the object or why seeing it otherwise than it is in reality be taken to indicate that one sees something else instead. That is why it is now widely recognized that perceptions cannot be so easily analysed without artificiality into their constituent parts. Perception of a human individual as loving or intelligent would, therefore, now also be commonly regarded as a no less proper way of talking than of the person being seen to be wearing a red coat. Just as such properties might be viewed as supervening on the purely natural yet be said to be perceptible, so in the divine case it would be a matter of certain natural conditions making possible contact with a numinous reality in virtue of the kind of world in which we live and for which theists believe the divine is ultimately responsible. The point would be that the Creator has so established natural conditions as to mediate such contact into the created order. So, although the causal relations may be quite different, the perception of such immaterial properties in both human and divine can alike be successfully mediated through the material.

But, while these parallels with the range of predicates we are prepared to use of human beings and the mode of their mediation lessens the extent of the contrast with ordinary perception, it may still be objected that no sense can be given to claims to experience something quite so non-natural, and other-worldly as God, precisely because of the sort of predicates claimed for the divine. For what could it mean to experience the totality of what it is to be divine, or even particular

attributes such as being infinite, the various conventional attributes that are themselves so qualified (infinitely good and so on), or, more generally, a being quite unlike any particular thing?⁷

These objections can scarcely be answered in a short compass but their force can be greatly lessened when it is noted that the same difficulty occurs with any other complex object or person. In any particular act of perception only some particular aspect of the object or person is perceived, and it is only thanks to other mental faculties that the particular is then brought under some more general heading, thanks, for example, to the work of the memory, the mind's categorizing faculty or whatever. In a similar way, then, strictly speaking on any particular occasion it is only one aspect or another of the divine that is perceived, and that is indeed something that is recognized in much of the literature concerning such experiences.

Even so, some attributes might seem more difficult to envisage as part of human experience than others, infinity being one. John Ruskin makes a suggestion of how such an experience might occur: 'light receding in the distance is of all visible things the least material, the least finite, the farthest withdrawn from the earth . . . , the most typical of the nature of God, the most suggestive of the glory of his dwelling place' (Ruskin (1906), II, 3, v, 45). It is important to note that he is not proposing an inference from the quality of the landscape to the divine property. Rather, his suggestion is that the perception of one occasions the perception of the other in light of the fact of God as Creator being in any case the source of such infinity in nature. Certain features of the created world, we might postulate, are especially conducive to such an understanding; perhaps, it has been suggested, rather like the way in which a vapour trail in the sky occasions thought of an aeroplane although it is not visible.

Admittedly, this aspectual approach does raise the possibility of such varied experience being interpreted in terms of several different gods rather than a single entity.⁸ But that is surely right. It is only some forms of experience that suggest an overall unity to the divine; otherwise an inference to that belief is required. So my conclusion here is that, initial appearances notwithstanding, divinity as the object of perception can be said to be not all that dissimilar from more standard cases. There can at times be the same level of predictability while the sort of attributes experienced and the mode of their perception are not wholly unlike our perception in more complex human cases.

The oddness of the conditions of such perception

Here the objection is likely to be that there is oddness both in initial and in accompanying conditions. Oddness in initial conditions repeats a point already considered in the previous section, namely whether theological insistence on the total freedom of God would inhibit any of the lawlike predictability that

characterizes more conventional perception. My answer here would therefore be the same, that God has in fact chosen to operate within certain constraints and so, although all perception of the divine cannot be subsumed under some rule, sufficient can be for the parallel still to hold with ordinary perception.

It is perhaps, therefore, the oddness of accompanying rather than initial conditions that may present the appearance of greater contrast. This is because an affective element is often thought to be no less important than the epistemological. That is to say, in contrast with ordinary perceptual experience, claims to religious experience would commonly be regarded as deficient were they not accompanied by significant emotions such as awe, joy, sorrow, and so on. Were the presence of the affective to be seen as merely a contingent feature of such perception, bearing no essential relation to what is perceived, the matter might be considered as of no great moment. But in fact it does seem that customarily having the requisite emotions is a *sine qua non* for having the full perception in the first place. So, for example, it is hard to see what sense could be made of a claim to have experienced the divine infinite without this also inducing awe and wonder, or again perfect divine goodness without some accompanying sense of guilt or shame, mystic intimacy without joy, and so on.

Alston alludes to 'one nagging worry', which is 'the possibility that the phenomenal content of (mystical) perception wholly consists of affective qualities' (Alston (1991), 49–51, esp. 49). Although conceding that 'subjects speak of ecstasy, sweetness, love, delight, joy, contentment, peace, repose, bliss, awe and wonder' (*ibid.*, 50), he insists that the heart of the experience lies elsewhere in its cognitive content, and only a passing concession (without further elaboration) is made to the possibility 'that a direct perception of God could be effected through affective qualities' (*ibid.*, 51). However, the problem with that response is that in fact the emotions seem much more directly involved, indeed to the extent that some emotions both predispose individuals towards the having of a religious experience and are constitutive of its fulfilment. So, for example, a mind not in the least disposed to awe would be unlikely ever to have an experience of divine infinity or majesty mediated through nature or music, or again an experience of divine forgiveness seems precluded without some prior sense of guilt or of 'sin' needing to be forgiven.

All this may seem to make religious perception far removed from 'ordinary' perception, but, as I sought to argue in the previous section, it is only a particular philosophical tradition that takes something elementary as the model of what all perception is like, and then wrongly so. Equally, it would be quite wrong to suppose that in any particular case it is only one of our five senses that is involved and not also various mental faculties. So, for example, hearing a piece of music is not just a matter of hearing but of interpretation in terms of its harmonic and melodic structures, and so on. Including the emotions in these mental faculties, therefore, does not seem such a huge step as it might initially appear.

Even so, were religious experience unique in assigning such a key role to the emotions, then this might count decisively against parallels with ordinary perception. Increasingly, however, it is being acknowledged that similar issues arise with morals and aesthetics. On the latter Nelson Goodman is quite emphatic: 'in aesthetic experience the emotions function cognitively. The work of art is apprehended through the feelings as well as through the senses' (Goodman (1969), 148). But in many ways it is the situation with respect to moral insight that is the more interesting. When Hume declared that reason without emotion was powerless, it was questions of motivation that he had in mind, but moral philosophers are now increasingly acknowledging that in issues of cognition the emotions might also play a crucial role.

While Martha Nussbaum's claims about 'love's knowledge' are undoubtedly the best-known, it is a pity that she focuses so exclusively on the necessity of narrative expansion in order to make the claim clear, because this would seem to lessen the sense of emotion in its own right acting as an epistemological tool (Nussbaum (1990), 281).⁹ Here Sabine Döring (2010) seems more helpful in suggesting that an emotion like sympathy can itself trump reason as a form of knowledge, as in Huck's discovery of the value of the slave he decides to hide in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Again, in a book-length consideration of the topic, Mark Wynn observes how emotion can improve understanding, including moral perception, in quite a range of different ways. So, for example (following Graham Nerlich), he observes that 'the grief I feel at the death of another may help reveal the value that they hold for me; and on occasion, this response may reveal more than I could understand by discursive reflection alone' (Wynn (2005), 83). Or again (following Raimond Gaita), a nun's practical loving care for incurable patients may disclose the value they should bear far better than pronouncements of similar values by senior doctors that may smack of the theoretical and condescending (*ibid.*, 305, esp. 30 and 33, n. 7). Further support for such a position is given by Patricia Greenspan (2010), who argues that the moral education of children and their training in emotional response often go hand in hand, and indeed are in no sense simply a ladder which can be dispensed with later.

Wynn makes much of the overlap between such moral cases and the more explicitly religious, as in Newman's insistence that conscience is not only our primary means of experiencing the divine but also 'it is always what the sense of the beautiful is in only certain cases; it is always emotional' (Newman (1979), 100).¹⁰ But Newman's rather narrow focus on the moral would seem to me a mistake, for two other reasons: first, because an objector could always propose a reductionist strategy by suggesting that content in the end reduces to the purely moral; then, second, because even among believers it might court a presupposition that with God as good all religious experience necessarily has a moral component whereas in fact with all such experience as aspectival there may be no moral content at all.

However, it might well be objected to the above that all I have done is draw parallels with equally problematic areas of perception in ethics and aesthetics. Why after all should we be realists about either? While I personally would not endorse such a challenge, it is important to observe here that emotions also affect other areas of perception. So, for example, animals find sexually attractive others that are likely to be appropriate reproductive partners, or again fear is part of the process of detecting a dangerous predator. Equally, much work in psychology has been done on the way in which disinterested concern in others can only be recognized by the percipients first acquiring some empathy within themselves.

The appropriate response here then, I would suggest, is not to deny the essential contribution of the emotions to religious experience but rather to argue that emotion can equally be one means of accessing the truth, and that this occurs also elsewhere than in the specifically religious situation.

The oddness of the content

It is often said that ordinary perception allows relatively easy comparability with what others experience, whereas, irrespective of the precise form the religious experience takes, in so far as the data can be made to engage in dialogue with one another at all, this appears to be frequently in conflict not only across the religions but even within them. Certainly, there are serious difficulties, but these are intensified by failure to distinguish between the two types of experience delineated earlier, what I termed 'numinous' and 'personalist' or 'inter-actionist' experiences. On the whole, it is the latter inter-actionist model that presents the most problems especially when set against the sort of detail associated with claims to divine revelation in the various religions. By contrast, claims to experience the divine as loving, infinite, pure, angry, forgiving, gracious, generous, or whatever can for the most part be seen to complement one another.

Of course, different initial conditions may generate different emphases. To take the history of Christian architecture as an example, Gothic buildings will tend to generate a sense of God as other and infinite, classical a sense of order and beauty in the divine purposes, Baroque a sense of divine playfulness, and so on. However, despite proponents often insisting that only their particular style properly represents the divine character, there is no need to follow suit in such exclusiveness. Instead we may speak of them revealing different aspects of the divine. Nor need the fact that the history of Christian architecture and that of no other religion took precisely this character argue against the veridical character of the experiences mediated, for it is possible to detect similar elements emerging in the history of other religions also, despite considerable differences in what architectural forms generate the same sort of ideas and precisely when these occur in the history of the religion concerned.¹¹

However, although it is relatively easy to see how those assuming a plurality of gods behind such experience might be led to endorse belief in a single divine reality (on grounds of simplicity and the unitive experiences that some have), it is harder to identify how the conflict between personal and impersonal readings of the transcendent reality might be arbitrated. In a famous essay Zaehner (1957), while accepting the genuineness of both types of experience, argued for the superiority of the personal kind, as that which comes in the surpassing of more unitive experiences that still hark back to nature mysticism.¹² But I doubt whether matters can be resolved quite that easily. After all, there is a long tradition in western thought that argues for the superiority of the impersonal, as in Platonism, with the division between contemplating subject and object of reflection fully overcome.¹³ Perhaps the best way forward here is to distinguish between on the one hand the actual nature of the divine reality and on the other how it is experienced, for it is surely possible to maintain that both ways of experiencing divinity are fully veridical (if incomplete) whatever type of reality ultimately lies behind them. This can after all happen also with human agents, even if in the human case a lack of the 'personal' element is usually a subject for complaint, with, for example, institutional mismanagement or computer programmes correspondingly blamed. That would entail arbitrating the issue in respect of the divine on grounds other than experience.

However, in terms of content the strongest objections to any parallel with ordinary perception come not from the data of numinous experience but rather from what I have called inter-actionist experience. Thus it is commonplace to note how certain visions or auditions of saints only occur within a specific religion, and give conflicting information to that found in other religions or even different parts of the same religion. Similarly, the primary revelations themselves of the major religions appear to contradict one another sharply, with the Qur'an, for example, explicitly rejecting some of the New Testament claims about Jesus or with Krishna as an avatar of Vishnu holding central place instead in Hinduism's Bhagavad-Gita. Partly in response to such difficulties some have retreated to antirealism, among them Don Cupitt in England and Mark Johnston in the United States.¹⁴ Others, such as Roger Trigg, continue to advocate a very straightforward form of realism according to which, if the experience is veridical, there is some direct correspondence between the experience and God as understood in fairly straightforward theistic terms (Trigg (1997), (1998)). More common among academics, though, is probably some form of critical realism, at the extreme end of which lies John Hick's claim that all religions are equidistant from 'the Real' and so what is experienced is a heavily conditioned form of that ultimate reality.¹⁵

In these debates Hilary Putnam is of particular interest as he has wrestled with such issues throughout the latter stages of his long career, moving from realism to antirealism and then towards the end of his life to what might be called pluralist realism, with the recognition that not only do standards of truth vary from

discourse to discourse but also that in some contexts apparently competing accounts of the truth could be simultaneously true.¹⁶ So, for example, there is no reason why the meaning of 'exists' should not vary depending on the types of discourse in which it is being employed (moral or mathematical, for example, rather than empirical), why the number of objects in a field should not vary depending on why they are being viewed (mereological or otherwise), or even why something like the Müller-Lyer illusion should be allowed to call into question the truth of what we actually see (in our perceptual field the lines are actually of different lengths).¹⁷ In particular he wanted to resist the idea that intermediate representation in the mind makes all such experience indirect. So far from illusion or hallucination demonstrating the need to postulate mediating sense data for all perception, they merely expose a different kind of relation to external reality in these particular cases.¹⁸ If despite his own Jewish belief Putnam did not specifically apply these insights to religious truth, there seems good reason to believe that such an understanding could also be pursued in the religious case.¹⁹ Thus, adopting such applications would allow us to say that the divine experienced as Allah or as the Christian God does not necessarily entail a distorting lens and thus a less direct experience but that both could be correct relative to the two discourses in which they operate.

Should religion need to be treated as a special case in all of this, that would of course greatly weaken the force of any Putnam-inspired analysis. But the examples Putnam himself gives could also be greatly extended, given that the content of ordinary perception is in fact much more complex than ordinarily recognized and is itself in part shaped by competing discourses of interpretation. Thus even across European languages the range of colour perceptions is not divided in exactly the same way, while anthropologists commonly insist that almost every perceptual concept is not universal across cultures, with even the nature of human identity itself a contested concept. The advantage of the Putnam approach is that it is not necessary, for example, to arbitrate on the division of the colour spectrum but instead one may acknowledge that what is seen can still be true, each relative to the cultural schema of which it is part.²⁰ None of this is to deny that cross-cultural comparisons are possible. It is simply to contest whether they should be seen as the only form of truth, and also to emphasize that, by allowing these multiple forms of truth, further insights may prove possible, for example in the reasons grounding why different cultures divide up the world differently.

In religion this also would have advantages. So, for example, from a Judaeo-Christian perspective it looks as though Hinduism is of all the major religions the most idolatrous with its numerous images of the gods. But by first setting such practice in the context of its own discourse, a new possibility emerges, that it is in effect Hinduism's way of guarding against idolatry since the very quantity and variety preclude any one from becoming dominant. Indeed, it can provide a way for Hinduism to argue against the Judaeo-Christian tradition as itself much more

idolatrous since in contrast to Hinduism a particular book is given unconditional authority. So there is at least an argument to be had about which of the two discourses is inherently more idolatrous.²¹

In all of this my intention is not to argue that all differences between the religions can then dissolve as their setting within particular traditions is taken more seriously. It is rather to observe that the contrast so often made between simple agreed perceptions on the one hand in other cases and the hopeless contradicting claims of religion on the other is itself hopelessly naïve both about the character of ordinary perceptions and about the nature of religion. In respect of the former such a stark contrast immediately collapses as soon as one ceases to consider interrelated cultures and in particular pays attention to the whole sweep of human history, while in respect of the latter, surface conflict does not necessarily always point to deep underlying conflict. The point can perhaps be made clearer by examples, but these need first to be set in some sort of wider theological and philosophical context. In brief, the philosophical assumption is that all thinking is to varying degrees contextual or culturally conditioned,²² while the theological assumption is that the divine also has chosen to work within this context, addressing individuals where they are rather than compelling them in directions beyond their immediate comprehension. Such is the pattern I believe to be disclosed within the Judaeo-Christian revelation, given the gradual character of some of its key transformations, for example from implicit belief in a plurality of gods to a single God, or from a stress on divine unity in the Jewish Shema to a plurality in which even the divine itself (in Christ) chose to be limited by the ordinary conditions of human existence.²³

Two rather different examples from the Judaeo-Christian revelation may suffice, the first being the sacrifice of Isaac and the second the Trinity. To take a scriptural passage and a doctrine may seem to carry us far from the topic of religious experience, but this is not so. The doctrine is based in experiential claims and continues to influence other such experiences, while, whether or not Genesis 22 records an actual experience, it is certainly true that its traditions of interpretation have influenced how others have interpreted their own encounters with God.

Certainly, if specific historical details such as place or the name of the son involved are regarded as important, then irreconcilable conflict on Abraham's sacrifice of his son between Bible and Qur'an immediately emerges.²⁴ There will also be conflict if the interpretation that has dominated Protestant Christianity since Kierkegaard is accepted, that the primary focus is on Abraham's dilemma, since in the history of both Judaism and Islam the primary focus alike moved to a potential self-offering by the son. In Islam's case such a transformation was greatly facilitated by identification of the potential victim as the older son, but Jewish exegesis followed a similar route, in assuming Isaac to be a responsible individual chosen to represent the Jewish people in the event that became known as the

Akedah or 'Binding'. For example, one influential midrash argues that Isaac must have been thirty-seven years old at the time since Sarah's death is mentioned immediately afterwards and so must have been caused by shock at what had nearly happened, the death of her own son.²⁵

But in fact traditional Christian exegesis had moved in precisely the same direction, through seeing the offering of Isaac as a type or foretaste of the sacrifice of Christ. So, for example, as early as Clement of Rome we are told that because 'Isaac knew with confidence what was about to happen, it was with gladness that he was led forth as a sacrificial victim', while Irenaeus urges us to 'take up our cross as Isaac took up his bundle of sticks'.²⁶ In short, if we are prepared to set the apparently competing versions of the narrative in the context of their respective traditions of interpretation, then surface conflict disappears, to be replaced by an agreed emphasis on the key role in religion of the place of self-sacrifice.²⁷ Nor need that conclusion be confined to the three monotheistic religions. A similar conclusion might be reached if the examination were extended to the role of the sacrifice of Nachiketas in Hinduism.²⁸ More controversially, I would also suggest that the point even applies to Aztec traditions of sacrifice in the sense that even in the midst of all their brutality there are indications of an alternative, similar view emerging through aspects of the practices and in the poetry associated with the cult.²⁹

It perhaps needs emphasizing that it is no part of my intention to suggest that all potential conflicts between the religions can be resolved in this way, only that some can be once such contextualization is taken into account. Nonetheless, it is important that such claims should be made if any real parallel with ordinary perception is to be sustained. It is simply not the case that religion throws up nothing but irresolvable conflicts. Even in the most apparently intractable of disagreements, there may be some converging elements. That is why I would like to conclude with a brief consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity, commonly cited as a clear case of irresolvable conflict across the religions. Islam customarily treats the doctrine as a gross instance of *shirk*, of an idolatrous collapse into polytheism, no less dangerous than the Hindu belief system. Yet, superficial appearances notwithstanding, two elements of contextualization may be used to lessen greatly that sense of conflict, even if they hardly succeed in dispensing with it altogether.

The first is that, although the Trinity is sometimes treated as a datum of Christian experience,³⁰ it is now virtually standard practice to treat the doctrine as a deduction from other elements of Christian faith, experiential or otherwise. So, for example, the argument might be based on the need to reconcile the revelatory emphasis in the Hebrew Scriptures on monotheism with the New Testament's assertion of the divinity of Christ and the Spirit. But equally this is what is found in Hinduism: that talk of a plurality of gods is reconciled at the conceptual level in the assertion of a single divine reality, even if there is disagreement over whether this

should be conceived personally or impersonally.³¹ Again, the intellectual history of Islam is not quite as unqualifiedly monotheistic as its accusations against Christianity might initially indicate, for claims that the Qur'an was a created entity led in due course to the postulation of its holy book as uncreated.³² So, one way of lessening the appearance of tension is to note that elements of unity and plurality in fact operate within all three intellectual traditions.

It is possible, however, also to construct a similar but more direct strategy in respect of experience of the divine itself. Although Hegel's appeal to the *Trimurti* of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva is no longer plausible, with Kali or the feminine principle more generally substituted instead of Brahma it becomes true that most recorded Hindu experience of the divine would find its place within this threefold categorization. This is not to suggest that the three parallel the three persons of the Trinity, only that there is a similar building from 'plural' experience to an ultimate unity. Equally within Islam, although there is no talk of experiencing the Qur'an as uncreated, there are claims to similar 'plural' experiences in the Sufi tradition in respect of the names of God. Resolved by Al-Ghazali from the ninety-nine in the Qur'an into seven, these were further reduced to three by later tradition (life, knowledge, power).³³ Again, my point is not to claim that essentially the same content is revealed as pertains to the Christian God. My aim is far more modest: simply to observe that contextualization enables one to say that there is enough of an overlap on the theme of unity and plurality for discussions to be had. It will not do for the objector to the parallel with ordinary perception to say that the differences are so great that it is inconceivable that it is in some sense the same object that is being perceived.

Obviously many of the points I have made in this essay could have been explored at much greater length and indeed would need to be if the parallel with ordinary perception is to be fully sustained. Nonetheless, I hope that I have shown that in principle at least such a strategy is indeed possible.³⁴

References

- ALSTON, W. (1991) *Perceiving God* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press).
- BLOOM, P. (2009) 'Religious belief as an evolutionary accident', in H. Schloss & M. L. Murray (eds) *The Believing Primate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 118–127.
- BROWN, D. (1999) *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (2008) *God and Mystery in Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- (2011) *Kenosis and the Construction of a Christian Theology* (Waco TX: Baylor University Press).
- (2012) 'Experience, symbol, and revelation: continuing the conversation', in R. MacSwain & T. Worley (eds) *Theology, Aesthetics and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 265–296.
- (2013a) 'Human sacrifice and two imaginative worlds, Aztec and Christian', in J. Zachuber & J. Meszaros (eds) *Sacrifice and Modern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 180–196.
- (2013b) 'Interfaith dialogue through architecture', in *Mediaeval Sophia: Studie e ricerche sui saperi mediaevali* (Gennaio–Giugno), 168–178.
- BRUNSVELD, N. (2012) *The Many Faces of Religious Truth: Developing Hilary Putnam's Pragmatic Pluralism into an Alternative for Religious Realism and Antirealism* (Utrecht: University of Utrecht).

- CUPITT, D. (1980) *Taking Leave of God* (London: SCM).
- DAVIES, B. (1982) *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- DÖRING, S. A. (2010) 'Why be emotional?', in P. Goldie (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 283–302.
- GOODMAN, N. (1969) *Language and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- GREENSPAN, P. (2010) 'Learning emotions and ethics', in P. Goldie (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 539–559.
- HARRÉ, R. (1983) *Personal Being* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- HICK, J. (1989) *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Basingstoke: Macmillan).
- IPGRAVE, M. (2003) *Trinity and Inter-Faith Dialogue* (Bern: Peter Lang).
- JOHNSTON, M. (2009) *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- LLOYD-JONES, H. (1971) *The Justice of Zeus* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press).
- MCDOWELL, J. (2009) *The Engaged Intellect* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).
- NEWMAN, J. H. (1979) *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame Press).
- NUSSBAUM, M. (1990) *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- PUTNAM, H. (1978) *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- (1981) *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- (1988) *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press).
- (1995) *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- (2000) *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body and the World* (New York: Columbia University Press).
- QUASH, B. (2012) 'The density of divine address: liturgy, drama, and human transformation', in R. MacSwain & T. Worley (eds) *Theology, Aesthetics and Culture: Responses to the Work of David Brown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 241–251.
- RUSKIN, J. (1906) *Modern Painters* (London: George Allen).
- SELLERS, W. (2002) *Celestial Music?* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press).
- SNELL, B. (1982) *The Discovery of the Human Mind* (New York: Dover Publications).
- SWINBURNE, R. (1979) *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; 2nd edn 2004).
- TRIGG, R. (1997) 'Theological realism and antirealism', in P. L. Quinn & C. Taliadro (eds) *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell), 213–220.
- (1998) *Rationality and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell).
- WOLFSON, H. A. (1976) *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press).
- WYNN, M. K. (2005) *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- YANDELL, K. E. (1993) *The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- ZAEHNER, R. C. (1957) *Mysticism, Sacred and Profane* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Notes

1. See especially Swinburne (1979), 254–271, esp. 254–255. In the 2004 edition 310–323 is of particular relevance. Our somewhat different treatment of conflict emerges from 316ff.
2. The use of the term 'mystical' in Alston (1991) to describe such experience is somewhat unfortunate, as, although he takes some of his examples from the writings of Teresa of Avila, he seems to intend in general what others might call ordinary religious experience.
3. For these critiques in Yandell (1993), see 279–321. His own preferred type of experience he labels 'numinous'.
4. Exodus 29.44–5; 2 Chron. 6.1–12; Psalm 68.16; Matt. 18.20; John 20.22–3; Luke 12.11–12.
5. See especially Sellers (2002), xi–xv and 307–10.
6. The earlier empiricists' term had been 'ideas' of sense. It was G. E. Moore who first coined the term 'sense data', though Bertrand Russell was the first to introduce it into print in *Problems of Philosophy* (1912). Although they are often related, claims about sense data and simple perceptions should be treated as conceptually distinct.
7. For a Christian accepting this sort of objection, see Davies (1982), 70–76. A related objection can be found in Ben Quash's discussion of my own work (2012); to which I offer a brief reply in Brown (2012), 271–273.
8. A point Bloom (2009, 127) makes against Plantinga (and Calvin).

9. 'We seem to require no unit shorter than this actual story.'
10. Also quoted in Wynn (2005), 18.
11. For further development of this argument, see Brown (2013b).
12. Given that he discusses Advaita-Vedanta at some length, it is surprising to find that Yandell (1993) makes no mention of other forms of unity mysticism that could equally be said to challenge his 'numinous' account.
13. Influential was Plotinus' claim that awareness of difference between subject and object represented not only division in the divine but also an imperfect focus on the object since even in the human case we are most focused when we are least conscious of what we are doing.
14. With Cupitt, a process that began with *Taking Leave of God* (1980). With Johnston in *Saving God: Religion after Idolatry* (2009), his own preference would probably be to have his position treated as a rather extreme form of critical realism, but so much has gone that antirealism might be a more appropriate term.
15. Although Hick moved far from orthodox Christianity, his own self-description for his later views is critical realism: e.g. Hick (1989). My own inclination is to accept this account of his position, though it would be challenged by a strong realist such as Trigg.
16. The transition to antirealism can be seen in works such as *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (1978) and *Reason, Truth and History* (1981). A pluralist but realist position is then found advocated in *Representation and Reality* (1988) and *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (1995).
17. For his comments on the Müller-Lyer Illusion (the same length of line with outward facing arrows appears considerably shorter than with inward facing arrows), *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body and World* (2000), esp. 159.
18. John McDowell makes a similar claim in *The Engaged Intellect* (2009), 225–256.
19. For one such development, Brunsveld (2012). Putnam develops a quite different Wittgensteinian approach to religious issues; for a list of his writings on religion, see Brunsveld (2012), 192, n. 1.
20. On the colour spectrum, the most notorious examples come from ancient cultures such as the extraordinary range of *purpureus* in Latin. On notions of identity, note Snell's claim (1982, e.g. 19) that Homer had a unitary view of neither the human body nor the human soul, though the interpretation is challenged by Lloyd-Jones (1971, esp. 9–10). Again, Rom Harré has drawn attention to the way in which Inuit is minimally indexical and so only able to distinguish between Eskimo-here and Eskimo-there: Harré (1983), 85–89.
21. For some further brief comments on this point, see Brown (2008), 141–143.
22. 'Conditioned' rather than 'determined', for otherwise how could real change be possible? But it is one thing to step beyond the existing assumptions of a particular culture; quite another to extricate oneself from these entirely.
23. For implicit belief in a plurality of gods, e.g. Ex 18.11; Ps 82.1; for such kenotic assumptions about the incarnation, see Brown (2011).
24. The Qur'an places the event near Mecca, and implicitly identifies the son as Ishmael, the father of the Arab peoples.
25. *Genesis Rabbah* 58.5. Sarah is 127 at the time of her death (Gen. 23.1) and had given birth to Isaac at the age of 90 (Gen. 17.17).
26. Clement, *First Letter to the Corinthians* 31; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 4.10 (both my tr.).
27. These issues are discussed in some detail in Brown (1999), 237–260, esp. 245–257.
28. In the *Katha Upanishad* Nachiketas offers to substitute himself in place of his father's rather stinting gifts to the gods.
29. See further Brown (2013a).
30. Paul might be a possible starting point, as in Rom. 8.15 and Gal.4.6.
31. Ramanuja offers a personalist approach. Contrast the Advaita-Vedanta or non-dualist, impersonalist approach of Samkara, with 'saguna' or form seen as subordinate to 'nirguna', the 'formless' or 'that which transcends form'.
32. The Qur'an as created was explicitly declared by Caliph al-Ma'mun in 827 but soon challenged by Ahmad ibn Hanbal and then by Ash'arism more generally. For the history, Ipgrave (2003), 216–234. Harry Wolfson suggests the term 'inlibration' to parallel 'incarnation': Wolfson (1976), 246.

33. Ipgrave (2003), 241–256. Part of the argument was that the attributes should not be identified with the divine essence but Al Ghazali’s devotional treatise ‘The Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names of God’ gave the claim a strong experiential thrust.
34. I am very grateful to a number of earlier readers of this essay for helpful comments and suggestions, particularly at the universities of Notre Dame and Leeds, among them Robin LePoidevin, Rob MacSwain, Michael Rea, Roger White, Mark Wynn, and Sameer Yadav.