

# Aldersgate Today?

## *The Validity of Religious Experience in a Postmodern Age*

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### Abstract

This essay explores the validity of religious experience today by examining a variety of philosophical perspectives including Modern, Postmodern and critical realist thinkers. Utilising William Alston's detailed analysis of the reliability of sense and mystical perception, the essay questions whether or not the kinds of religious experience, illustrated in the testimony of many historical figures like John Wesley, can still be considered valid in the contemporary world. It also explores how claims to religious experience might be evaluated in relation to other disciplines. Perceived differences between science and religion are examined and suggestions as to how conflicting information, gleaned from the data of sense and mystical perception, might be adjudicated without denigrating either of these important fields of knowledge.

### Keywords

William Alston, Postmodernism, Religious Experience, Science and Religion, Aldersgate, John Wesley

### Introduction

Throughout the centuries, religious experience has played an enormous role in the lives of many Christians. To offer an illustration, on 24 May 1738, John Wesley had a spiritual experience (known affectionately as his Aldersgate experience) in which he came to have



an assurance of the love of God.<sup>1</sup> While philosophical analyses of John Wesley's Aldersgate experience are uncommon this type of religious experience is manifest in a plethora of Christian traditions.<sup>2</sup> The roots of the Azusa Street Revival (9 April 1906) can be traced directly to ideas found within the Methodist tradition.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the relentless expansion of Pentecostalism globally underlines the reality that now, more than ever, religious experience is deemed pivotal to Christian identity.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the idea that religious experience is simply a projection, that a direct experience or perception of God is a fantasy, remains an unexamined *dogma* in many European churches.<sup>5</sup>

Over the last century, the reliability of religious experience has been called into question by Modern and Postmodern thinkers. Whereas logical positivists undermined the probability of empirical knowledge about God, Postmodern thinkers have argued that experience, religious or otherwise, is a projection of our background beliefs onto the particulars of external reality.<sup>6</sup> Utilising the philosophy of William Alston this essay will explore whether or not religious experience, such as the kind illustrated by John Wesley's Aldersgate experience, should be considered viable or whether it is merely the projection of a Christian worldview onto ordinary everyday experiences.<sup>7</sup> At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the use of Alston's terminology 'mystical perception.' The term 'mystical' connotes the perception of a spiritual reality such as the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, a 'mystical perception' may include any supernatural experience including the perception of God. However, here it will be used specifically to refer to Christian religious experience. This construal, as mystical perception, is particularly helpful for our present purposes in that it facilitates comparisons between religious experience and ordinary day-to-day experience insofar as 'mystical perception' maybe considered analogous to 'sense perception' – ordinary (non-mystical) experience. Having introduced this terminology it is useful to examine the way in which philosophers have interpreted the value of sense and mystical perception in both the Modern and Postmodern periods.

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley was not an uneducated man. He had the best university education of his time. However, he did not view religious experience and reason to be incompatible but rather considered true faith (like life itself) to be intellectual and experiential. J. Campbell, *The Pentecostal Holiness Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016) 129–30.

<sup>2</sup> William J. Abraham, *Aldersgate and Athens* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2010), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Tomkins, *John Wesley: A Biography* (Oxford: Lion, 2003), 199.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Jacobson, *The World's Christians* (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2011), 50–51.

<sup>5</sup> William Alston, *Divine Nature Human Language* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 17.

<sup>6</sup> For further discussion see A. J. Ayer, *Language Truth and Logic* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936), 114–15; D. J. Pratt Morris-Chapman, *Nonfoundationalism Considered as a Handmaiden for Theology* (Burbage: William Wathes & Sons, 2007), 23–29.

<sup>7</sup> Sigmund Freud also viewed religious beliefs as projections, 'Cultural fantasies expressed in so-called mystical experiences reflect an attempt to recreate the parent-child symbiotic encounter ... A real stimulus near the person starts a fantasy process in which object relations are projected on it. This [illusion] is the starting point for the creation of ... religion.' B. Beit Hallahmi, 'Object Relations Theory', in E. Dowling and W. Scarlett (eds), *The Encyclopedia of Religious and Spiritual Development* (London: Sage, 2006), 326–27.

## The Reliability of Sense Perception

The idea that religious experience (mystical perception) is an unreliable enterprise was common in the Modern period. Rudolf Carnap, whose work had considerable influence upon logical positivism,<sup>8</sup> divided propositions into two meaningful types: analytic and synthetic.<sup>9</sup> While synthetic (empirical) propositions were verifiable through experience, analytic propositions (such as 'all widows are women') were displayed logically.<sup>10</sup> While he believed the analytic assert nothing about reality, the synthetic could be verified through reference to the world.<sup>11</sup> On the basis of these ideas, logical positivists developed a verification principle which affirmed that 'a factual assertion is one whose truth or falsity makes some experienceable difference.'<sup>12</sup> On this basis these writers argued that the Christian conception of god is dubious because they considered claims about a transcendent deity could not possess any literal significance.<sup>13</sup>

During the postmodern period the confidence that philosophers, like logical positivists, have had in sense perception has been called into question. In his work, *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (1993) Alston explores a variety of different approaches, seeking to determine whether or not there is a non-circular argument for the reliability of normal everyday experience.<sup>14</sup> For example, in order to defend the notion that sense perception is reliable, logical positivists examined the viability of the opposite statement: 'sense

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<sup>8</sup> Carnap tried to show that science was only committed to beliefs that could be defended by reference to sense experience. According to A. J. Ayer, Carnap sought to demonstrate how 'the entire set of concepts needed to describe the world could be constructed' upon experience 'stage by stage', using Bertrand Russell's Logic. For further discussion see A. J. Ayer, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1982), 126; Viktor Kraft, *The Vienna Circle*, trans. by A. Pap (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953). For an example of Russell's approach to Logic see Alfred N. Whitehead and Bertrand Russell, *Principia Mathematica* (Cambridge: University Press, 1910); Rudolf Carnap, *The Logical Structure of the World*, trans. by R. George (Chicago, Illinois: Open Court, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Uebel, 'Rudolf Carnap: The Logical Structure of the World', in J. Shand (ed.), *The Twentieth Century Central Works of Philosophy: Moore to Popper* (Chesham: Acumen Publishing, 2006), 111–29 (117).

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Kuklick, *A History of Philosophy in America* (Oxford: University Press, 2000), 234.

<sup>11</sup> John Macquarrie, *God-Talk: An examination of the language and logic of theology* (London: SCM, 1967), 105–6.

<sup>12</sup> John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, INC, 1973), 86; Macquarrie, *God-Talk*, 106. Any propositions that fall outside the aforementioned are considered meaningless. Therefore, according to this theory, ethics, metaphysics and theology are literally non sense. For example, Ayer examines whether the statement 'god exists' has any meaning: 'what are the premises from which the existence of such a god could be deduced...these premises must be certain...But we know that no empirical proposition can ever be anything more than probable. It is only a priori propositions that are logically certain. But we cannot deduce the existence of a god from an a priori proposition. For we know that the reason why a priori propositions are certain is that they are tautologies ... It follows that there is no possibility of demonstrating the existence of a god.' A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2nd edition (New York: Dover Books, 1957), 114–15.

<sup>13</sup> Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 115. In response to this John Hick argued that god's existence was verifiable eschatologically, in the sense that after death we will know (if we can know) if god is real. John Hick, 'Theology and Verification', in B. Mitchell (ed.), *The Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: University Press, 1971), 53–71 (60–61).

<sup>14</sup> A circular argument (*circulus in probando*) is a logical fallacy because it begins with what it is trying to end with. B. H. Dowden, *Logical Reasoning* (Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth, 1993), 4.

perception is not reliable.<sup>15</sup> Adhering to their verification principle<sup>16</sup> they argued that, since there is no way to confirm the validity of the statement 'sense perception is unreliable' experientially (empirically), the statement is meaningless. Therefore they concluded that there is no empirical (experiential) basis for rejecting the reliability of sense perception. They thus argued that there is no alternative to accepting the reliability of sense perception. However, the problem with this argument is the verification principle itself. The verification principle assumes sense perception to be reliable. The verification principle - which argues that the only meaningful statements are those which can be verified experientially - is assuming the reliability of our senses. Put another way, it is impossible to prove the reliability of our senses using a principle which assumes the reliability of our senses. There is no point in defending the reliability of experience using experience.<sup>17</sup>

Alston also explores a variety of other arguments. For example, it could be argued that sense perception is reliable because it has a good 'track record.' However, to determine whether a large number of beliefs produced by sense perception are true it would be necessary at some point to rely on sense perception. Alston thus concludes that the argument is a circular one.<sup>18</sup> Another approach might be to argue that sense perception proves itself by its fruits - in that it provides information that enables us to form generalizations which scientists can successfully use.<sup>19</sup> However, Alston points out that, if it is sense perception that enables us to conclude that we have been successful then this argument is also circular.<sup>20</sup> A slightly different strategy might be to argue that sense perception is reliable because it has been developed over a long period of human evolution. Hence sense perception must be reliable because it is the result of natural selection. Thus, while a species with unreliable sense perception would likely perish,<sup>21</sup> the human species has flourished. The problem here is this: the theory of evolution is based

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<sup>15</sup> This negative rendering of the argument is useful. As time passed, the Verificationist principle evolved into that of Falsification. However, both formulations consider that meaningfulness is dependent upon whether something can be verified or falsified (confirmed or disconfirmed) empirically. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 2002), 18.

<sup>16</sup> As noted above, the logical positivists upheld a 'verification principle': all meaningful statements must have a basis in experience. Thus, statements that are not verifiable experientially (empirically) are meaningless.

<sup>17</sup> Alston also explores the cogency of another a priori argument - that of Immanuel Kant. For example, Kant argued that human concepts such as causality are applicable to the objects of sense perception. Kant's (Transcendental Deduction) thesis is that experience is only possible because we apply concepts such as causality to the objects to the things we experience in sense perception. However, there is still a problem because, even if sense perception presents objects to be causally connected, this does not prove that sense perception is necessarily reliable. Alston, *Reliability*, 30-32, 57-58; Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), 220 (A85/B117).

<sup>18</sup> William Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 13-15.

<sup>19</sup> For example, by using sense perception we can determine that when chicken is frozen it lasts longer than when it is hot. This knowledge, gained from sense perception, can be used to control the condition of our food.

<sup>20</sup> Alston, *Reliability*, 22-23.

<sup>21</sup> Willard V. O. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 126.

upon empirical data gained from sense perception.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the argument that sense perception is reliable because it is the product of evolution is circular because the theory of evolution was developed using sense perception. The arguments validity relies upon the assumption of what it is supposed to establish.<sup>23</sup>

## An Appropriate Attitude to Sense Perception

After examining a variety of approaches to the question of the reliability of sense perception Alston concludes that, unless a more robust alternative is presented, there is no non-circular demonstration of its reliability.<sup>24</sup> This conclusion raises the following question: what would constitute a realistic attitude towards sense perception – given the difficulty of finding a cogent non-circular defence of its reliability? It is clear that, regardless of the problem of the reliability of sense perception, we are (by nature) powerfully disposed to forming beliefs on the basis of sense perception. This makes scepticism, or the postponement of any beliefs which are not certain, unworkable. Humankind would not survive if people ignored the information delivered by sense perception. If when crossing the street I see a motorcycle hurtling towards me but decide that, since I have no non-circular proof of the reliability of sense perception, I will not move any quicker than it is likely I will be run over. A total abstention from forming beliefs on the basis of sense perception would be suicidal (intellectually and practically). What then is a sensible response to the philosophical scepticism engendered by the realization that there is no non-circular argument for the reliability of sense perception?<sup>25</sup>

## Thomas Reid

The Scottish Common Sense Philosopher, Thomas Reid offers a sensible solution to this dilemma. Reid argued that, rather than languishing in scepticism, it is better to accept that we cannot function without trusting (*prima facie*) in the general reliability of our basic belief-forming faculties like sense perception, memory, introspection and so on. Put simply, our human cognitive condition does not permit us to go beyond these fundamental faculties in order to determine their reliability. We cannot take a single intellectual step without engaging in one of these basic belief-forming faculties.<sup>26</sup>

Following Reid, Alston rejects the idea that we must be dubious about these basic belief-forming faculties until they have an external source of validation (guilty until proven innocent). Instead, like Reid, he concludes that we must take all our normal belief-forming

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<sup>22</sup> Quite apart from misunderstanding the theory of evolution, for natural selection does not necessarily preserve the best aspects of surviving species, the theory is guilty of circularity.

<sup>23</sup> Alston, *Reliability*, 23–24.

<sup>24</sup> There is not space to survey all of these approaches here. For further discussion see Alston, *Reliability*.

<sup>25</sup> Alston, *Reliability*, 115–19.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Reid, *The Works of Thomas Reid* (Edinburgh: Maclachlan & Stewart, 1846), 183.

faculties to be innocent until proven guilty. Beliefs resulting from these faculties can be regarded as trustworthy pending an examination of the possible reasons for their ineligibility. This does not mean we give sense perception a blank cheque merely because we trust its results *prima facie*. For example, if after drinking heavily, a person believes they see a lorry coming towards them but their companion, who has not drunk anything alcoholic, does not; we can say that the initial perception of the lorry was mistaken. Alston's point here is that relevant considerations can help us to evaluate retrospectively whether or not an initial perception or belief resulting from sense perception is valid.<sup>27</sup> Having explored the reliability of sense perception it is now necessary to examine the reliability of mystical perception in a Postmodern age.

### The Reliability of Religious Experience in a Postmodern Age

Alston is not alone in questioning the reliability of sense perception. A number of Postmodern thinkers have also questioned whether or not sense perception can provide a reliable link with external reality.<sup>28</sup> For example, Richard Rorty has argued that we project our antecedent conceptual knowledge onto our experience.<sup>29</sup> Hence, when we view a red object, we project the concept of redness onto the object. The point being that, if we did not already have a concept of redness we would not acquire redness from looking at the object. Thus, our experience of reality requires us to have antecedent conceptual knowledge (redness) as a precondition because we project our conceptual schemes onto reality.<sup>30</sup> However, while it is clear that our background beliefs play a very important role in our experience of reality, it does not necessarily follow from this that experience offers nothing more than a projection of our background beliefs onto reality.

### Mystical and Sense Perception according to the Theory of Appearing

In his work *Perceiving God* Alston maintains that it is helpful to think of religious experience (mystical perception) in a similar way to that of sense perception. He understands both sense perception and mystical perception in terms of a (revived) form of the 'Theory of Appearing.'<sup>31</sup> On Alston's understanding this theory holds that:

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<sup>27</sup> Alston, *Reliability*, 120–30.

<sup>28</sup> For further discussion see Pratt Morris-Chapman, *Nonfoundationalism*, 25.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: University Press, 1979), 182–83.

<sup>30</sup> Pratt Morris-Chapman, *Nonfoundationalism*, 25–29.

<sup>31</sup> William Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 9. In its early formulation this theory was not without its opponents. However, this understanding of perception has been revived by later writers. For further discussion see William Alston, 'Back to the Theory of Appearing', *Philosophical Perspectives* (1999), 181–203; F. Jackson, *Perception* (Cambridge: University Press, 1977); Roderick Chisholm, 'The Theory of Appearing', in M. Black (ed.), *Philosophical Analysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1950); Hugh Price, *Perception* (London: Methuen, 1932).

... what perception *is* is the awareness of something's appearing to one *as such-and-such*, where there is a basic, unanalyzable relationship; not reducible to conceptualizing an object as such-and-such, or to judging or believing the object to be such-and-such.<sup>32</sup>

To give an example, in sense perception, when we open our eyes we are presented with objects. In the same way, people who describe religious experiences often recount being directly aware of God perceptually. They contrast this to thinking or reasoning about God. Therefore, like sense perception, mystical perception entails some sort of an experience in which an object (God) is presented to the person in a way similar to when physical objects are presented in sense perception. Thus, in the same way that seeing an object differs from thinking about it or forming mental images of it (etc)<sup>33</sup> so the Mystical Perception of an object (God) differs from thinking or forming mental images about it.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps Wesley's Aldersgate (24 May 1738) experience can help illustrate the difference between forming mental images about God and perceiving God. Wesley says that:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.<sup>35</sup>

Here Wesley reports that something was 'strangely' presented to him. While he conceptualises this presentation as Divine 'assurance' it is apparent that he believes something has been 'strangely' presented to his experience. This is a man who, previously, had understood the concept of divine acceptance mentally. Now he experienced a presentation of something which, to him, felt like what he had understood Divine acceptance to be.

## The Nature of Mystical Perception

Alston considers that a direct perception occurs in religious experience. People consider that something, God, has been directly presented to them in the same way in which objects are presented to them in sense perception. They consider themselves to have had a direct awareness of God.<sup>36</sup> Looking at different accounts of religious experience,<sup>37</sup> Alston notes that God is often experienced as being: 1) Good, 2) Powerful, 3) Loving, 4) Compassionate,

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<sup>32</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> What distinguishes perception from abstract thought is that an object is directly presented or immediately present to the subject. Alston, *Perceiving*, 21.

<sup>34</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 14–15.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Jackson (ed.), *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley in 14 Volumes* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872), Vol. I, 103–4.

<sup>36</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 37–38.

<sup>37</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 43–44.

5) Wise (etc.). He also notes what God is generally experienced as doing things like: 1) Speaking, 2) Forgiving, 3) Strengthening, 4) Sympathising (etc.).

These concepts are not something that could be conveyed from the phenomenal appearance of the object in perception. They are clearly concepts. However, Alston considers that, in describing the appearance of God as being 'loving' they are saying something like: I was aware of an object which presented the kind of appearance it would be reasonable to expect God to present. In effect the person, who already has a conceptual understanding of what they believe God to be like, is being presented with an object that indicates the presence of God to them. Thus, while they are clearly using concepts, it does not follow that an object, God, did not appear to them.<sup>38</sup>

### The Role Played by our Conceptual Schemes

There is a difference that needs to be highlighted here. Many philosophers argue that our background conceptual beliefs always play a part in perception. While it is clear that perceptual beliefs work in partnership with the general conceptual stock contained in our background beliefs it must be stressed here that this is not necessarily the case. For Alston, it is possible for simple perceptual beliefs to be entirely based upon the presentation of an object. Thus, if I believe that  $x$  is  $\varphi$  because I had an experience in which  $x$  was presented to me as  $\varphi$  then that experience in and of itself impacts upon my beliefs. Nevertheless, Alston acknowledges that predicates applied to God in mystical perception often extend far beyond the information gleaned from perception.<sup>39</sup>

Thus, it could be argued that people who report having mystical perception are (all mad) simply confused about the phenomenological character of their experience. It could be argued that, because of their theological assumptions, they mistook a powerful emotional experience for a direct experience of God. This of course is conceivable. An individual may confuse a strong emotional experience as being a direct awareness of God. Nevertheless, even if an individual's description of the phenomenology of an experience is not infallible their perception that something was presented to them is likely to be accurate – even if their identification and conceptualisation is not. The point here is that a distinction needs to be made between two different things: 1) objects present themselves to our perception and, 2) a phenomenological account of the objects presentation.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, the same point can be made about sense perception. In both mystical perception and sense perception we apply concepts to external objects which go beyond anything presented in the initial perception. If I am presented with something that appears to be a cat, and I apply the concept cat to it, I am presuming that the appearance is a reliable sign of the object being a cat. However, the question remains as to how I learned

<sup>38</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 78–79, 81–82, 93.

<sup>40</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 40.



that this object ('cat') appears in this way? If I am unable to demonstrate how I can reliably connect concepts (such as 'cat') to the objects of sense perception then I am not justified in drawing the conclusion that the object which appears to be a cat is in fact a cat. In short, sense perception has the same problem as mystical perception.<sup>41</sup>

### Is Mystical Perception A Source of New Information?

If the possibility of mystical perception is accepted, some may still question if it offers us new information – whether it gives us anything that we don't believe already. This question can be reframed in the following way: *Does mystical perception offer us anything new or does it simply apply presupposed religious beliefs on to experience?*<sup>42</sup> First it is helpful to split this question into two separate parts: 1) Does mystical perception simply project antecedent beliefs onto experience? 2) Does mystical perception offer any new information? The first part of the question has been discussed above and it is a question that can easily be applied to sense perception too. When we perceive objects we usually, but not exclusively, make use of background beliefs. Alston argues that, while this is generally the case, it does not prevent us from perceiving reality or gaining new information about it. The truth that one possesses concepts which are used to clarify a perception does not rule out the idea that new information is gained from that perception.

The second part of the question is particularly interesting. Even though our conceptual frameworks (whether theological or otherwise) aid us in perception, is it not likely that the converse is also true – that perception plays some role in enabling people and societies to modify their concepts (and even acquire new ones)? For example, the perception may add a new dimension to the beliefs already in ones possession. Likewise, the perception can offer confirmation, at a given moment, of the presence of the object perceived (such as the perception that my bicycle is still in front of the house – not stolen). Thus, when I pray I may get the sense that God loves me – I may already believe God is loving, but I now have information that God is presently loving and, moreover, that God loves me. In summary, we can say that mystical perception offers new information which complements background conceptual beliefs, this includes: (i) information about how God relates to us individually, (ii) confirmation of beliefs we already hold and (iii) new insights into the beliefs we already hold.<sup>43</sup>

### Evaluating the Authenticity of a Religious Experience

None of the above is intended to suggest that anything goes or that claims to Divine truth ought always to go unchallenged. Provided there is no good reason to the contrary, a

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<sup>41</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 47–48.

<sup>42</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 205–6.

<sup>43</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 206–7.

mystical perception is (*prima facie*) justified.<sup>44</sup> However, it is clear that religious traditions do have procedures (overrides) for checking whether or not a mystical perception or theological belief is authentic. For example, in mystical perception, our procedures for checking a particular perceptual belief make use of the theological tradition within which we are situated. Thus, a perceptual report can be checked against the background system of beliefs within the religious tradition in question.<sup>45</sup> For example: if a Methodist Pastor states that they have received a vision from God telling them to redefine marriage so as to incorporate polygamy (so that they can marry several people at once) members within the church might say: ‘that doesn’t sound like the sort of thing Methodist Pastors are supposed to say ... the doctrinal standards outlined in the Deed of Union would not support you in doing this ... Are you sure that is what you heard God say?’ Therefore, when there are claims to revelation which appear to contradict the general tenor of scripture and tradition as a whole it is likely that established conclusions (the result of an accumulation of mystical perceptual data over time) are more reliable. In short, on this view, one would heed more widely accepted beliefs and norms whenever unorthodox perceptual claims are made. On the other hand, a checking procedure of this kind not only serves to disqualify unorthodox perceptual beliefs, it can also confirm genuine ones. For example if I have a sense that I am loved by God then, when this is tested against the general consensus of religious experience in my tradition, it will be confirmed.

### Internal Checking Procedures for Mystical Perception

It might be argued here that the overrides (checking procedures) for mystical perception are not objective in that they are internal to the religious tradition in which the person is a part. This is an interesting objection. It indicates that the scriptures and the tradition (for example the doctrinal standards of the Methodist church contained in the Deed of Union) are not objective documents but are rather documents that are themselves (directly or indirectly) the result of religious experience. Thus it may be argued that our overrides, whatever we know about the conditions that make for accurate or inaccurate perceptions, come to us from perception. Thus, it is true that, our methods for checking perceptual reports are circular – because they rely on mystical perception. This is a powerful objection – but it can equally be made of sense perception.<sup>46</sup> There is no non-circular way of checking the reliability of either of these belief-forming practices.

### When Sense Perception and Mystical Perception Contradict Each Other

There is need for further clarification here, even if sense perception and mystical perception cannot be defended in a non-circular way, a difficulty still remains. What is to be done when

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<sup>44</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 72.

<sup>45</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 210–12.

<sup>46</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 216–17.

two belief-forming practices come into contradiction? For example, what should be done when the results of sense perception seem to oppose the results of mystical perception. Well, using the idea of contradiction, we can conclude that if two belief-forming practices contract each other it is likely that one is at fault somewhere along the line. In such cases it is necessary to check which department of knowledge we are in and to listen carefully to the more established belief-forming practice for that area of knowledge. This is not to say that we abandon mystical perception because one individual scientific author (such as Richard Dawkins) advocates we do so.<sup>47</sup> Many scientists are in fact theists. On the contrary, if (using sense perception) the general consensus of science leans in a particular direction – a direction that appears to contradict an established theological position (resulting from mystical perception) with physical implications – then we need to have another look at that doctrine to see if there are other ways of framing it. This ability to adjust should not render theology void. In most cases a *Via Media* is possible.<sup>48</sup>

### Faith and the Copernican Revolution

Alston highlights an obvious pertinent historical situation at this juncture. At the time of the Copernican revolution it seemed that the understanding of the physical world in the scriptures (understood here as the fruit - over time - of mystical perception)<sup>49</sup> were being contradicted by science (understood here as the fruit – over time – of sense perception). During that period scientists, on the basis of observation (sense perception), came to the conclusion that the sun, not the earth, was at the centre of things. This initially appeared to contradict the view of theologians who, on the basis of scripture (the results of mystical perception), had thought that the earth cannot be moved (Ps. 93.1). What happened? This development in sense perception did not turn the population of Europe to atheism overnight. What did the theologians do? Well, after a period of much tension and confusion, the theologians gradually modified their beliefs – taking the Psalmist to be poetically expressing the truth that the earth has been firmly established by God.<sup>50</sup>

### Faith and Evolution

The same might be said for Evolution. Initially there has been much confusion and tension about how evolution (the result of sense perception) relates to the scriptures (the result of

<sup>47</sup> For further discussion of this position see R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: University Press, 1976); R. Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1996).

<sup>48</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 173.

<sup>49</sup> Here I am indebted to Abraham's observation that Christian doctrine is the fruit of an ongoing accumulation (of the Church's reception) of Divine Revelation over time. For further discussion see William Abraham, *Crossing the Threshold* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 49, 106–7. For further discussion on this see D. J. Pratt Morris-Chapman, 'Canon, Criterion and Circularity: An analysis of the epistemology of canonical theism', *HTS Theologese Studies* 74 (2018), 1–9.

<sup>50</sup> Alston, *Perceiving*, 173.

mystical perception) – particularly in relation to doctrines such as that of the Creation and Fall. With reference to the latter it seems it may be entirely possible to continue to uphold a strain of this theological tenet while accepting evolution. For example, the philosopher Eleonore Stump argues that there are ways of understanding this doctrine which are not incompatible with contemporary understandings of the theory of evolution. For example, formulating the doctrine in the following way, she states that:

...(a) at some time in the past as a result of their own choices human beings altered their nature for the worse, (b) the alteration involved what we perceive and describe as change in the nature of human free will, and (c) the changed nature of the will was inheritable.<sup>51</sup>

There is nothing, as it is presently expounded, in the theory of evolution that entails the falsity of any part of the above (a)–(c). Thus, Stump illustrates a way in which the integrity of the traditional interpretation of this doctrine can be maintained without ignoring developments in science. This does not mean that the theory of evolution is an infallible *dogma* that will forever be certain. As progress has continued since the Copernican revolution so we can expect there to be developments in other areas. Nevertheless, Christians need not fear when these two belief-forming practices appear to contradict one another.<sup>52</sup> If real truth is being presented to us in both sense perception and mystical perception then we need not be afraid to modify our outlook over time.<sup>53</sup> After all, ideological consistency (theological or scientific) at the expense of observation is a marker, not of integrity but, of obstinacy.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> E. Stump, 'The Problem of Evil', *Faith and Philosophy* (1985), 392–423 (402–3).

<sup>52</sup> The comments of J. H. Newman, a contemporary of Darwin, are insightful in this regard: 'It does not seem to me to follow that creation is denied because the Creator, millions of years ago, gave laws to matter. He first created matter and then he created laws for it — laws which should construct it into its present wonderful beauty, and accurate adjustment and harmony of parts gradually. We do not deny or circumscribe the Creator, because we hold he has created the self acting originating human mind, which has almost a creative gift; much less then do we deny or circumscribe His power, if we hold that He gave matter such laws as by their blind instrumentality moulded and constructed through innumerable ages the world as we see it. If Mr Darwin in this or that point of his theory comes into collision with revealed truth, that is another matter — but I do not see that the principle of development, or what I have called construction, does. As to the Divine Design, is it not an instance of incomprehensibly and infinitely marvellous Wisdom and Design to have given certain laws to matter millions of ages ago, which have surely and precisely worked out, in the long course of those ages, those effects which He from the first proposed. Mr Darwin's theory need not then to be atheistical, be it true or not; it may simply be suggesting a larger idea of Divine Prescience and Skill.' Stephen Dessain (ed.), *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman in 32 Volumes* (Oxford: T Nelson, 1961), vol. XXIV, 77.

<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere Alston argues that, whatever language games we engage in, statements about God are true or false regardless of the conceptual packaging we put upon them. William Alston, 'Taking the Curse of Language Games', in T. Tessin and M. Ruhr (eds.), *Philosophy and the Grammar of Religious Belief* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 16–47.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Bai, 'Political World', <https://sports.yahoo.com/news/willing-let-trump-evolve-090022380.html> (accessed 5 February 2017).

## When to consider Science and when to consider Faith?

A further note is necessary here. When science, the results of sense perception, appears to conflict with religion, the results of mystical perception, it is important to check where the apparent disagreement arises. Each of our belief-forming practices is tailored towards a specific object. Sense perception tells us about physical realities and its expertise relates to our knowledge of the physical world. Religious beliefs with clear physical implications (such as those about creation) clearly relate to the results of sense perception and must not obstruct scientific research. Where theologians have given scientists liberty to explore the results of sense perception there have been incredible developments in our understanding and our ability to harness the physical world. As a result of these freedoms, scientific advances have created highly developed technological societies which in turn have made human existence (developments in medicine, technology and so on) much more bearable (particularly in the West). However, in terms of moral questions, it is not necessarily the case that the results of sense perception, Science, is best suited to providing us with answers.<sup>55</sup> Where scientific theories have moral implications it is necessary for other belief-forming practices to be given attention. In this domain, I refer here to questions of moral philosophy (ethics), it is necessary for scientists to accept that they cannot always take the lead (given the nature of their expertise) but rather should heed the results of another belief-forming practice. Thus, we might say that where there are disagreements between sense perception and mystical perception in relation to moral questions, it is not the case that scientists, on the basis of sense perception, should be given an automatic position of pre-eminence. Our societies may be the most technologically advanced in human history – but are they the most moral? Listening to only one belief-forming practice at the expense of another is not a balanced approach to knowledge.<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

Alston's examination of the epistemological weaknesses present in normal experience (sense perception), given the absence of a non-circular defence of its reliability, indicates that some of the prejudices people have had towards religious experience (mystical perception) are unfounded. After all, if we cannot prove sense perception to be reliable, there is no reason philosophically to dismiss mystical perception because we deem it has no non-circular proof of its reliability. While it may well be the case that there is no non-circular proof of its reliability its widespread use by the majority of the world's population (over a prolonged period) indicate that mystical perception is a well established and rational belief forming practice. In short, those who dismiss religious experience (mystical

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<sup>55</sup> For further discussion on these points see John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined And Illustrated In Nine Discourses Delivered To the Catholics of Dublin* (London: Longmans, 1912), 430.

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle writes: 'It is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits.' Cited in Abraham, *Crossing*, 29.

perception) and yet are willing to engage in sense perception betray a prejudice – one that has nothing to do with philosophy or reason.

In addition to the above, while it should be acknowledged that our background beliefs (our language and cultural formation) play an essential part in the way in which we interpret the world around us, the distinction Alston draws between perception and conceptualisation challenge the notion (*dogma*) that religious experience can be reduced to the projection of theological ideas onto ordinary sensory data. On this analysis, religious experience becomes a valid source of information in the present – even if it also entails the use of antecedent conceptual beliefs. Besides, it is clear that these background beliefs do play an important role, and can even be utilised as an internal checking mechanism – offering a procedure through which false claims to revelation can be rebuffed. Moreover, it is argued here that where two belief-forming mechanisms yield contradictory results, it is prudent that the more established practice (in relation to the field of knowledge in question) should be heeded. Using this approach it should be possible to mitigate some of the potential misunderstandings that frequently arise between scientists and the adherents of religion.

In conclusion, having explored some of the philosophical difficulties relating to mystical perception, it is hoped that this paper may go some way toward removing objections towards religious experience. In sum, as John Wesley declared three centuries ago, it is my prayer that ‘all ... may know<sup>57</sup> the love of God.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> W. B. Fitzgerald, *The Roots of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1930), 173.

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