LIGHT OUT OF PLENITUDE: TOWARDS
AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF MYSTICAL INCLUSIVISM

JANUSZ SALAMON

Metropolitan University Prague

Abstract. The question to what extent the putative mystical experiences reported in the variety of religious traditions contribute to the conflict of religious truth claims, appears to be one of the hardest problems of the epistemology of religion, identified in the course of the ongoing debate about the philosophical consequences of religious diversity. A number of leading participants in this debate, including the late W.P. Alston, took a strongly exclusivist stance on it, while being aware that in the light of the long coexistence of seemingly irreconcilable great mystical traditions, mystical exclusivism lacks philosophical justification. In this paper I argue that from the point of view of a theist, inclusivism with respect to the issue whether adherents of different religious traditions can have veridical experience of God (or Ultimate Reality) now, is more plausible than the Alstonian exclusivism. I suggest that mystical inclusivism of the kind I imply in this paper may contribute to the development of cross-cultural philosophy of religion, as well as to the theoretical framework for inter-religious dialogue, because (1) it allows for the possibility of veridical experience of God in a variety of religious traditions, but (2) it avoids the radical revisionist postulates of Hickian pluralism and (3) it leaves open the question whether the creed of any specific tradition is a better approximation to the truth about God than the creeds of other traditions.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the term 'mystical experience of God' designates an experience in which the subject takes herself to have a direct non-sensory perception of God (or of God's presence or God's activity). However, more than being about putative mystical *experiences* of God, this study is focused on *beliefs* about God formed on the basis of alleged mystical experiences of God. More precisely, I will be concerned with the *mystical doxastic practice*

(hereafter 'MDP'), conceived in the manner proposed by William P. Alston (1991), *i.e.* as the cognitive practice of forming beliefs about God on the basis of alleged mystical experiences of God. The beliefs formed in this way will be called 'mystical beliefs' (later 'M-beliefs') about God. I would like the term 'mystical belief' to be understood on analogy with the term 'sense perceptual belief'. As we can call 'sense perceptual belief' a belief that we take to be epistemically warranted in virtue of being properly grounded in some sense perceptual experience, so by 'M-belief' I mean a belief that is supposed to derive its epistemic warrant from the fact of being properly grounded in a (non-sensory) perceptual experience of God.

Among the contemporary philosophers of religion who have addressed the issue of the epistemic status of M-beliefs (*e.g.* Alston 1991; Swinburne 1991; Yandell 1993; Wainwright 1981; Pike 1992; Gellman 1997 and 2001; Franks Davis 1989), there is a widespread agreement that the fact of religious diversity, especially the variety of ways different religious traditions (later 'RTs') describe God, constitutes powerful challenge to the apologists of mysticism. In this paper I want to examine a number of key claims made by the late William P. Alston in his *Perceiving God*, which is justly considered a classic in the field of epistemology of religion, and I will suggest that the exclusivist stance exemplified by Alston does not meet the above challenge, and an inclusivist approach is called for as a more viable option.

I describe the position which I defend in this paper as 'inclusivist', in order to contrast it with the view I will label 'exclusivism'. By exclusivism I mean a view that, either God does not come into experiential contact with adherents of alien RTs (and therefore the beliefs about God taken by representatives of alien RTs to be M-beliefs are never such, because they are not grounded in genuine mystical experiences of God), or, even if God is being experienced in alien RTs, the practice of forming beliefs on the basis of such experiences is, in these RTs, for some reason generally unreliable, *i.e.* it does not yield mostly true beliefs about God.

Inclusivism, as conceived in this study, (1) allows for the possibility of MDP being reliable when exercised in a variety of RTs, but (2) does not imply denying the possibility that the account of God provided by one RT, or a group of doctrinally related RTs (*e.g.* broadly theistic RTs), is a better approximation to the truth about God than the accounts of God found in other RTs. Stress on (1) allows for distinguishing such inclusivism from exclusivism. Stress on (2) allows for distinguishing inclusivism from those pluralistic positions, defended *e.g.* by John Hick (1989) which imply that

all beliefs about God held in various RTs, including beliefs taken by each respective RT to be either based on, or verified by mystical experiences of God, are equally true (in some sense) and epistemically on a par.

I will argue that an inclusivist account of MDP, as outlined here, is a better explanatory account of the reports of mystical experiences of God (later 'mystical reports') coming from a variety of RTs, than an exclusivst account.[1] The main advantage of inclusivism should manifests itself in the fact that, unlike exclusivism, it allows for an adequate response to a number of concerns, crucial to any satisfactory (from the point of view of a theist) epistemological assessment of mysticism. Among them are: (a) saving the reliability of MDP in the face of the Conflicting Truth Claims Challenge (later 'CTCC'); (b) providing a hypothesis that would explain both similarities *and* differences in the mystical reports coming from various RTs, without discarding too much of the available data; (c) taking into account metaphysical and epistemological complexities involved in the idea of 'experiencing God'; (d) objecting to the revisionist approach to mystical experience proposed by the anti-realists, which apparently dismisses some

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[1] One needs to notice that given the understanding of MDP as a practice of forming beliefs on the basis of mystical experience *of God*, a positive answer to the question whether MDP as exercised in the context of both theistic and non-theistic RTs can be generally reliable, does imply that some mystics from non-theistic RTs can be justified in holding some M-beliefs *about God*. As the question is asked and answered *by a theist*, for MDP to be reliable in the context of non-theistic RTs, it must be the case that it is the God which a theist believes in, that is both the object of the non-theist's mystical experience and the object of a non-theist's M-beliefs. The *meaning* of the terms that some Eastern mystics may use to name the object of their mystical experiences may be too different from the meaning a Western theist ascribes to 'God', to allow for a Western theist's identification of the object of an Eastern mystic's experience as the God of Western theism. However, it will suffice to assume that the terms used by the theist and the non-theist to name the object of the non-theist's experience have the *same reference*. Such assumption can be made without imposing anything which would be unacceptable for Western or Eastern RTs, because, while using the term 'God', we can substitute for the conception of God, which is not common to all RTs, the conception of an Ultimate Reality as the ultimate source or ground of all else, which is common to Eastern and Western RTs. Such a contention is supported *e.g.* by the way F. X. Clooney & H. Nicholson characterize the mainstream Hindu conception of Ultimate Reality: "Ultimate Reality might be described as follows: that which cannot be surpassed; that from which all realities, persons, and things come, that on which they depend . . . In the theistic traditions that most distinctively characterize Hindu thinking, this Ultimate Reality is personal, can be invoked by one or more proper names, and can choose to become accessible in perceptible form" (Clooney & Nicholson 2001, 95-96).

of the most fundamental claims made by mystics themselves about the nature of their experiences of God.

To show that it is possible to accept an inclusivist account of MDP, without undermining the efforts of various theistic philosophers to secure the epistemic reliability of MDP as such, is an essential part of the present project. Hence, the arguments provided by the acclaimed authors who are sympathetic to the idea that some people have had veridical mystical experiences of God, will constitute the background of my own argument, which is meant to supplement rather than to challenge their overall approach. This will be especially true with regard to Alston's defence of the reliability of MDP. Revising the Alstonian account of MDP, I will suggest that construing MDP as a single doxastic practice, reliable across a variety of RTs, allows for a more satisfactory response to CTCC.

My response to the critic of mysticism will be centered on the suggestion that although overall accounts of God found in different RTs may be and often are incompatible, M-beliefs about God as the object of mystical experiences do not have to come into direct conflict (the beliefs that do conflict are not M-beliefs).

My argument will proceed as follows. Firstly, I will reject W.P. Alston's exclusivist account of MDP. I will suggest that the reasons he provides for taking there to be many conflicting MDPs rather than one universal MDP ('universal' in this context meaning 'common to all RTs') are insufficient. Then I will show that individuating plurality of MDPs does not allow for a satisfactory response to CTCC, while by allowing of there being just one universal MDP it is possible to conceive an inclusivist account of MDP. Finally, I will make a suggestion how, granting an inclusivist account of MDP, the presence of apparently incompatible beliefs about God implied in some mystical reports coming from various RTs may be explained without denying the general reliability of MDP as exercised in the variety of RTs. I will conclude that CTCC does not endanger the reliability of MDP as accounted for in an inclusivist manner.

A CRITIQUE OF ALSTON'S CONSTRUAL
OF MYSTICAL DOXASTIC PRACTICE

In his *Perceiving God*, William P. Alston arrives at an account of mystical doxastic practice which has clearly exclusivist consequences, as far as religious diversity is concerned. Crucial in this respect are Alston's contentions that we cannot individuate a single universal MDP reliable across various mystical traditions, but that each RT has its own distinct MDP which is incompatible with the analogical practices of other RTs (the claim I reject), *and* that there can only be one epistemically reliable mystical doxastic practice (the claim I support).

Alston's motivation for being an exclusivist is that MDP as exercised in at least some alien RTs seems to yield beliefs about God that are mostly false (*i.e.* heterodox from the point of view of the exclusivist under consideration). An exclusivist may think that allowing for MDP being generally reliable in alien RTs would amount to giving credibility to an account of God that the exclusivist takes to be false (*e.g.* an account of God as non-personal).

Alston's understanding of mystical experience of God as 'a perception of God', while providing ground for a strong argument in favour of the veridicality of at least some mystical experiences, invites a formulation of CTCC that makes it the most powerful challenge to the reliability of MDP. The critic of mysticism can say that even if there is no way to *prove* that MDP as such cannot be reliable, and even if beliefs about God (usually grounded *also* in scriptural revelation, philosophical reflection, reports of miracles, and religious authority) held in each individual RT appear to be in full harmony with deliverances of MDP as exercised *within this particular* RT, still the very existence of a plurality of RTs, each with its own belief system about God (which supposedly includes M-beliefs) that appears incompatible with the belief systems of other RTs, calls into question the reliability of MDP as exercised in *each* competing RT.

I suggest that this line of criticism can be rejected, and it can be done in a more effective way than that proposed by Alston. Thus the first point to be made is that Alston's attempt at securing the reliability of MDP in the face of CTCC (and that is his central concern) is simply unsuccessful. Its failure depends largely on the way Alston *individuates*[2] MDP.

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[2] Due to stylistic considerations I will speak about 'individuation' and 'individuating' mystical doxastic practice(s), aware that it would perhaps be more precise to speak of 'deciding about there being' one or many MDPs.

Alston's *Perceiving God* is an extensive defence of what he calls the 'mystical perceptual practice', by which he means, the practice of forming beliefs about the Ultimate on the basis of putative direct experiential awareness thereof (*PG*, 103, 258). This initial formulation is specified by a proposal to understand this practice as one among other 'doxastic practices', like sense perception, memory, deductive reasoning, inductive reasoning, rational intuition, or the forming of beliefs on the basis of the testimony of others. By a doxastic practice Alston means "the exercise of a system or constellation of belief-forming habits or mechanisms, each realizing a function that yields beliefs with a certain kind of content from inputs of a certain type" (*PG*, 155). This involves "a family of ways of going from grounds – doxastic and experiential, and perhaps others – to a belief with a certain content" (*PG*, 100, 153).

Alston's main thesis is that "a person can become justified in holding certain kinds of beliefs about God by virtue of perceiving God as being or doing so-and-so" (*PG*, 1). In a different place Alston formulates this thesis as follows: "The experience (or, as I prefer to say, the 'perception') of God provides *prima facie* epistemic justification for beliefs about what God is doing or how God is 'situated' vis-a-vis one at the moment')".

On Alston's account, in the last analysis, a person is justified in holding certain M-beliefs (as I call them) about God if MDP is reliable, *i.e.* it can be relied on to yield mostly true beliefs. Thus to support his main thesis Alston needs to show that MDP is epistemically reliable. It is my contention that by failing to respond adequately to the challenge posed by religious diversity, Alston makes his defense of the epistemic reliability of MDP not entirely convincing. It is only by revising this that he would be able to make an effective argument in favour of the evidential value of mystical experience.

Before discussing the issue of what we should accept as the basis for individuation of doxastic practices, Alston firmly asserts:

> A doxastic practice has only 'conceptual' reality. It proves convenient for one or another theoretical purpose to group particular mechanisms into larger aggregations, but a 'practice' is not something with an objective reality that constrains us to do the grouping in a certain way. [. . .] I am assuming that any plausible mode of individuation will group mechanisms into a single practice only if there are marked similarities in inputs and functions, but that still leaves us considerable latitude (*PG*, 165).

In other words, Alston admits that inputs and input-output functions (and he could add outputs too, as he does on other occasions) *are* grounds for the

individuation of practices, however he finds them insufficient. In what sense could they be insufficient? The relevant paragraphs of *Perceiving God* suggest that Alston is unhappy with the degree of arbitrariness in individuating doxastic practices that this approach allows for. For example, he considers the range of inputs of sense perceptual doxastic practice (later SPDP) and concludes that it is not easy to see why we should individuate SPDP as one doxastic practice, rather than as a separate visual-perceptual practice, along with an auditory-perceptual practice, and so on; each sensory modality would seem to provide sufficient ground for determining yet another separate doxastic practice. This example is meant to support Alston's thesis that "there is no one uniquely right way to group mechanisms into practices" (*PG*, 165). But then, if Alston is right in claiming that we are not decisively constrained by any objective reality in individuating doxastic practices in just one way, but are free to group belief forming mechanisms into practices in the way that is "convenient for one or another theoretical purpose" (*PG*, 165), why should we worry about a certain 'latitude' that individuating of doxastic practice primarily on the basis of inputs and outputs supposedly leaves us with? If we can point to an important theoretical purpose for which a certain way of individuating doxastic practices will be convenient (*e.g.* our purpose of showing that it is plausible to individuate just one MDP), do we need any further justification of our choice to do so? And besides, once Alston admits that individuating doxastic practices in a particular way is always to some extent arbitrary, he has to provide strong reasons to justify his insistence on individuating MDPs in the way he thinks is appropriate (namely along the borderlines of the World religions).

More importantly, it is not obvious that Alston is right in claiming that we are *not* constrained by any objective reality in individuating doxastic practices in just one way. Does Alston's above example, supposedly showing the possibility of individuating a number of perceptual doxastic practices, really show that in attending to the inputs of belief forming mechanisms we don't find decisive constraints on the individuation of doxastic practices? One could argue to the contrary, that this example shows that by attending to inputs alone, we find natural (*i.e.* non-arbitrary) groupings of belief forming mechanisms into practices with somewhat vague borders in such a way that some doxastic practices have other doxastic practices as natural parts. Perhaps Alston gives too much weight to the apparent vagueness of the borders between doxastic practices. We need to notice that this vagueness may be seen as a result of our imperfect knowledge of the workings of belief forming mechanisms, rather than as characterizing their objective

reality. Perhaps if we knew perfectly well all the input-output functions of all doxastic practices, we might be able to see that on this ground we can individuate each doxastic practice quite precisely without latitude or vagueness. Thus our present inability (due to our limited knowledge) to point to the one and only right way of individuating doxastic practices, does not exclude the possibility that we may be able to individuate them in the way that is arguably closest to the natural way of individuating them, *i.e.* the way that is least arbitrary.

After concluding that individuation of doxastic practices on the ground of similarities in inputs, outputs, and in the function that connects inputs and outputs, would not be satisfactory, Alston seeks additional reasons for grouping certain belief forming mechanisms in one doxastic practice. One such reason is that practices as typically individuated are usually highly homogeneous with respect to epistemic reliability (*PG*, 166-167). When we compare deductive reasoning, memory or formation of beliefs on the basis of the testimony of others, they clearly appear to have very different levels of homogeneity with respect to epistemic reliability. No doubt, this homogeneity can be seen as confirming that certain ways of individuating doxastic practices are more natural than others. However, probably against Alston's wishes, homogeneity with respect to epistemic reliability can be seen as a factor which supports the claim that we should individuate a *single* universal MDP rather than a plurality of MDPs, as Alston prefers. After all, it is hard to see any compelling reasons for thinking that Christian MDP betrays any difference in homogeneity with respect to epistemic reliability when compared with Jewish MDP or Muslim MDP. I would suggest that MDP taken as one universal doxastic practice appears to be highly homogenous in this respect, and such homogeneity should be expected given that irrespectively of RT, it seems to deal with the same subject matter (*i.e.* Ultimate Reality as an object of experience), and has similar input, output, and input-output functions (as Alston agrees). Thus homogeneity with respect to epistemic reliability does not appear to be a good basis for an argument in favour of Alston's way of individuating a plurality of MDPs, rather than just one universal MDP.

Finally, Alston points to the 'overrider system' of a doxastic practice as a possible ground for its individuation. It is primarily on this ground that Alston's individuates a plurality of MDPs (and this move, I will suggest, is responsible for Alston's failure to respond to CTCC, and puts him, in the last analysis, in the exclusivist camp.)

For Alston, the concept of *prima facie* justification can be applied only when we have an overrider system. He conceives an overrider system

as a regulating mechanism which allows for deciding whether a *prima facie* justified belief ought to be accepted, all things considered. It is primarily a belief system about the specific subject matter, against which a particular *prima facie* justified belief can be checked (*PG*, 167, 262). As MDP and SPDP (sense perceptual doxastic practice) deal with distinctive subject matters, their overrider systems are likely to constitute two markedly different sets of beliefs. The overrider system for SPDP will be made up largely of beliefs about facts concerning the perceivable physical and social environment, while the overrider system for MDP will need to be made up of beliefs about facts concerning God and God's relations to the Universe. Possessing different overrider systems makes doxastic practices autonomous, because the outputs of one doxastic practice are tested against the background of the overrider system specific to this particular practice, and not any other. For this reason (and because he thinks that other grounds are not sufficient), Alston suggests that the difference in the overrider systems should be considered the chief basis for individuating different doxastic practices.

On this basis Alston argues for the impossibility of there being a single MDP with a single overrider system. He does not deny that there are often important commonalities in the ways mystics in different RTs describe their religious experiences, which could suggest that inputs and outputs of MDP as exercised in various RTs are often similar. Still, Alston asserts that it is not clear that in the inter-religious context these commonalities are significant enough to justify individuating only one universal MDP on this ground (*PG*, 185-186). More importantly, comparing MDP with SPDP, Alston points out that though they both have a number of common features that are typical of a doxastic practice (notably, its social establishment and transmission, as well as its ability to be mutually involved with other recognized practices in belief production), there are at least two important differences between them that make it impossible to conceive MDP as a single practice, in the way SPDP is a single practice. These are, lack of a single conceptual scheme and lack of a single overrider system in MDP conceived as a single doxastic practice.

This is one of Alston's central claims about MDP, which I wish to challenge (along with his claim that inputs and outputs cannot provide sufficient basis for individuating MDP). What are Alston's reasons for thinking that there can be no one conceptual scheme in MDP conceived as a single doxastic practice? Alston argues that even if we grant that in the case of SPDP we cannot exclude the possibility that perhaps in some uncivilized cultures (as

some anthropologists suggest) people conceptualize sensory input in ways somewhat different from us (*e.g.* perceiving inanimate nature as animated), this would be nothing in comparison with the diversity of conceptual schemes found in various religions. Alston writes:

> The ways in which theists, Hinayana Buddhists, Mahayana Buddhists, and Hindus of one or another stripe think of the objects of their worship (and of what they take to be Ultimate Reality) differ enormously. [. . .] There are also differences in the ways God is conceived in the different theistic religions, but they seem like family squabbles compared to the differences between all of them and the non-theistic religions. Thus if the use of a uniform conceptual scheme, with only minor deviations, is required for a single doxastic practice, we will have to deny that there is any single MP. We will have to distinguish as many MPs as there are different conceptual schemes for grasping Ultimate Reality (*PG*, 189).

Alston adds to this the following comment:

> I must ask the reader's indulgence for the extremely crude nature of my appeals to the comparative study of religions. I am concerned only to make the point that there is diversity in certain respects, and therefore I need not go into the careful distinction of, *e.g.* different forms of Hinduism that would be required for a different purpose.

On the same page, putting Hinduism and Buddhism on a par, Alston asserts:

> If Christianity has the right line on Ultimate Reality, the others are wrong. In that case, either Hinduism and Buddhism have no real subject matter [what beliefs are about] at all, or they have the same subject matter as Christianity, but it is incorrectly characterized.

These views of Alston's invite criticism. Above all, Alston plays down perhaps too easily the importance of attending to details when it comes to conceptions of Ultimate Reality to be found in Eastern religions. The abundant literature on Hindu monotheism[3] should have prevented him from putting Hinduism and Buddhism on a par and from making such a sharp contrast

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[3] Regarding Hindu monotheism see *e.g.*, Clooney 1996 (ch. 2-3); Clooney 2001 (ch. 3); Sharma 1990 (ch. 1); Sharma 1995 (ch. 1).

between Western and Eastern religions in general. Alston's contention that the differences in the way God is conceived in the Western religions seem like family squabbles, when compared with the differences between Western and Eastern religions, is controversial, taking into account that not only does the Hindu Dvaita Vedanta of Madhava embrace a clearly theistic conception of God, but the Visistadvaita Vedanta of Ramanuja also allows for a theistic interpretation.[4] This is even more obvious when one considers Sikhism.[5] A Muslim may consider the Christian conception of God (as Trinity) further removed from his own, than the conception of God embraced by a Hindu Madhva or a Sikh. R.Z. Zaehner (1957, p. 205), an authority (even though not uncontroversial) on Hindu mysticism, wrote: "Hinduism has its theists as well as its monists; and the Bhagavad-Gita as well as Ramanuja stand nearer to St. John of the Cross than they do to Sankara." So perhaps the conceptions of God to be found in various World religions are not always as significantly different as Alston seems to think.

To this objection Alston could respond that this does not matter too much, as after all his argument against the possibility of individuating a single MDP is negative in nature: so long as there is no *one* 'conceptual scheme for grasping Ultimate Reality' common to mystics from *all* RTs, there can be no single MDP. But on what ground does Alston really base his claim that mystics from various RTs do not use one conceptual scheme to grasp Ultimate Reality in mystical experience? Apparently on the ground that at least some strands of some Eastern RTs' *conceptions* of Ultimate Reality can be found that are impossible to reconcile with the Christian or Jewish conception of God. I would suggest that from the fact that different conceptions of Ultimate Reality are to be found in various RTs it does not follow that mystics from these traditions use different conceptual schemes for grasping Ultimate Reality, especially *when having a mystical experience*.

Firstly, different subjects *can* have (broadly) the same conceptual scheme in relation to the same subject matter and make different claims within the same conceptual scheme. This may be especially true in the case of MDP, due to the highly specific subject matter, *i.e.* Ultimate Reality. Mystics from various MDPs can make different and sometimes conflicting truth claims about the (common) object of their mystical experiences for reasons that are not necessarily associated with the concep-

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[4] This claim finds support in Srinivasachari 1946, 579-600; Zaehner 1969 (ch. 4); Bradby 2003, 61-5.

[5] Cf. Cole & Sambhi 1993, 25-40.

tual scheme employed. In fact, the popularity of CTCC shows that many critics of mysticism presuppose that mystics use relevant concepts in a sufficiently similar way, otherwise there simply would be no possibility of contradiction (like in the case of rugby and soccer where different conceptual schemes are being used and as a result statements about a 'goal' or 'tackle' made within these different schemes cannot conflict). Thus we can make sense of the situation, taken by Alston as a serious possibility, that Hinduism has in fact the same 'subject matter' as Christianity but in one of them (or both) it is 'incorrectly characterized', without assuming that different conceptual schemes are involved. Perhaps simply in some religions false claims are being made about God within the same conceptual scheme (or in all of them). And perhaps the relationship between the conception of God to be found in a particular RT and the conceptual scheme for grasping God *in mystical experience* employed by a mystic from that RT is such, that mystics belonging to different RTs (and so having different conceptions of God) employ nevertheless (broadly) the same conceptual scheme when they grasp God *in mystical experience* (as opposed to grasping God when just thinking about God).

That a mystic's grasp of God in mystical experience is not always *completely* dependent on the conception of God to be found in that mystic's RT follows from the mystical reports in which the mystics suggest that what they have grasped in their mystical experiences goes beyond what the conception of Ultimate Reality held in the mainstream of their own RT would make them expect to experience.[6] This sometimes leads them to making, on the basis of their experiences, claims about God that are taken to be heterodox in their own RT. This would not be expected if what is grasped in mystical experience was always fully shaped by the conception of the object that those who engage in MDP have, as S.T. Katz (1978) and other 'constructivists' would like us to believe.

Secondly, the apparent difference in the characterization of God may be a result of problems with translation (broadly understood). Given Quinean

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[6] Meister Eckhart and Jan van Ruysbroeck are good examples of Christian mystics of this kind. Worth taking into account in this context are also comments of Japanese Buddhist mystics about Christian mysticism, as well as exchanges between Christian and Buddhist mystics (cf. Suzuki 1957; Moammaers & Van Bragt 1995). They make no suggestions that mystics from different RTs conceptualize the object of their mystical experiences in accordance with the conception of Ultimate Reality to be found in their respective RTs. The picture that emerges from this exchange is rather that in some cases mystics from different RTs have similar experiences which they conceptualize in a similar way, while in other cases they simply have clearly different experiences.

difficulties about synonymy, there may be theoretical problems in deciding whether in a particular instance one is faced with radical incomparability or not, but nevertheless usually the presumption is that the difficulty is in translation, and not in the use of significantly different conceptual schemes.

Thirdly, one might argue that because of the highly specific subject matter, it may be actually difficult to spell out precisely what a conceptual scheme employed in mystical perception consists of. Mystical writers regularly complain that all concepts that a mystic can have *prior* to mystical experience or which a mystic can form as a result of mystical experience, are somehow insufficient for an adequate grasp of the object of mystical experience. Now, considering that Alston's main point is that we have to "distinguish as many mystical practices as there are different conceptual schemes for grasping Ultimate Reality", he would need to spell out precisely what these different conceptual schemes consist of, in order to show that the alleged differences are indeed significant enough to prevent individuating a single MDP. And it is not easy to see how Alston could accomplish that.

To sum up, Alston does not provide sufficient reasons to justify his claim that we cannot individuate a single MDP, because of the alleged plurality of conceptual schemes for grasping God in mystical experience.

As if aware of this difficulty, Alston shifts his attention from conceptual schemes to overrider systems, asserting:

> Differences in overrider systems are more crucial. The overrider system determines how we go from *prima facie* to unqualified justification; as such it has a crucial bearing on what outputs are ultimately approved. Hence we cannot count practices with quite different overrider systems as different branches of one practice (*PG*, 189).

Thus ultimately Alston suggests that we should individuate as many MDPs as there are overrider systems (rather than conceptual schemes).

So long as he was focusing on conceptual schemes for grasping God, one might have expected that Alston would allow for there being a single theistic MDP. However, at the end he decides to individuate MDPs along the lines of major World religions, on the ground that the overall doctrine of a religion constitutes one unified overrider system of MDP for that particular religion. As a result we get among others a 'Christian Mystical Practice' (for the sake of terminological consistency I will call it 'Christian MDP', unless quoting Alston). Alston defines Christian MDP as "the practice of forming perceptual beliefs about God that is standard in . . . mainline Christianity" (*PG*, 193).

Since Alston ultimately considers not inputs, outputs or conceptual schemes, but overrider systems to be crucial for individuating MDPs, the more important issue becomes the question which beliefs are to be included in the overrider system.

I take it for granted that Alston is right in claiming that one doxastic practice should have one overrider system. This claim is ultimately grounded in a plausible intuition that is fundamental to the doxastic practice approach to epistemology, namely that one doxastic practice (when functioning properly) should have one set of outputs given one set of inputs. However, there are reasons to think that we should not expect that in the case of every doxastic practice it will be equally easy to specify which beliefs belong to its overrider system. There may be significant differences in this respect between doxastic practices. As to achieve consensus in matters concerning the nature of mystical perception and the nature of the object of mystical perception will be much more difficult in the case of MDP than it is in the case of SPDP, one can expect that it will also be more difficult to specify which beliefs belong to the overrider system of MDP. And this characteristic of MDP can be called in to support the thesis that we have no sufficient reasons to deny that it is possible to individuate one universal MDP with one overrider system (although with vague borders).

Considering that Alston's point is that we have to individuate many MDPs because mystics from different RTs in assesing their M-beliefs use significantly different overrider systems, he has to show the sets of beliefs which in particular cases play the role of overriders in order to support his claim that these sets are too different to make the idea of there being only one overrider system (of a single MDP) viable. Alston does not provide reasons for thinking that this can be done.

For the reason I am about to spell out, unlike Alston, I consider similarities of inputs and outputs of MDP as constituting sufficient ground for individuating one universal MDP. As already mentioned, Alston is aware that it is tempting to consider the differences in inputs of two doxastic practices as the primary candidate for being a ground for their individuation. However, speaking about SPDP and MDP he asserts:

No doubt, they have qualitatively different experiential inputs; but that is equally true of different sensory modalities. The experiential input for MP does not, so far as we know, stem from the stimulation of physical sense receptors, but since we understand so little about the input of MP, that is a rather shaky basis for differentiation (*PG*, 167).

Such an argument against making the difference of inputs the primary basis for distinguishing between SPDP and MDP is not entirely compelling. Firstly, why should we worry about our inability to reject a hypothesis that mystical experience may, after all, stem from the stimulation of physical sense receptors? Given that we have good reasons to believe that the object of mystical experiences is sufficiently different from the objects of sense perceptual experiences, even if after all mystical experiences turn out to be the causal effects of God on mystics' senses, they would still be so different from ordinary sense perceptual experiences that it would justify individuating 'mystical sense perceptual doxastic practice' as distinct from SPDP.

Moreover, one needs to notice that while it is clear what constitutes outputs of a doxastic practice (namely beliefs about the relevant subject matter formed by the relevant belief forming mechanisms), it is possible to specify what constitutes inputs of a doxastic practice in more than one way. From the fragment just quoted one can gather that Alston takes the 'experiential input' of SPDP to be qualified as such by the fact that it does stem from the stimulation of physical receptors. But let us assume for the sake of argument that Berkeley is right and material objects do not exist. Would this make the whole talk of SPDP as a reliable doxastic practice meaningless? Not necessarily. I suggest that we identify inputs of SPDP as *experiences* of a certain sort, namely experiences that their subjects take to be sensory experiences of what the subjects take to be physical objects. Of course, there is a story of brain-processes behind these experiences/inputs, as there is behind beliefs/outputs, but this is equally true in the case of every doxastic practice, including MDP, and we are unlikely to be able to differentiate inputs of different doxastic practices by attending to this level of the reality of doxastic practices. Hence we can identify experiential inputs of MDP as experiences that their subjects take to be non-sensory experiences of what the subjects take to be God (or Ultimate Reality). For such identification of inputs that would allow for individuating MDP on the ground of similarities in inputs, it is not necessary to establish whether the causal chain that leads to mystical experience leaves the physical world at the point of causing a physical brain-input or at the point of causing input on sense-organs (which for all we know is not the case).

Thus, in opposition to Alston, I propose that the differences in inputs and outputs can provide sufficient ground for individuating MDP as a single mystical perceptual doxastic practice *by distinguishing it from SPDP*. Differences in their (*i.e.* the MDPs' and SPDPs') respective overrider systems, as well as the homogeneity of each practice with respect to epistemic reliability

(different in the case of MDP and SPDP) only confirm the plausibility of differentiating between those two practices as natural (*i.e.* non-arbitrary).

AN EXCLUSIVIST ACCOUNT OF MYSTICAL DOXASTIC PRACTICE
AND THE CONFLICTING TRUTH CLAIMS CHALLANGE

By individuating the plurality of MDPs, Alston provoked a particularly strong version of CTCC. Once he decided to distinguish between mystical practices along the lines of major religions and dug up a gulf between them by individuating them primarily on the ground of the overrider systems, which according to him include the overall doctrines of respective religions, there was no other way left to show that Christian MDP is reliable than by coming out victorious from the conflict between competing MDPs.

In these circumstances Alston could either attempt to prove that Christian MDP is reliable and other practices are not, or to argue for the weaker claim that though there is no way to settle the issue which practice has better credentials to reliability, he can show that it is rational to continue to engage in Christian MDP. Alston chose to admit that there are no sufficient reasons independent of one RT which could settle the conflict, but he was confident in being able to defend the weaker claim in the face of religious diversity. The main reason Alston thinks there are no sufficient RT-independent arguments available to show which MDP has stronger claims to reliability, is that he does not believe that Natural Theology can settle the issues concerning the nature of God.[7]

One of the consequences of Alston's settling for a weaker claim is that while initially he appeared to defend Christian MDP on RT-independent grounds, and was aiming at epistemic reliability or justification of Christian MDP, when faced with the fact of religious diversity he becomes less clear as to what sort of rationality (practical or epistemic) he wishes to establish. There is no doubt that he settles for directing his argument only to defending those who are already engaged in Christian MDP. The main claim he now attempts to support is that it is rational *for them* to continue to do so. And this selfl-imitation seems unavoidable, for, in his own words, the problem

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[7] Not surprisingly the main positive suggestion that Alston's critics came up with is exactly that without bringing metaphysical argumentation into the picture he will not be able to secure a serious epistemic justification of the reliability of Christian MDP. (See Wainwright 2000; Willard 2001; Quinn 2000; Schellenberg 2000).

Alston faces is the following:

> Since each form of MP is, to a considerable extent, incompatible with all the others, not more than one such form can be (sufficiently) reliable as a way of forming beliefs about the Ultimate. For if one is reliable, then most of the beliefs that issue from it are true; and hence, because of the incompatibility, a large proportion of the beliefs issuing from each of the other must be false; and so none of those others is a reliable practice. Now why should I suppose that Christian MDP is the one that is reliable (if any are)? (*PG*, 268-269).

So it appears that Alston is aware that once he has generated conflict between different MDPs, he can either argue successfully that his RT got it right and other RTs got it wrong, or allow for some other RT or none to be declared a winner. At times (*e.g. PG*, 274-275) Alston may sound as if is he wishes to establish epistemic parity between mystics engaging in different MDPs, but on a closer look this merely amounts to an expression of the status quo, namely that there is no RT-independent way of settling the dispute. Alston clearly ends up in a position close to that occupied by Alvin Plantinga (1994), claiming that (1) there are no sufficient overriders of the *prima facie* justification for the M-beliefs of someone engaging in Christian MDP, but (2) neither are there sufficient arguments to show that a Christian mystic is in an epistemically more favourable position when compared with a non-Christian mystic. It is in this context that Alston (like Plantinga) comes to the conclusion that it is sufficient to argue that (3) it is rational to continue to engage in a particular MDP.

Claims (1)-(3) do not in themselves imply that Alston is an exclusivist with respect to the reliability of MDP. They do, however, support the claim that exclusivism is implicit in Alston's project, when we combine them with some other of his assertions. In the passage from *PG* I have just quoted Alston makes the claim (4) that "no more than one such form [of MDP] can be (sufficiently) reliable as a way of forming beliefs about the Ultimate". As claim (1) entails that Christian MDP is reliable, from claims (1) and (4) it follows that MDPs different than Christian MDP are not reliable. In this context, by stating (2) Alston admits only that there is no way to rationally convince everybody who is not yet engaged in Christian MDP that it is the only reliable MDP, but it does not imply that Alston is unsure whether other MDPs are reliable or not.

Alston's most promising argument in his defense of the reliability of Christian MDP in the face of religious diversity is the one based on the (sup-

posed) disanalogy between a conflict that occurs within the same doxastic practice and inter-practice conflict. Alston suggests that it is only because in the case of the former there is a common ground between competitors, that it is possible to charge one of the competitors with the lack of something positive that his rival has got. So one can be defeated only if there is a possibility of clash, as it were. But, according to Alston, in the case of mystics from different RTs there is no such common ground, as they engage in different MDPs. Consequently, the lack of positive arguments able to establish the superiority of Christian MDP does not have negative epistemic consequences (*PG*, 271-272).

Even when we grant that this argument works, it seems that what Alston can (at most) establish in this way is that it is rational for a person who is already engaged in Christian MDP to continue to do so (*i.e.* Alston can at most establish the *prima facie* warrant of a Christian mystic believing certain things on the basis of her putative mystical experiences of God). It is not easy to see why a person who is an outsider to Christian MDP should take a Christian mystic to be more justified or rational in continuing to engage in her MDP, than is a mystic from some other competing MDP (of course, we bracket possible arguments that Natural Theology might perhaps supply in this respect, for Alston does so). But Alston claims that his argumentation for the reliability of CMP (*i.e.* Christian MDP) would "provide anyone, participant in CMP or not, with sufficient reasons for taking CMP to be rationally engaged in" (*PG*, 283).

This assertion may be read in two different ways. On the weaker interpretation, Alston can mean only that he can supply an outsider to Christian MDP with reasons to believe that the participant in Christian MDP may rationally engage in Christian MDP. Such a claim would not imply that an outsider to Christian MDP has been supplied with reasons to believe that Christian MDP is reliable, as it could be compatible with the same outsider having reasons to believe that mystics engaging in other MDPs are similarly justified, and with this outsider believing at the same time that Christian MDP is after all unreliable. (Similarly, I can have very good reasons for thinking that S is perfectly rational in his being an atheist, while at the same time justifiably believing that S's atheistic beliefs are after all false.)

But the statement of Alston's just quoted might have been intended by him to express his conviction that even granting the impossibility of settling the dispute between different MDP's, there are ways of justifying the outputs of Christian MDP for the outsider to Christian MDP. This stronger interpre-

tation appears to be supported by Alston's lengthy discussion (*PG*, 279-282) of how an outsider to MDP can be justified in believing that p (where p is an M-belief) in virtue of basing this belief on testimony of a mystic whose belief that p is based on her own mystical experience. Although this suggestion does not imply that an outsider to MDP would not have been equally justified in believing that ~p, basing this belief on the *testimony* of a mystic from a competing MDP, considering that this discussion occurs in the context of Alston's defence of the reliability of Christian MDP, one might read Alston as suggesting that he can provide an outsider to Christian MDP with reasons for believing that Christian MDP is reliable. But if we grant that there is no other way of settling the dispute between competing MDPs, it is hard to see how an appeal to testimony could be of any help in establishing the reliability of Christian MDP. Why should an outsider to Christian MDP credit a Christian mystic with a greater trust than a Muslim mystic? If the outsider is a Christian, he may have additional reasons to put a greater trust in a Christian mystic. But in such a case the outsider's justification in believing what some Christian mystic testifies about would be a function of the reasons he has for believing that the claims made by the mystic are true, rather than a function of the reasons he has for believing that these claims are warranted in virtue of being outputs of Christian MDP. So pointing to the possibility of an outsider's acquiring justification in virtue of believing in the testimony of a mystic does not look like a promising way of establishing the reliability of Christian MDP (or indeed any other MDP, once one assumes that there are many conflicting MDP's).

Equally unpromising is another of Alston's arguments for the reliability of Christian MDP, in which he asks us to imagine that SPDP is diversified in such a way that we have some people who engage in an 'Aristotelian practice of seeing', a 'Cartesian practice of seeing', etc. Here again we have a situation in which there is no way of settling the dispute, each doxastic practice enjoys considerable self-support, and as this practice is necessary to function in a real life environment, Alston concludes that we would need to grant that practitioners in each practice would be justified in continuing to engage in their practice. The suggestion here is that different MDPs are like different 'practices of seeing', hence by parity of reasoning, it is rational for a practitioner of CP to continue her engagement in the practice.

Alston's argument from analogy is not convincing either. True, Alston's thought experiment with a plurality of SPDPs does show that the very fact of the plurality of MDPs would not in itself disqualify all MDPs as reliable doxastic practices. When we grant that there are many competing MDPs,

and it will appear that all competing MDPs seem to have something about them that makes engaging in them practically rational (as engaging in them brings with it certain spiritual rewards that confirm their value), it is still thinkable that only one of them is a generally reliable source of beliefs about God, while all other MDPs are not. However, the issue at stake is whether there are sufficient reasons to accept that this is indeed the case.

Alston does not seem to provide convincing reasons of this sort. Alston's argument from analogy implies or entails a number of claims which seem to lead to an undesirable conclusion. If (1) for a practitioner of each particular MDP, it is possible to establish the *prima facie* warrant of her continuing to engage in her MDP, and (2) there are no sufficient arguments to show that one particular MDP is superior with respect to epistemic reliability, then (3) the outputs of all competing MDPs are *prima facie* warranted for those who engage in them. If we grant in addition that (4) a transfer of warrant to an outsider is in the context of MDP at all possible (on the ground of testimony), then (5) in the case of each MDP reasons would be available for an outsider to take its outputs to be a reliable source of beliefs about God (as there are no reasons to doubt that in each MDP there are trustworthy practitioners of MDP). However, as Alston individuated and characterized different MDPs in such a way that they are in direct conflict (for only one of them can be reliable), reasons for assenting to the outputs of one MDP are at the same time reasons against assenting to the outputs of other MDPs. And so the outsider's warrant deriving from testimony is mutually cancelled, thus at best giving reasons for suspending judgment.

Hence it seems that Alston can establish only a *prima facie* warrant of an individual subject in relation to a particular mystical experience. But this is unlikely to suffice for establishing the epistemic reliability of Christian MDP, as in many cases this warrant will be called into question by M-beliefs held by mystics engaged is some other competing MDP, and therefore it is unlikely that Alston will be able to suppose that as Christian MDP produces *ultima facie* warranted belief in each individual case, then we can say that it generally produces *ultima facie* warranted beliefs.

On the other hand, even if Alston's arguments would be able to establish the rationality of the practitioner's continuing to be engaged in Christian MDP, they would be useless for our project which aims at showing how one might allow for the reliability of MDP as exercised in alien RTs without undermining the effort of securing the reliability of MDP as exercised in one's home RT. They would be useless because Alston's individuation of MDPs does not allow for more than one MDP being reliable.

AN INCLUSIVIST ACCOUNT OF MYSTICAL DOXASTIC PRACTICE AND THE CONFLICTING TRUTH CLAIMS CHALLANGE

It should be clear by now that the reason for my giving, in this essay, so much attention to the issue of individuation of a single universal MDP rather than many conflicting MDPs, is that individuating a plurality of MDPs plays into the hands of the critics of the veridicality of mystical experience.

The critics of mysticism (*e.g.* Gale 1994, Martin 1990) often make the point that as mystical reports coming from the variety of RTs apparently imply that different mystics hold conflicting beliefs about God, it follows that many of these beliefs must be false, and since we are unable to provide an argument which, if any, mystic is right, it makes a mockery of the idea of MDP being a reliable belief-forming practice. In response I wish to argue that even if we grant that mystics from various RTs often hold conflicting beliefs about God, it will not follow from this that MDP is not a reliable doxastic practice. There are two ways to support this claim. Firstly, one can argue that the beliefs about God that are conflicting are not M-beliefs, therefore this conflict does not have any bearing on the reliability of MDP. Secondly, one can argue that some apparently conflicting beliefs are indeed M-beliefs, but the alleged conflict between them is only apparent. Now I will develop these two lines of arguments, appealing to the characteristics of the inclusivist account of MDP I propose.

To show how these arguments could work I need to return to the idea of there being just one overrider system shared by mystics from various RTs. I argued above that Alston fails to show why there cannot be only one over-rider system of this sort (which would indeed entail that there cannot be a single MDP). Now I would like to suggest that what Alston actually says about the overrider system of Christian MDP gives a clue as to how the overrider system of a single MDP could work.

When comparing MDP with SPDP, Alston notices that while in the case of SPDP we are not confronted with any significant diversity of conceptual schemes, the background beliefs of which the overrider system of SPDP is made up are less uniform. This lack of uniformity, according to Alston, is however 'peripheral' and 'for practical purposes' we may think about there being "a single worldwide overrider system for SPDP" (*PG*, 192). When it comes to attending to the background beliefs that make the overrider system of Alston's Christian MDP, he manages to accommodate all the differences involved in the intra-Christian inter-confessional disputes. In what I consider to be the crucial move in his argument, Alston asserts that although *any*

doctrinal difference can affect the overriding function of a doxastic practice, ". . . this point should not be overblown. Many differences are rarely called upon in this capacity. Hence groups that differ on certain doctrines may in fact use the same criteria for testing putative divine perceptions" (*PG*, 193-194).

Now, Alston's talk about the 'lack of uniformity' of an overrider system means simply that some subjects who engage in the relevant doxastic practice believe that P is a part of its overrider system, while some others think that ~P is an overrider in this system. However, strictly speaking P and ~P cannot both at the same time belong to the overrider system because then neither P nor ~P could play the role of an overrider. Alston's comments clearly imply that different subjects *can* (be it rarely) bring with themselves into the overrider system of a reliable doxastic practice some beliefs they consider to be overriders in this system, although some other practitioners of this doxastic practice disagree. So how is such an overrider system, which is not fully uniform (as every overrider system of a mystical doxastic practice however conceived is likely to be), supposed to work?

I suggest that we can conceive an overrider system as a set of background beliefs with vague borders, such that some of these beliefs belong to the *core* of this system, in virtue of their overriding function *regularly and universally*), while some other beliefs are 'peripheral' (in the sense that they are called upon in this capacity only by some subjects who think these beliefs are true and use them as overriders – even though not always consciously). On such a picture, only the core beliefs would strictly speaking play the role of overriders, because a *significant* lack of consensus as to whether some beliefs should play such a role makes them unable to prevent any *prima facie* warranted beliefs from becoming *ultima facie* warranted.

Moreover, one can justify the inclusion into an overrider system of a limited number of beliefs which lack universal acceptance as overriders, if there are serious reasons for thinking that they tell the true story about the subject matter of the relevant doxastic practice and therefore *do in fact* belong to its overrider system, although due to our limited knowledge (which gives rise to the disagreement in question) we cannot (as yet) be sure of that. Such 'peripheral overriders' are really only conditionally included into an overrider system.

In the context of Christian MDP (as conceived by Alston) allowing for there being one pan-Christian overrider system would imply that some Christian mystic can form an M-belief, with respect to which there will be no consensus as to whether it is *ultima facie* warranted, because there will be

no consensus between Christian mystics whether particular beliefs which can override this particular M-belief belong in fact to the overrider system. However, since the presumption is that it is likely to be a relatively rare occurrence, because M-beliefs are rarely about very specific doctrinal nuances on which Christians may differ, Alston is justified in stressing the importance of the *common core* and allowing for their being a single Christian MDP (rather than the Pentecostal MDP, the Catholic MDP, the Protestant MDP, the Reformed MDP, the Dutch Reformed MDP, etc.).

Granting the plausibility of the core overriders/peripheral overriders distinction, it is now *not* clear that we are compelled to differentiate between Christian MDP, Jewish MDP, Muslim MDP, etc., rather than to take there to be a single universal MDP, with one overrider system consisting of the common core overriders shared by mystics from various RTs and peripheral overriders whose overriding status is a matter of debate that is unlikely to be resolved on this side of the Great Divide. A possible argument that the lack of uniformity would perhaps be too great to allow for this, is simply difficult to support. Given that Alston defined MDP in a way that restricts the range of experiences which may constitute inputs of MDP to direct non-sensory focal perceptions of God, the conclusion could be supported by the rich data of mystical reports coming from various RTs that the vast majority of M-beliefs formed on the basis of such experiences are of such kind that they do not call for confrontation with peripheral overriders.

The picture that emerges from the study of mystical reports coming from various traditions does not support what might be a popular intuition that the mystical experiences of Christian mystics are mainly about Christ as God, that most of the mystical experiences of Muslim mystics confirm that Muhammad received the revelation of the Qu'ran from Allah, while Hindu mystics have mainly visions of Krishna or some other *avatar*.[8] If that would be the case, it might indeed call into question the idea of there being one overrider system shared by mystics from various RTs, because then what I called 'peripheral overriders' would be more prominent than the common core overriders,

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[8] It is important to bear in mind that the idea that God may be perceived through different intermediaries (*sefirot*) is also known in Kabbalah mysticism. These intermediaries are not understood as distinct from God but are phenomenally different from each other, so that experiential encounter with God in different *sefirot* is sometimes compared to seeing water poured into different coloured bottles. The suggestion here is that as one does not ascribe the characteristics of the bottle to the water itself, so a mystic does not ascribe the phenomenal characteristics of different intermediaries to God (cf. Idel 1988; Idel 1999).

and in such a case we would have to conclude that different mystics use significantly different sets of overriders, except that they overlap a bit. The truth of the matter seems to be, however, that in most of the Sufi mystical reports there is hardly any mention of Muhammad. The mystics of the Kabbalah rarely experience God communicating to them that the people of Israel are the Chosen People. Such classic Christian mystics as Jan van Ruysbroeck or the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* do not report mainly mystical encounters with Christ as the Second Person of the Trinity, etc. The writings of Sufi mystics are typically of such kind that should one extract from them what pertains to putative mystical experiences, one could mistakenly attribute them to some medieval Christian or Jewish mystic.[9] Also the typical mystical experience reported by a Christian mystic does not appear to be an experience of Christ but rather of God characterized in such general terms as to make Him indistinguishable from the object of the mystical experiences reported by Jews or Muslims.

As so far the discussion was rather abstract and general in character, not grounded enough in the examples of mystical experiences coming from the variety of RTs, in order to show that an inclusivist account of MDP may look viable when confronted with the mystical literature, it will be good to present at least some examples of mystical experiences, as reported by the mystics themselves, which can play the role of inputs of MDP conceived in an inclusivist manner.

The reports that follow are taken from a variety of RTs and refer to paradigmatic experiences that satisfy the requirements of my stipulated definition of mystical experience of God. All the reports presented here have the family resemblance which one would expect from experiences that can constitute inputs of the same doxastic practice. It may be noticed that most of the experiences reported or alluded to in the section that follows are of such kind that if some of their elements which are of secondary importance were to be bracketed, it would be difficult to say to which RT the mystic belongs. By providing such examples I want to suggest that there are plenty of mystical reports coming from various RTs that do not pose any difficulty for there being a single universal MDP. This will constitute a point of departure for my discussion of such cases when there are apparent incompatibilities between beliefs about God that are supposed to be outputs of one

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[9] The story of Yehuda Halevi, a medieval Jewish mystic who immersed himself in the Sufi mystical tradition, shows that in some cases it is possible to use specific mystical concepts and terminology developed in an alien tradition, to express one's own mystical experience, while remaining committed to the overall doctrine of one's own RT.

and the same reliable MDP. I will show that these incompatibilities may be explained in such a way that it does not diminish the value of the reports that now follow, and which support the viability of an inclusivist account of MDP.

(Report I) I had no delight whatever in the Torah I studied or the prayers I recited. [. . .] Many harsh and demonic forces (*kelippot*) rose against me to dissuade me from studying the Torah. [. . .] But once I had overcome these blandishments, suddenly, in the midst of the day, [. . .] a great light fell upon me, [. . .] a marvelous light, the *Shekhinah* [the Divine Presence] resting there. This was the first time in my life that I had some little taste of His light, may He be blessed. It was authentic without out error or confusion, a wondrous delight and a most pleasant illumination beyond all comprehension (Rabbi Isaac Eizik of Komarno, after Jacobs 1976, 240-241).

(Report II) All at once [. . .] I felt the presence of God – I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it – as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether. [. . .] Then, slowly, the ecstasy left my heart; that is, I felt that God had withdrawn the communion which he had granted. [. . .] I think it well to add that in this ecstasy of mine God had neither form, color, odor, nor taste; moreover, that the feeling of his presence was accompanied by no determinate localization. [. . .] But the more I seek words to express this intimate intercourse, the more I feel the impossibility of describing the thing by any of our usual images. At bottom the expression most apt to render what I felt is this: God was present, though invisible; he fell under no one of my senses, yet my consciousness perceived him (Anonymous report, after James 1982, 68).

(Report III) By love He [Brahman] comes to recognize my greatness, who I really am, and enters into me at once by knowing me as I really am. [. . .] Go to him alone for refuge with all your being, by his grace you will attain the highest peace and his eternal resting place (*Bhagavad Gita*, 18.55, 62).

(Report IV)   Not by sight is It grasped, not even by speech,
               Not by any other sense-organs, austerity, or work.
               By the peace of knowledge, one's nature purified –
               In that way, however, by meditating, one does behold
               Him who is without parts
               (*Mandukya Upanishad*, III, i, 8, after Radhakrishnan & Moore
               1957, 552).

(Report V) At times God comes into the soul without being called; and He instills into her fire, love, and sometimes sweetness. [. . .] But she does not yet know, or see, that He dwells in her; she perceives His grace, in which she delights. And again God comes to the soul, and speaks to her words full of

sweetness, in which she has much joy, and she feels Him. [. . .] And beyond this the soul receives the gift of seeing God. God says to her, 'Behold Me!' and the soul sees Him dwelling within her. She sees Him more clearly than one man sees another. For the eyes of the soul behold a plenitude of which I cannot speak: a plenitude which is not bodily but spiritual, of which I can say nothing (Blessed Angela of Foligno, after Underhill 1995, 282).

(Report VI) The way of the *zaddikim* [. . .] is well known. [. . .] as they experience the fragrance and sweetness of God, [. . .] it would take but little for them to become annihilated out of existence in their great longing to become attached to God's divinity [. . .]. [. . .] they proceed until they come to that high place where comprehension is impossible, except in the way one smells something fragrant, and even this only in a negative way, since that which is there cannot be grasped by thought at all. When they comprehend this, so great is their longing to attach themselves to His divinity, blessed be He, that they have no desire to return to the lowly world of the body (Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Epstein of Krakow, after Jacobs 1976, 221-222).

(Report VII) The mystic who has seen the Vision of the Unity, sees at first the light of Real Existence: even more, as he sees, by his gnosis, the pure light, in everything he sees, he sees God first. A condition for good reflection is solitude, for in that state a flash of the Divine Light brings us help. [. . .] To that one whose spirit lives in contemplation of the Vision of God, the whole world is the book of God Most High (Mahmud Shabistari, a Muslim mystic, after Smith 1972, 112).

(Report VIII) Now it fares in like manner with the soul who is in rest and quiet before God: for she sucks in a manner insensibly the delights of His presence, without any discourse. . . [. . .] She sees her spouse present with so sweet a view that reasoning would be to her unprofitable and superfluous [. . .]. Nor does the soul in this repose stand in need of the memory, for she has her lover present. Nor has she need of the imagination, for why should we represent in an exterior or interior image Him whose presence we are possessed of? (St Francis of Sales, after Poulain 1950, 75-76).

(Report IX) The saint [. . .] is submerged in the ocean by unity, by passing away from himself. [. . .] He leaves behind him his own feelings and actions as he passes into the life with God (Al-Junayd, a Muslim mystic, after Stace 1961, 115).

(Report X) That which the Servitor saw had no form neither any manner of being; yet he had of it a joy such as he might have known in the seeing of the shapes and substances of all joyful things. [. . .] And the Friar could do naught but contemplate this Shining Brightness; and he altogether forgot himself and all other things. [. . .] Then he said, 'If that which I see and feel be not the Kingdom of Heaven, I know not what it can be [. . .]' (Blessed Henry Suso, after Underhill 1955, 187).

(Report XI) When a state of perfect motionlessness and unawareness is obtained, all the signs of life will depart and also every trace of limitation will vanish. Not a single

idea will disturb your consciousness when lo! all of a sudden you will come to realize a light abounding in full gladness. It is like coming across a light in thick darkness; it is like receiving treasure in poverty. [. . .] Your very existence has been freed from all limitations: you have become open, light and transparent [. . .]. Here is manifested the unsophisticated self which is the original face of your being (Yuan-wu, a Buddhist Zen master, after Mommaers & Van Bragt 1995, 185).

(Report XII) In very truth the soul, immersed in God and absorbed into Him, swims, as it were, to and fro in the Godhead, and abounds with unspeakable joy which even overflows plenteously into the body (Venerable Blosius, after Pike 1992, 8).

(Report XIII) This is a supernatural state, and however hard we try, we cannot reach it for ourselves. [. . .] The soul, in a way which has nothing to do with the outward senses, realizes that it is now very close to its God, and that, if it were but a little closer, it would become one with Him through union. This is not because it sees Him either with its bodily or with its spiritual eyes. [. . .] It [the soul] cannot understand how it knows Him, yet it sees that it is in the Kingdom [. . .] (St Teresa of Avila, *The Way of Perfection*, ch. 26).

(Report XIV) In this exalted state she [the soul] has lost her proper self and is flowing full-flood into the unity of the divine nature. But what, you may ask, is the fate of this lost soul? Does she find herself or not? [. . .] though she sinks all in the oneness of divinity she never touches bottom. God has left her one little point from which to get back to herself [. . .] and know herself as creature (Meister Eckhart, after Stace 1961, 114).

(Report XV) Those who have passed into the unitive life have attained unto a Being transcending all that can be apprehended by sight or insight, for they find Him to transcend in His sanctity all that we have described heretofore. But these can be separated into classes, for some of them, all that can be perceived is consumed away, blotted out, annihilated, but the soul remains contemplating that Supreme Beauty and Holiness and contemplating itself in the beauty which it has acquired by attaining to the Divine Presence, and for such a one, things seen are blotted out, but not the seeing souls. But some pass beyond this and they are the Elect of the Elect, who are consumed by the glory of His exalted Countenance, and the greatness of the Divine Majesty overwhelms them and they are annihilated and they themselves are no more. They no longer contemplate themselves, and there remains only the One, the Real, and the meaning of His Word: 'All things perish save His Countenance' is known by experience (Al-Ghazali, a Muslim mystic, after Smith 1972, 71).

(Report XVI) Yet [in the mystic union] the creature does not become God, for the union takes place in God [. . .] and therefore the creature in its inward contemplation feels a distinction and otherness between itself and God. [. . .] There [in this union] all is full and overflowing, for the spirit feels itself to be one truth and one richness and

one unity with God. Yet even here there is an essential tending forward, and therein is an essential distinction between the being of the soul and the Being of God [. . .] (Blessed Jan van Ruysbroeck, after Pike 1992, 29).

All these mystical reports, typical of the mystical traditions to which the respective mystics belong, seem to point to experiences which in my opinion do not pose any problem for an inclusivist account of MDP, *i.e.* MDP conceived as a single universal MDP, reliable when exercised across the variety of RTs.

This is so, because as can be gathered from the above mystical reports, mystical experiences have rarely such a determinate conceptual content as to involve very specific and elaborate doctrines of particular religions. For this reason, the beliefs that constitute the core of the overall doctrine of one RT and differ from the core beliefs of some other RT* don't have to be included in the core of the overrider system of MDP common to both RT and RT*. By suggesting that Christian beliefs about the Incarnation or the Trinity can be conceived as 'peripheral overriders' within a single universal MDP, I do not mean to suggest that they are peripheral to Christian faith but only that in the context of MDP they are (as a matter of fact) rarely called upon in their capacity as overriders. One must not forget that MDP is just one of the doxastic practices involved in forming beliefs about God, and practices of forming beliefs about God by appeal to sacred scriptures, testimony or deductive reasoning may have overrider systems with significantly different core beliefs than MDP. In each case the overrider system needs to include all beliefs that may be called upon in their overriding capacity, but not all beliefs about the subject matter. And this implies that Alston's proposal to include in the overrider system of MDP all beliefs that make up the doctrine of particular religion(s) is an unnecessary step which makes it difficult to see how could there be only one MDP. To sum it up, to possible doubts about one MDP being able to accommodate M-beliefs formed by mystics from various RTs, one may respond by using the words Alston uses to justify the individuation of a single Christian MDP, when he says that "groups that differ on certain doctrines may in fact use the same criteria for testing putative divine perceptions" (*PG*, 193-194).

This point shows that MDP may be conceived as generally independent of particular RTs, both in the forming M-beliefs and in their assessment against the background of the overrider system. The possibility of MDP being generally RT-neutral is highlighted by the fact that there are reports of mystical experiences of God that occur outside the context of

any particular RT. Taking into account the mystical reports presented above, it is hard to see compelling reasons for thinking that to have such experiences of God as pointed to in these reports, or to asses the *prima facie* warrant of M-beliefs formed on the basis of these experiences, a mystic would need to appeal to background beliefs which would be an expression of Christian rather than Muslim or Hindu faith (especially once one allows the names: 'Brahman', 'Allah', 'the Real' or 'God' to be co-referential and one is aware that certain ways of describing mystical experience are tradition-bound metaphors, not pertaining to the experience itself).

That a mystic may identify the object of her mystical experience as the 'God of Jesus Christ' or 'Yahweh who delivered His People from the slavery in Egypt' does not necessarily have any bearing on the viability of an inclusivist account of MDP. Speaking more generally, the mystical reports often show that mystics from various RTs have mystical experiences of God on the basis of which they form M-beliefs that do *not* involve concepts or doctrines that are distinctively connected with just one RT (*e.g.* beliefs attributing to the object of their mystical experiences goodness, power, lovingness, being active or just being present). These examples make one think that it would be undesirable to individuate MDP in a way that would not make sense of this common ground apparently shared by mystics from various RTs.

But what about the assessment of M-beliefs that *are* clearly RT-specific? After all, it is a matter of fact that various mystical traditions (not to be confused with MDPs), like *e.g.* the Roman Catholic mystical tradition or the Kabbalist mystical tradition, have their own rules for discerning whether a mystical experience is veridical, notably rules for disqualifying some alleged mystical experiences. Are these not 'local' overrider systems within these traditions?

As I already suggested, the beliefs that make up such 'local' overrider systems could be thought about as being peripheral overriders of the overall overrider system of a single universal MDP. This would imply that within such a system some M-beliefs which are RT-specific cannot at all be shown to be *ultima facie* warranted. But this would not be a problem specific to MDP. As long as all the debates concerning the nature of the extra-mental world and the nature of sense perception are not resolved (*i.e.* as long as we are not able to say in every case whether a certain belief is or is not a part of the overrider system of SPDP), people can form sense perceptual beliefs which cannot be shown to be *ultima facie* warranted, because according to some their warrant will be canceled, while some others may disagree (and be able to provide solid reasons for that). This,

however, does not call into question the general reliability of SPDP or MDP, or the viability of SPDP or MDP being a single doxastic practice, because a doxastic practice is generally reliable when it yields mostly *true* beliefs, and not necessarily beliefs which are always *ultima facie* warranted. Inability to show that a belief is *ultima facie* warranted is not a sufficient reason for thinking this belief to be false.

To allow into the overrider system certain beliefs which can be called upon in their function as overriders when a mystic has a specifically Christian mystical experience (*e.g.* an experience of the presence of 'Christ in his Divinity') does not amount to allowing into the overrider system beliefs that are like P and ~P. I have defined these RT-specific overriders as peripheral overriders, saying that they are only conditionally allowed into the system, on the ground that although (at least as yet) there is no universal consensus as to whether they are in fact overriders, there are good reasons (shared by a significant number of practitioners of MDP) for thinking they may in fact be overriders. However, as they are not universally shared by practitioners of MDP, they are not overriders *sensu stricto*, *i.e.* it is not the case that a Christian mystic is compelled to appeal to the peripheral overriders recognized as such by a Hindu mystic.

Exploring the above analogy further, I can finally make use of the two main lines of argument against CTCC, suggesting that some beliefs about God that are expressed in the context of mystical reports are not M-beliefs at all, and as such should not be assessed against the background of the overrider system of MDP. To elucidate this suggestion, it will be helpful to clarify the distinction between there being one universal MDP but a plurality of mystical traditions. By 'mystical tradition' I mean a somewhat vaguely specified set of beliefs (not necessarily M-beliefs!) about the object and nature of mystical experience, about the ways of cultivating mystical consciousness, etc., held by mystics committed to a particular RT. What is specific about mystical traditions so understood is that in forming these beliefs they usually draw on the resources of the sacred scriptures of their religion, or on writings of some prominent historical mystic from their mystical school, or on the resources of philosophical reflection typical for this school, etc. What is important here is that many of these beliefs may not be M-beliefs at all, and as such are not warranted in virtue of being outputs of MDP (and when they are unwarranted, it is not MDP which takes the blame). Taking this into account and remembering the distinctions I have already made in different places in this study, we need to stress that sets of beliefs that make up (1) the overall account of God that

is held within the RT*, (2) the account of God held in some mystical tradition*, (3) the account of God formed on the basis of mystical experiences* of God – may be different sets of beliefs. Now, let us assume that a mystic S* is linked to RT*, mystical tradition* and is the very mystic that had mystical experiences*. And let's assume further that we have another mystic S** who is linked to RT**, mystical tradition** and had mystical experiences**. Now, let's assume that the mystical reports of S* and S** imply that they hold conflicting beliefs about God. I suggest that it is possible that in such a case the M-beliefs held by S* and S** do *not* conflict, but instead are warranted beliefs, being outcomes of a reliable doxastic practice, namely MDP.

Now, in one of the crucial steps of the defence of the main claim of this paper, I suggest that it is the critic of mysticism who carries the burden of proof here. The burden is to show that the conflicting truth claims about God as the common object of all mystical experiences *are M-beliefs*. Given that I have shown that they may well not be, the failure of the critic of mysticism to show this would result in dissolving CTCC. The situation here is clearly analogous to what we face in the case of the so called problem of evil, where it is considered sufficient for the apologist of theism to show that beliefs about God being omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good are not *necessarily* logically incompatible with beliefs about there being evil in the world. And it seems that the task of the critic is in both cases hopeless.

Thus an apologist of mysticism can hold that there is no conflict between M-beliefs held by S* and S**, because it is possible that some beliefs that are implied in mystical reports provided by S* and S** are not M-beliefs but instead are beliefs read-in by the mystic(s) *post factum* drawing on the set of beliefs about God they hold on the basis of something else than mystical experience. Of course, it may not be possible for an outsider to assess whether some particular beliefs implied in a mystical report are or are not M-beliefs, but the data of mystical reports coming from various RTs suggest that the overall doctrines of Ultimate Reality, like *e.g.* those proposed by the two greatest Hindu philosophers, Shankara and Ramanuja, cannot be directly confirmed or negated by mystical experiences. In opposition to Ramanuja, Shankara claims that Brahman and Atman (*i.e.* God and the mystic, to simplify it a bit) are one. Ramanuja argues convincingly that it is not possible to base such a belief on one's experience (*i.e.* such a belief cannot be a perceptual belief), because so long as one is experiencing something, one is aware of the subject-object distinction and so unable to transcend this distinction to confirm experientially that one is not distinct from the object of this

experience. Similarly, it is hard to see how a classical Western theistic account of God could be based on one's experience. After all, one can perceive God as very good or very powerful, but how could one perceive God in such a way as to form perceptual beliefs that God is perfectly good or omnipotent? These beliefs are clearly outputs of doxastic practices other than MDP. One way in which one could form an M-belief that God is omnipotent or that the mystic is not distinct from God whom she perceives is by experiencing God as communicating such a belief. This may be possible, but the study of reports of mystical experiences (covered by our stipulated definition) does not confirm that such beliefs are often formed. And were they formed, their warrant would have to be checked against the background of peripheral beliefs, and in this case the conflict would be resolved by suggesting that once peripheral overriders conflict, either P or ~P is false (though we are unable as yet to settle the matter).

To sum it up, beliefs about God expressed in the context of mystical reports may in fact be formed by more than one doxastic practice, and if outputs of two different doxastic practices are conflicting it cannot be said that both are to blame. In fact, Shankara and Ramanuja can both have veridical experiences of God and form true M-beliefs about God, while one of them can hold false beliefs about God which are outputs of *e.g.* deductive reasoning. Assessing the warrant of these latter beliefs has nothing to do with MDP and its reliability.

Having said that, it seems that more often than not, when we are faced with the apparent conflict of beliefs about God implied in mystical reports and we are challenged by the critic arguing along the lines of CTCC, the adequate response is not to point to the fact that the conflicting beliefs are not M-beliefs, but to say that they are indeed M-beliefs but are not really in conflict. Here are a few hints how this second sort of response to CTCC could look.

Let's consider the issue of some mystics having experiences of God as being person-like, while some other mystics report experiencing God as non-personal. The simplest response to this is to point to the possibility of different mystics experiencing different sets of characteristics of the common object of their experience. Here it is very helpful to note that the present inclusivist account of MDP is being defended from the point of view of a theist. Hence, a theist can suggest that it is not necessarily the case that a Buddhist mystic holds false beliefs about God (or does not experience God at all). It is conceivable that (for whatever reason) God 'allows' him to ex-

perience some of His characteristics, but not some others which a Muslim mystic does experience. And *vice versa*.

So perhaps it is not the case, as a typical exclusivist about the reliability of MDP would suggest, that the belief producing mechanism involved in MDP is malfunctioning in the case of a Hindu mystic or a Sufi mystic, and as a result they end up having false M-beliefs about God (and so one can conclude that they never really have any genuine mystical experiences, or at least most of their experiences are illusory). Perhaps it is simply the case that different mystics perceive different sets of characteristics of God because God Himself, for some reason, *manifests to them* different sets of characteristics out of the Divine Plenitude.

What sort of reasons could God have to 'behave' in this way? For the purposes of my argument it will suffice to show that such reasons are thinkable. Perhaps God positively wills that there be a diversity of ways to the full knowledge of Him in the *eschaton*, and the diversity of M-characterizations of God is needed to generate diversity of ways to God.[10] Or perhaps (in addition) God, respecting human freedom, manifests Himself to a mystic only in a way specified by the mystic's preconceptions of what might be experienced, and/or his degree of openness to the truth about the subject matter and his readiness to be led by what is experienced in an unknown direction, and/or his strength and the authenticity of his desire to discover the truth, and/or the purity of his intentions, etc.?

Irrespective of the actual reasons why different mystics perceive different sets of characteristics of God, it may nevertheless be true that they all have mostly true M-beliefs. It is only that they are revealing only part of the whole truth about God (or Ultimate Reality), or more precisely, they are revealing only certain truths about God. Thus to describe the differences between M-characterizations of God in different RTs one could say that it is not the case that one M-characterization X is a better approximation to the truth about God than M-characterization Y, because Y consists of mostly false M-beliefs, but rather because X consist of *more* true M-beliefs than Y. But theoretically they may both consist of mostly true M-beliefs, being outputs of one universal mystical doxastic practice reliable when exercized across various religious traditions.[11]

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[10] A similar line of thought has been developed *e.g.* by S.M. Heim (1995 & 2001).

[11] I am grateful to Brian Leftow and Gerard J. Hughes for their comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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