

Ineffability

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Abstract: Within each of the major world religions a distinction is drawn between the ultimate ineffable Godhead or Absolute and the immediate object of worship or focus of religious meditation. I examine the notion of ineffability, or transcategoriality, in the influential Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius, who reconciles the divine ineffability with the authority of the Bible by holding that the biblical language is metaphorical, its function being to draw us towards the Godhead. If we extend this principle to other faiths we have gone half way towards making the global history of religions intelligible. The other half consists in a recognition of the different human conceptualities and spiritual practices that give concrete form to the divine reality within religious experience. However, William Rowe,¹ and Christopher Insole,² have criticized this use of ineffability, and their arguments are responded to here.

Transcategoriality in the world religions

The term ‘ineffable’, meaning inexpressible, transcending description, beyond the scope of our human concepts, is good semantic currency with a respectable Latin lineage. But today, because of such similar-sounding but very different-meaning words and phrases as ‘effing’ and ‘the eff word’, we may well be slightly uncomfortable with ‘ineffable’ and ready for an alternative. I suggest ‘transcategorial’, i.e., outside or beyond the range of our categories of thought, and I shall use both terms in what follows.

We are concerned with transcategoriality as applied to God – using ‘God’ as our customary Western term for the ultimate reality to which the religions point. Each of the great traditions says, in its own way, that God in God’s ultimate nature is beyond characterization by the range of concepts available to human thought and embodied in our languages. But they balance this by also speaking of God in relation to ourselves as having, in the case of the monotheisms, humanly describable attributes such as personality, goodness, love, compassion, justice, and so on, in virtue of which prayer, worship, and personal devotion are possible. The non-theistic faiths make corresponding distinctions, as we shall see presently.

Thus each of the world religions has a dual concept of God as both transcategorical in the ultimate divine nature and yet religiously available in virtue of qualities analogous to but limitlessly greater than our own. As a brief reminder, within Jewish mysticism a distinction is drawn between *Ein Sof*, the Limitless, and the God of the Torah – thus Gershom Scholem speaks of ‘the difference between *deus absconditus*, God in Himself, and God in His appearance’.³ The ultimate divine ineffability is also affirmed in the Qur’an: ‘God is too glorious for what they ascribe to Him’ (37.159; also 43.82). This is developed by some of the Sufis in a two-level concept of the transcategorical Reality and the self-revealed Qur’anic Allah. For example, Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492) writes, ‘The unique Substance, viewed as absolute and void of all phenomena, all limitations and all multiplicity, is the Real (al-Haqq). On the other hand, viewed in His aspect of multiplicity and plurality, under which He displays Himself when clothed with phenomena, He is the whole created universe’.⁴

We shall come to the other great monotheism, Christianity, presently. But first we turn to the traditions originating in India. Within the streams of religious experience and thought collectively called Hinduism there is a pervasive distinction between *nirguna brahman*, the ultimate transcategorical reality in itself, and *saguna brahman*, that same reality humanly experienced as *ishwara*, deity, expressed in the innumerable gods worshipped in different regions and areas of life. Sikhism, which has received much from Hinduism, also uses the *nirguna/saguna* distinction.⁵

Within the *mahayana* tradition of Buddhism an essentially similar distinction is drawn between the ultimate *dharmakaya*, beyond human conceptuality, and its manifestation as the heavenly realm of the compassionate Buddhas, some of whom appear on earth in different historical periods. To quote a passage used by Shinran,

Among Buddhas and bodhisattvas there are two aspects of dharmakaya: dharmakaya-as-suchness and dharmakaya-as-compassion. Dharmakaya-as-compassion arises out of dharmakaya-as-suchness, and dharmakaya-as-suchness emerges into human consciousness through dharmakaya-as-compassion. The two aspects of dharmakaya differ but are not separate; they are one but not identical.⁶

These distinctions between *Ein Sof* and the God of the Torah, between *al-Haqq* and the Qur’anic Allah, between *nirguna* and *saguna brahman*, and between the *dharmakaya* and the realm of the Buddhas, are clearly analogous to one another and also have their analogy in Christian thought.

Here virtually all the great church theologians from early times have affirmed the ultimately ineffable nature of God. This was laid down as a marker by the fourth-century Gregory of Nyssa, of whom Bernard McGinn, in his authoritative history of Western mysticism, says that his theology is ‘now recognized as one of the most powerful in the history of Christianity’.⁷ Gregory said,

The simplicity of the True Faith assumes God to be that which He is, namely, incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words, having but one name that can represent His proper nature, the single name being 'Above Every Name'.⁸

In the fifth century the enormously influential Pseudo-Dionysius, about whom more later, wrote the definitive Christian affirmation of the absolute ineffability of God. Moving on through Christian history, Augustine treated it as an accepted fact that God 'transcends even the mind',⁹ although this was not a central theme of his work. The ninth-century John Scottus Eriugena spoke of the God beyond God.¹⁰ And Thomas Aquinas, deeply influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius (whom he cites some seventeen hundred times), said that 'by its immensity, the divine substance surpasses every form that our intellect reaches. Thus we are unable to apprehend it by knowing what it is'.¹¹ And the thirteenth/fourteenth-century Meister Eckhart completed the picture by distinguishing explicitly between the transcategorical Godhead (*Gottheit, deitas*) and the describable and worshipped God (*Gott, deus*). Later in the fourteenth century Margaret Porete, who was executed for heresy – paying the price of being a woman mystic in a male-dominated church – expressed the common theme of mystical theology that 'God [i.e. the Godhead] is totally incomprehensible and therefore "nothing" from the perspective of human categories'.¹² In the twentieth century Paul Tillich spoke of 'the God above the God of theism',¹³ and Gordon Kaufman distinguished in his earlier work between the 'real God' and the 'available God', the former being an 'utterly unknowable X' and the latter 'essentially a mental or imaginative construction',¹⁴ whilst Ninian Smart has spoken of 'the noumenal Focus of religion which so to say lies beyond the phenomenal Foci of religious experience and practice',¹⁵ and I have myself based an hypothesis about the relationship between the world religions on the distinction between the noumenal Real and its phenomenal personae and impersonae.¹⁶

Pseudo-Dionysius: ineffability versus religious availability

Let us now look more closely at one particular Christian writer, Pseudo-Dionysius, and at the way in which he faced the religious dilemma which the idea of divine ineffability brings with it. He was probably a fifth-century Syrian monk who pretended in his writings to be the biblical Dionysius the Areopagite (Acts 17.34). His works remained immensely influential, with a 'Dionysian renaissance' in the thirteenth century, at least up to the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Whether they would have been equally influential if it had not been believed that he was St Paul's convert, Dionysius, and thus close to Paul and writing with a near-apostolic authority, we shall never know. But Denys (to use a more reader-friendly contraction of his name) is famous for his stress on the absolute and

unqualified transcategoriality of God. He frequently uses non-personal terms, such as 'the Transcendent One', of which he says,

It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding.... It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding.... It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time.... It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness.... It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being.... There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it.... It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it...for it is...free of every limitation, beyond every limitation: it is also beyond denial.¹⁷

Here and elsewhere Denys says in as emphatic and unqualified a way as he can that the Godhead, the ultimate One, is absolutely ineffable, eluding all our human categories of thought. He goes beyond a purely negative or apophatic theology, which confines itself to saying what God is not, by rejecting negative as well as positive statements about God. He says that 'we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion'.¹⁸ Thus the positive and negative statements jointly point beyond themselves to an absolutely transcategorial reality.

But Denys is then caught in the dilemma which faces everyone who affirms the ultimate divine ineffability but who is also required, by the practice of worship and the religious life generally, to think of God as a personal being with whom a personal relationship is possible. For how could we worship the totally transcategorial? And how could Denys, as a faithful Christian monk, allow the scriptures, liturgies, and theologies of the church to be undercut by an unqualified divine ineffability? And so he says that God is the 'Source which has told us about itself in the holy words of scripture'.¹⁹ He accepts fully the church's teaching that 'the Godhead is... one in three persons',²⁰ and affirms 'the most evident idea in theology, namely, the sacred incarnation of Jesus for our sakes'.²¹ But clearly he has landed himself in a direct contradiction when he says:

- (a) that the Godhead is absolutely ineffable, transcending all our human categories of thought, and
- (b) that the Godhead is self-revealed in the Bible as a trinity, one person of whom became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth.

Denys was fully aware of the problem. He asks,

How then can we speak of the divine names? How can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of mind and of being, if it encompasses and circumscribes, embraces and

anticipates all things whilst itself eluding their grasp and escaping from any perception, imagination, opinion, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding? How can we enter upon this undertaking if the Godhead is superior to being and is unspeakable and unnameable?²²

His answer is that the language of scripture is metaphorical: 'the Word of God makes use of poetic imagery ... as a concession to the nature of our own mind';²³ the divine Light makes truth known to us 'by way of representative symbols', so that 'this divine ray can enlighten us only by being upliftingly concealed in a variety of sacred veils which the Providence of the Father adapts to our nature as human beings'.²⁴ Dionysius uses 'symbolic' with the same meaning as 'metaphorical'.²⁵ He emphasizes the metaphorical character of the biblical language by pointing to the absurdity of taking it literally. In the Bible, he says,

God is clothed in feminine adornments or in the armour of barbarians. He is given the attributes of an artisan, be he potter or refiner. He is put on horses, on chariots, on thrones. Well-laid feasts are put on for him. He is represented as drinking, as inebriated, as sleeping, as someone hung-over.²⁶

Clearly such imagery and language must not be understood literally.

Denys adds that the function of this metaphorical language is to draw us onwards in our spiritual journey. He says that the Godhead 'generously reveals a firm, transcendent beam, granting enlightenments proportionate to each being, and thereby draws sacred minds upward to its permitted contemplation, to participation and to the state of becoming like it',²⁷ and he speaks of 'what scripture has revealed to us in symbolic and uplifting fashion',²⁸ saying that the divine Word 'uses scriptural passages in an uplifting fashion as a way ... to uplift our mind in a manner suitable to our nature'.²⁹ This is interestingly analogous to the Buddhist concept of 'skillful means' (*upaya*), according to which religious teachings are not eternal truths but are ideas adapted to our present state in order to lead us towards Enlightenment, and they are to be left behind when they have served their purpose.³⁰

Dionysius thus deals satisfactorily with the question of religious language. But he says nothing about ordinary religious experience, such as the sense of the presence of God. The next step was taken centuries later by Meister Eckhart when he identified the object of Christian worship and devotion as God in distinction from the ineffable Godhead. 'God and the Godhead', he says, 'are as different from one another as heaven and earth ... God acts. The Godhead does not'.³¹ He even took the next, even more daring, step of recognizing that because the worshipped God is partly a human construction, he (or she) exists only in relation to the worshipping community. Thus 'before there were creatures', he says, 'God was not god, but, rather, he was what he was. When creatures came to be and took on creaturely being, then God was no longer God as he is in himself, but God as he is with creatures'.³² He thus points to the idea that the God of the Bible and of the religious life is a manifestation in human terms of the ultimate divine

reality, and that as manifest He (for he was nearly always spoken of as male) exists only in relation to his worshippers. The same theme occurs in the twelfth/thirteenth-century Sufi, Ibn al-Arabi, who says, 'The Essence, as being beyond all these relationship, is not a divinity ... it is we who make Him a divinity by being that through which He knows Himself as divine. Thus, He is not known [as "Allah"] until we are known'.³³ These are daring ideas, pregnant with important future developments.

Transcategoriality and religious pluralism

For all this is consonant with the contemporary pluralist hypothesis that the ultimate transcategorial reality, the Godhead or the Real, is universally present and that our awareness of it in religious experience is a joint product of that presence and our own conceptual systems and their associated spiritual practices. Thus, as worshipped, the different god-figures exist only in relation to their worshippers. For example, the development of the God of the Torah from a violent tribal deity into the Lord, blessed be He, of contemporary Jewish worship, reflects the historical development of Hebrew society and culture. He is part of Israelite history, and that history is in turn integral to his divine biography.³⁴ The same is true of the gods of India, some of whom have undergone major transformations through the centuries, even amalgamating in celestial takeovers which mirror historical movements in Indian society. Again, the Christian God was, during much of the medieval period, a terrible judge threatening eternal hell for sinners, an object of intense dread, but later, beginning around the thirteenth century, became for many a God whose limitless love is expressed in the sacrificial death of his son Jesus. These developments do not mean that the ultimate divine reality itself has changed through the centuries but that our varying human conceptions of it have changed, producing new and sometimes very different forms of religious experience.

All this is easily understood from a naturalistic point of view as the variety of projections of imaginary gods. But how is it to be understood from the point of view of a faith that religious experience is not purely imaginative projection but is also, at the same time, in varying degrees a cognitive response to transcendent reality? The hypothesis that seems to me most promising is based on the epistemological principle enunciated by Thomas Aquinas: 'Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower'.³⁵ It was not within Thomas's sphere of interest to apply this principle to the relation between religions. However, this had already been done, in poetic form, by the fifth century Sufi, al-Junayd, in his saying that 'the colour of the water is that of its container', on which Ibn al-Arabi commented, 'If [one] knew Junayd's saying, "The water takes its colour from the vessel containing it", he would not interfere with other men's beliefs, but would perceive God in every form of belief'.³⁶ For the different traditions are the con-

tainers that give its recognizable colour – i.e character – to our human awareness of the Real.

To build on the application of this principle to religion we need a distinction analogous to Kant's, but in this case between the noumenal Real *an sich* and its phenomenal appearances to human perceivers.³⁷ For 'the mode of the knower' varies from religion to religion, so that the ultimate Godhead, the Real, can only be humanly experienced in terms of our varying religious conceptualities and spiritual practices. In the intriguing words of an ancient Hindu text, 'Thou art formless. Thy only form is our knowledge of thee',³⁸ We cannot attribute to the unexperientable reality in itself the attributes of its experientable personae, the God figures, or its impersonae, the non-personal 'absolutes'. The Real in itself is thus, from our human point of view, totally transcategorial. But the principle of equal validity, i.e. the basic faith that human religious experience is a range of responses to a transcendent reality, taken together with the observation that the moral and spiritual fruits of the different world faiths are, so far as far as we can tell, equally valuable, helps to render the global religious situation intelligible. For it becomes intelligible when we postulate the ineffable Real as the necessary condition, not of the moral life, as Kant proposed, but of the religious life as described in the history of religions.

Objections and responses

Three logical objections have been made to this use of the concept of ineffability.

First logical objection

The first is that when we say that God is absolutely transcategorial, we are saying something about God, namely that God is absolutely transcategorial. And indeed in referring to anything, including God, we are attributing to it the characteristic of being able to be referred to. It cannot therefore be *absolutely* transcategorial.

This is true, but it is in itself a trivial truth in that nothing significant follows from it. It does however prompt us to distinguish between at least two kinds of attributes. There are what we can call substantial attributes, which would tell us something about what the Godhead in itself is like – for example, that it is personal or that it is impersonal. And there are what I have called formal attributes, which do not tell us anything about what the Godhead in itself is like. Thus for example, that it can be referred to does not give us any information about its nature. Formal attributes are thus trivial or inconsequential in that nothing significant follows from them concerning the intrinsic nature of the Godhead.

It is worth adding at this point that the divine transcategoriality does not entail that the Godhead has no nature, but only that this nature cannot be grasped in

human thought and language. For ineffability is relative to the cognitive capacity of the knower. The Godhead is what it is; and the religions have always presumed it to be infinitely rich in nature. But this nature does not fall within the range of our human categories of thought – except, again, purely ‘formal’ ones.

Second logical objection

The second, much more substantial, logical objection is presented by William Rowe. His ‘chief difficulty with Hick’s Real’ is that ‘I cannot see how the Real can avoid having one or the other of two contradictory properties’.³⁹ I had argued that the transcategorical Real cannot be said to be either personal or impersonal, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive, etc., because it is not the sort of thing that could be any of these – as the number two cannot be said to be either green or non-green. Rowe says,

According to Hick’s argument, to ask whether the number two is green or non-green would be misleading, for the question presupposes that the number two is an entity of the kind that *could* be green or non-green.... My response to this argument is that even though to ask whether the number two is green or non-green may be to presuppose that it’s an entity of the kind that could be green or non-green, and would thus be an inappropriate or senseless question if asked by someone who knows that no number can be green, it hardly follows that the proposition that the number two is non-green is false or in some way meaningless. Indeed, the proposition that the number two is non-green is necessarily true. And it is precisely because every number must be non-green that it would make no sense for someone who is aware of that fact to ask whether the number two is green or non-green’.⁴⁰

Applying this to the postulated Real, Rowe insists that if the Real cannot possibly be personal, because it is not the sort of thing that *could* be personal, then clearly it is non-personal.

I do not disagree with this as a purely formal truth from which nothing significant follows concerning the nature of the Real. However Rowe claims that something significant does follow. He says that ‘if Hick were to agree that the Real is non-personal, this could create a serious difficulty for the assessment of religions favouring personal deities as opposed to religions favouring non-personal absolutes’.⁴¹ For if God is non-personal it follows that the theistic religions are fundamentally in error; and this would indeed be a very significant implication. But if, on the other hand, the Real is not personal simply because the concepts of personality and impersonality do not apply to it, then, surely, nothing significant follows concerning its nature. One can say that the Real is non-round, non-green, non-large, non-intelligent, non-French and so on *ad infinitum*, as well as non-personal, simply because it is not the kind of reality that could have any of these attributes. But none of this tells us anything significant about the nature of the Real in itself.

However Rowe still insists that it is logically necessary that if the attribute of

being personal does not apply to the Real, then the Real has the attribute of being non-personal. For 'personal' and 'non-personal' are logically interdependent, in that if X is not personal, it is necessarily non-personal. But the inference from 'X is not personal' to therefore 'X is a non-personal, or impersonal, reality' only holds within the domain of things to which the concepts 'personal' and 'non-personal' apply. The transcategorical Real is not in that domain. Indeed, the concept of the ineffable is precisely the concept of that which is, by definition, outside that realm. To deny – as in effect Rowe does – that there can be a reality beyond the scope of human conceptuality seems to me to be a dogma that we are under no obligation to accept.⁴²

Third logical objection

Christopher Insole⁴³ raises issues in the same area. In response I shall try to show why I can and should stay out of the jam pot. The 'jam pot' in question – which first appeared in William Alston's larder⁴⁴ – contains all the religiously significant qualities that the ultimate reality has been said by religious thinkers to have. These include, in Christian theology, goodness, power, knowledge, and being three-persons-in-one, the second of whom became incarnate as Jesus Christ; in Jewish theology, being unitary (not triune), and having adopted the children of Israel as his chosen people; in Muslim theology, being strictly unitary, and being self-revealed in the Qur'an; in advaitic Hindu thought, being the non-personal *brahman*; in different schools of Buddhist thought, being the non-personal *dharmakaya* or the non-personal *nirvana*. These instances are enough to remind us that there is not just one but a whole row of jam pots, many of whose ingredients are mutually incompatible. How then should we proceed?

Insole is not unsympathetic to the idea of the ultimate reality being differently known within different religious traditions, so that within them people are brought from self-centredness to a recentring in the transcendent Real. 'This', he says, 'is a substantial doctrine of God for which Hick has compelling and serious reasons'.⁴⁵ But he objects strongly to the distinction between formal and substantial attributes being brought into the picture.

The pluralist hypothesis that I wish to defend is not however that formulated by Insole when he says, 'Hick believes that the Real *an sich* is a transcendent divine reality which reveals itself partially ... in different faiths, but never fully in one faith',⁴⁶ or that it is 'authentically self-revealing in not one but many faiths',⁴⁷ or when he speaks of the Real's 'partial and aspectival self-revelation in different world faiths'.⁴⁸ That would indeed require the Real in itself to have the various qualities that it reveals within the different religions. But this is ruled out by the fact that many of these attributes are non-compossible. Indeed the language of revelation, and of the Real as 'self-revealing', which Insole frequently uses, suggests a theistic presupposition which is misleading in this context.

However Insole's main argument does not depend on that misunderstanding.

The principle of equal validity requires us to say that the Real is such that it is authentically responded to from within the different world religions. But is not this ‘being such that ...’ an attribute of the Real? And if so, is it a substantial or a formal attribute? Or is it perhaps an attribute of some third kind?

Insole is clearly right in pointing out that ‘being authentically responded to within different religions’ is not the same purely formal kind of property as ‘being able to be referred to’. But the question remains, How can the noumenal Real be phenomenally experienced as the gods and absolutes of the different religions without itself having any of the attributes of those gods and absolutes, since many of these are mutually incompatible? Philip Quinn, in his proposal for ‘thinner theologies’,⁴⁹ has suggested that we might attribute to the Real only those qualities on which the major traditions agree. He does not specify these, but they cannot include personality or impersonality, or any properties that presuppose either of these. But it could well be argued – and I have myself argued – that all the major religions report that their object of worship or focus of meditation is ultimately benign in relation to humankind. Can we not then at least make the religiously significant affirmation that the ultimate reality, the Real or the Godhead, is good? For this is a very important ingredient common to all the jam pots.

The answer, I suggest, does not lie in the nature of the Real itself but in our own human nature. ‘Good’ and ‘benign’ – together with our other value terms – are human conceptions. They apply within human life, and they apply to the range of divine phenomena which we have ourselves partially constructed; but not to the ultimate noumenal reality in itself. Our human nature, with its range of concepts and languages, is such that *from our point of view* the Real, experienced in a variety of divine phenomena, is benign, good. But there may possibly be other kinds of creature which also make a benign/malign distinction in relation to themselves, but by whom the Real is experienced as hostile, not good but evil, and others again by whom it is experienced as morally neutral.

But, again, is not ‘being capable of being experienced as benign by humans, as malign by others – perhaps devils – and as morally neutral by yet others’ (let us call this, not very elegantly, multi-perceptibility), an attribute of the Real? It seems to me preferable to hold that this is not an intrinsic attribute of the Real in itself, but an attribute of human (and possibly some non-human) nature. Is it an intrinsic attribute of a mountain that it looks smaller to an observer the more distant the observer is from it, or is it not rather an attribute of we observers that objects look smaller to us the further we are from them? Is it an attribute of objects that they appear coloured to some, but not to the colour-blind, or is it not rather an attribute of the different perceivers? For there could be mountains but no observers, and the same objects but no perceivers, but there is eternally (according to the religions) the ultimate transcategorical reality whether or not there are humans or others to respond to it – and of course a million years ago there were no humans. It therefore seems to me reasonable to treat the multi-perceptibility

of the Real as inhering, not in the Real *an sich*, but in the different finite perceivers with their different cognitive capacities and interpretative frameworks.

And so my conclusion is that these suggested logical difficulties are by no means insuperable. The concept of ineffability is viable, and it can contribute to a viable religious understanding of religion in its variety of forms.⁵⁰

Notes

1. William L. Rowe 'Religious pluralism', *Religious Studies*, 35 (1999), 139–150.
2. Christopher J. Insole 'Why John Hick cannot, and should not, stay out of the jam pot', *Religious Studies*, 36 (2000), 25–33.
3. Gershom Scholem 'General characteristics of Jewish mysticism', in Richard Woods (ed.) *Understanding Mysticism* (New York NY: Doubleday, 1980), 148.
4. Reynold Nicholson *The Mystics of Islam* (London & Boston MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 81–82.
5. Trilochan Singh 'Theological concepts of Sikhism' in Singh *Sikhism* (Patiala: Punjabi University, 1969), 53.
6. Shinran *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'*, trans. Dennis Hirota *et al.*, (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1979), 5.
7. Bernard McGinn *The Foundations of Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1991), 140.
8. Gregory of Nyssa *Against Eunomius*, book 1, ch. 43, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series II, vol. 5, (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 99.
9. St Augustine *Of True Religion* trans. John Burleigh, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 259.
10. See Bernard McGinn *The Growth of Mysticism* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 117.
11. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 14 trans. Anton Pegis *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, book 1 (New York NY: Image Books, 1955), 96.
12. Bernard McGinn *The Flowering of Mysticism* (New York NY: Crossroad, 1998), 257.
13. Paul Tillich *The Courage to Be* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 190.
14. Gordon Kaufman *God the Problem* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 85–86.
15. Ninian Smart 'Our Experience of the Ultimate', *Religious Studies*, 20 (1984), 24.
16. John Hick *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1980) ch. 5; *idem Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London: Macmillan and New York NY: St Martin's Press, 1985), ch. 3; *idem An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan and New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1989); *idem Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Macmillan and New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1993), ch. 10; *idem The Rainbow of Faiths* (London: SCM Press, 1995), as *A Christian Theology of Religions* (Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1995).
17. Pseudo-Dionysius *The Mystical Theology in The Complete Works of Pseudo-Dionysius*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 141.
18. *Ibid.*, 136.
19. Dionysius *The Divine Names* in Lubheid *Complete Works*, 51.
20. Dionysius *The Celestial Hierarchy* in Lubheid *Complete Works*, 166.
21. Dionysius *The Divine Names* in Lubheid *Complete Works*, 65.
22. *Ibid.*, 53.
23. Dionysius *The Celestial Hierarchy* in Lubheid *Complete Works*, 148.
24. *Ibid.*, 146 ff.
25. Cf. Denys Turner *The Darkness of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 35–38.
26. Dionysius *Letters* in Lubheid *Complete Works*, 282.
27. Dionysius *The Divine Names* in Lubheid *Complete Works*, 50.
28. Dionysius *The Celestial Hierarchy* in Lubheid *Complete Works*, 145.
29. *Ibid.*, 148.
30. *Majjhima Nikaya*, I, 135 in *The Middle Length Sayings*, trans. I. B. Horner (London: Luzac, 1954), 173.
31. Eckhart 'Sermon 27' in *Meister Eckhart*, trans. Raymond Blakney (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1941), 225–226.

32. *Ibid.*, 228.
33. Ibn al-Arabi *The Book of Bezels* (Mahweh NJ and London: Paulist Press, 1990), 92.
34. For the divine biography see, for example, Karen Armstrong *A History of God* (London: Heinemann, 1993).
35. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* 2.2ae.1.2.
36. R. A. Nicholson *The Mystics of Islam* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 88.
37. Some critics have made heavy weather of this use of Kant, and have assumed that I have been engaged in a controversial exercise in Kantian exegesis – recently, for example, Chris Firestone in ‘Kant and religion: conflict or compromise?’, *Religious Studies*, 35 (1999), 151–171. Christopher Insole also, in ‘Why John Hick ...’ at some points makes the same assumption. But I have only borrowed from Kant his basic noumenal/phenomenal distinction, and am well aware that his own epistemology of religion is very different from that which I am recommending. This is something that I have pointed out in the book which Firestone and Insole discuss – *An Interpretation of Religion*, 242–243.
38. *Yogava'sistha*, I, 28.
39. Rowe ‘Religious pluralism’, 146.
40. *Ibid.*, 147–148.
41. *Ibid.*, 149.
42. Rowe says that he does not reject the concept of the ineffable, provided being ineffable just precludes the possession of positive, substantial attributes conceivable by us. He does not allow that ‘non-personal’ is such an attribute. But it seems to me that if we know that the Real is a non-personal reality, we do know something positive and significant about it – for we know that it is such that the theistic religions are basically mistaken in their account of it.
43. Insole ‘Why John Hick ...’.
44. William Alston ‘Realism and the Christian faith’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 38 (1995), 37–60.
45. Insole ‘Why John Hick’, 32.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*, 30.
48. *Ibid.*, 25.
49. Philip Quinn ‘Towards thinner theologies: Hick and Alston on religious diversity’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 38 (1995), 154–164.
50. I am grateful to William Rowe for comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to William Wainwright for helpful discussions of some of the same issues – although neither of them agrees with my own conclusion.