

William P. Alston

In *History of Western Philosophy of Religion* (Acumen 2009), eds. Nick Trakakis and Graham Oppy

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William P. Alston was born in Shreveport, Louisiana on 29 November 1921 to Eunice Schoolfield and William Alston. He graduated from high school at age 15, and studied music at Centenary College. While serving in the US Army in World War II (1942-46), he read philosophy extensively. He earned his PhD in 1951 from the University of Chicago; Alston's dissertation on Alfred North Whitehead was written under the direction of Charles Hartshorne. He held appointments at the University of Michigan (1949-71), Rutgers University (1971-76), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1976-80), and Syracuse University (1980-92). Since 1992, he has been Professor Emeritus at Syracuse, where he continued to teach until 2000. During his career, Alston received many honors. He contributed significantly to metaphysics, epistemology, and the philosophy of language, psychology, and religion.

One will not find a synoptic philosophy of religion in Alston's work, nor much natural theology, although he had an abiding appreciation for both. Rather, one finds historically informed treatments of various problems that arise within theistic religions generally and Christianity specifically, treatments enriched by the tools of analytic philosophy. Alston has been at the forefront of the recent trend for Anglo-American Christian philosophers to take more seriously the Augustinian motto, 'faith seeking understanding'. (He was raised a Methodist and, through various ups and downs and ins and outs, returned to the Church to stay in the mid-1970s. For autobiographical details, see Alston 1995a.) Living out that motto resulted in work on the nature of God and God's action in the world, naturalistic explanations of religious belief, especially Freudianism (Alston 1964a), the Trinity, the Resurrection, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, prayer, divine command theory, biblical criticism, and the evidential value of the fulfillment of divine promises for spiritual and moral development in the here and now. (For a complete bibliography, see Howard-Snyder 2007.) Alston's best work, however, is on the nature of religious discourse, the epistemology of religious experience, the problem of evil, and the nature of propositional faith.

Religious discourse

While Alston insists on the indispensable role of non-assertoric speech in religious practice, he is at odds with much contemporary liberal theology over the role of assertion. He disagrees with those who say that no religious assertion is really a statement of fact whose truth-value does not depend on human cognition, and with those who say that human concepts and terms cannot literally apply to God.

Consider these sentences: 'God made a covenant with Abraham', 'God became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth', and 'There exists an immaterial person who is unlimited in power and knowledge'. Alston holds three theses about such sentences. (1) Absent sufficient reason to the contrary, we should take these sentences to be as they appear: genuine statements of fact, as opposed to mere expressions of feelings and attitudes, directives for behavior, and the like. As

such, they are either true or false. (2) These statements are true if and only if what they are about is as they say it is. Otherwise, they are false. (3) The facts that make these statements true—or false, as the case may be—are what they are independently of our beliefs, theories, conceptual schemes, values, activity and so on. Alston labels the conjunction of (1)-(3) *alethic realism*. Its proponents include theists as well as agnostics and atheists, e.g. Bertrand Russell. Its detractors deny one or more of (1)-(3).

Those who deny (1) endorse religious non-cognitivism, e.g. Paul Tillich, Richard Braithwaite, and D.Z. Phillips. The most influential basis for this view, popularized by A.J. Ayer, appealed to the Verifiability Criterion of Meaning (VCM), according to which a non-analytic sentence is a genuine statement (i.e. has a truth-value) only if it is empirically testable, i.e. confirmable or disconfirmable by experience. Since religious sentences are not empirically testable, they are not genuine statements (i.e. lack a truth-value).

Even if VCM is true, Alston argues it does not follow that no talk about God is empirically testable, for at least two reasons (Alston 2003). First, some talk about God occurs in theological contexts that tie that talk to observable historical events thereby rendering it empirically testable. Second, if non-sensory religious experience can provide empirical evidence for certain religious beliefs, then it can render statements used to express the content of such beliefs empirically testable.

Most importantly, however, this argument for non-cognitivism is only as plausible as VCM itself. Early in his career, Alston argued that it was nothing but a bit of metaphysics of the sort its proponents intended to supplant (Alston 1954). Later, he stressed four points (Alston 1964b and 2003). First, VCM itself is not a genuine statement since it is non-analytic but empirically untestable. If, however, as many insisted, it is merely a proposal for using the predicates ‘is a genuine statement’, ‘is cognitively meaningful’, etc., there is nothing to recommend it. Second, given the meaning of some empirically established terms plus a grasp of syntax, a speaker can construct sentences to make statements that are empirically untestable. To illustrate: given the meaning of ‘person’, ‘power’, ‘knowledge’, ‘material’, ‘limit’, ‘not’, and ‘exist’, one can construct the sentence ‘There exists an immaterial person who is unlimited in power and knowledge’ and query whether it is true or false despite its empirical untestability. Third, scientific theories contain some statements that are, at best, only indirectly testable, provided the theories of which they are a part include bridge principles, statements that connect them to directly testable statements. But there is no principled way to put restrictions on bridge principles so that statements verificationists want to let in, e.g. all theoretical sentences, are empirically testable but sentences they want to rule out, e.g. ‘God is perfectly good or it won’t rain in Seattle tomorrow’, are not. Moreover, since bridge principles are non-analytic, VCM implies they lack truth-value unless they too are testable; but they cannot be tested independently of the broader theories of which they are a part. Fourth, unless a sentence is already understandable as a factual statement, the question of whether and how it can be empirically tested cannot even arise.

Those who affirm (1) but deny (2) or (3), e.g. John Hick, affirm a conception of truth other than the minimally realist one expressed in (2), or else claim that the facts that make statements true in the realist sense are not what they are independently of human cognition. As for the denial of (2), Alston argues at great length on behalf of (2) and against its rivals (1996a). As for the denial of (3), he argues on behalf of (3) on both philosophical (1979, 2001) and religious grounds (1995b). In the latter connection, he argues that it is deeply subversive of the Judeo-Christian faith. For it is fundamental to that faith that “God is taken to be a real presence

in the world, a supreme personal being with whom we can enter into personal relationships, a being Who, to understate it, enjoys a reality in His own right, independently of us and our cognitive doings,” a being Who is “the source of being for all other than Himself,...an ultimate supreme reality,...that on which everything else depends for its being” (Alston 1995b: 45-47). No imaginative construct, no way in which the Real appears, not even Tillich’s Being-Itself, can answer to these descriptions. Moreover, arguments for these views endorse an extreme version of the conceptual transcendence of the divine that is based on the false assumption that since human concepts were developed to apply to this-worldly phenomena, they cannot apply to any other reality. Finally, “any form of irrealism is crashingly implausible as an account of the way in which religious beliefs and affirmations are meant (understood) by almost all believers”; as a proposal for reinterpreting them, it is not only intellectually indefensible, “it would be deeply unsatisfying to practically all religious believers and seekers to be told that the only thing available is a set of make-believes that they can pretend to be real so as to regulate, orient, and guide their lives in certain ways” (Alston 1995b: 55-56).

Suppose Alston is correct: religious assertions can be used to make statements of fact. Even so, it might be that no religious statement could possibly be true; that would be the case if it were impossible to refer to God or to truly apply predicates to him.

In response to the question about reference, Alston distinguishes two broad positions, descriptivism and direct reference (1989). According to the former, one refers to an individual with a referring expression by having a uniquely exemplified description in mind. According to the latter, one fixes the reference of an expression by virtue of intending to do so when the item is perceptually presented to one on a particular occasion; when others hear the expression, they refer to the item in question by virtue of intending to use it with the same reference as the person they learned it from (Kripke 1972). While mixed modes of reference are typical in general, Alston argues that direct reference to God is primary in religious practice. Most people learn to refer to God by way of learning to refer to God in prayer, sacrament, ritual, etc., through which they take it they are in experiential contact with God. Moreover, most people intend to refer to what their predecessors refer to, ultimately to what it is the originators of their tradition referred to in experiential encounters with God.

Whether reference to God is primarily direct or descriptive is important for at least two reasons. First, it makes a difference to what is negotiable: if experiential encounter fixes the reference, then what is experienced is the referent of ‘God’ despite descriptions one had in mind, but if descriptions fix the reference, then, if nothing satisfies them, nothing answers to ‘God’. Second, it makes a difference to commonality between world religions: if experiential encounter fixes the reference rather than description, it is more likely that religions with radically divergent descriptions of the nature of Ultimate Reality are really in contact with the same being. Taken together, these two points tend to support inclusivism in the debate surrounding religious pluralism.

The problem of theological predication is especially poignant in light of the fact that our talk about God is derived from our talk about creatures, and God is radically different from creatures. In fact, many thinkers suggest that the difference is so radical that our speech cannot apply literally to God; at best, it can apply figuratively, e.g. metaphorically. Alston’s position on these concerns can be summarized under three headings (1989a).

First, some predicates seem to be literally applied to God. Consider some negative predicates, e.g. ‘God is immaterial, atemporal, not restricted to one spatial location, not dependent on anything else for his existence, not identical to Richard Nixon’; or consider some

positive relational predicates, e.g. ‘God is thought of by me now’, or even ‘God comforts us and strengthens us in adversity, forgives the sins of the truly repentant, communicates to us how we should live’. The latter mainly report the effect of God’s action on us without saying anything about what God did to bring it about. If, however, God is absolutely simple, as Thomas Aquinas thought, no positive non-relational predicate can literally apply to God since that would require God to exemplify a property standardly associated with the predicate, and that implies a distinction between God and God’s properties. Alston rejects the doctrine of simplicity and the doctrine of analogical predication that goes with it (1993b).

Second, in contrast to many contemporary theologians, Alston denies that our talk about God is *irreducibly* metaphorical. He argues that in the typical case of using a term metaphorically to express a truth, the speaker presents to the hearer something to which the predicate literally applies (an *exemplar*) and the speaker has in mind some resemblance between the exemplar and the subject, some salient, shared feature the speaker means to draw to the hearer’s attention, say *P*. A speaker cannot have *P* in mind without having a concept of *P*, in which case it is possible for others in the speaker’s linguistic community to have it too; thus, it is possible, in principle, to semantically correlate a predicate *in the language* with *P*. So the Psalmist truly says ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ only if it is possible, in principle, to literally express the same truth. Talk about God *cannot* be irreducibly metaphorical.

Third, Alston aims to clarify how personal predicates—both those that ascribe mental states, e.g. ‘knows’, ‘desires’, ‘intends’, and those that ascribe actions, e.g. ‘makes’, ‘guides’, ‘commands’, ‘forgives’—can apply literally to an immaterial and timeless being. Toward this end, he makes the general point that features common to the extension of a term need not be features partially constitutive of its meaning; consequently, their application may well have no bodily or temporal requirement. Thus, for example, the predicate in ‘God made the heavens and the earth’ might literally apply to God since our concept of making something is the concept of bringing something into existence, the concept being silent on how it happens. Furthermore, even if there are bodily and temporal requirements for the literal application of a term, they might be peripheral, in which case they might be simply lopped off or replaced with a functionally equivalent condition; the resulting concept could be literally applied to God.

All of the issues mentioned here are pursued further in Alston (2005).

The epistemology of religious experience

Alston develops a model of the epistemology of religious experience according to which persons’ beliefs about the activities, intentions, and character of God can owe their justification, in no small part, to their own putative perception of God, in the same general way that ordinary perceptual beliefs about the characteristics of the objects in our immediate environment can owe their justification to perception of those objects and not to arguments. The details have changed over the years, culminating in the model presented in Alston (1991), which is expressed in terms of the notion of a *doxastic practice*—a socially learned, monitored, and reinforced constellation of belief-forming dispositions and habits, each of which yields a certain belief from a certain input. But the basic idea is easily understood without this apparatus, despite its importance (Alston 1982, 2004).

Central to Alston’s model is a version of what Richard Swinburne calls the *Principle of Credulity* (PC): in general, if one’s belief that *x* is so-and-so is based on an experience which *seems* to one to be of *x*’s being so-and-so, then one’s belief that *x* is so-and-so is justified, *unless* one has a defeater. One has a defeater just in case one has sufficient reasons to suppose either

that (a) one's belief is false (a rebutter) or that (b) one's experience is not, in the circumstances, indicative of the truth (an underminer). To illustrate rebutters, suppose you are having an experience which seems to you to be of a bear behind some bushes ahead of you on the trail. Several of your friends who are in a position to tell you that there is a burned stump at that spot, but no bear. Their testimony gives you sufficient reason to think that your belief is false, and so your belief is not justified. To illustrate underminers, suppose you are having an experience which seems to you to be of a red wall. Someone who is in a position to know informs you that there is a red light shining on the wall. Their testimony does not give you sufficient reason to think that your belief is false, but it does give you sufficient reason to think that your experience is not, in the circumstances, indicative of the truth, and so your belief is not justified. To illustrate the plausibility of PC, you now believe that there are words before you on the basis of what you take to be a visual experience of words on a page. You do not believe this on the basis of an argument of any sort. Nevertheless, it seems to be a perfectly sensible, rational, justified, warranted belief for you to have, in your circumstances; furthermore, you have no defeaters. PC explains these facts. The main reason to endorse PC, however, is that without it those experientially-based beliefs of ours that we tend to think are justified, like the one of yours just mentioned, would not be justified.

It is crucial to Alston's model that we think of the experiences referred to in PC as *immediate*. One takes it that one is *directly aware* of the object of experience (the bear, the wall, the words), and not indirectly aware of it. To illustrate: when I watch the Mariners from the bleachers of Safeco Stadium and see Ichiro Suzuki smash the ball down the right-field line for a triple, I see him directly, while when I watch the Seahawks on television from a seat at the local sports bar and see Shaun Alexander slice through the defensive line on the television, I see him indirectly, by seeing an electronic image of him. It is also crucial to the model that we think of the justification conferred by experience as *immediate* or *direct*. A belief is *indirectly* or *mediately* justified just when it is justified by *reasons*, other things that one knows or justifiably believes. A belief is *directly* or *immediately* justified just when it is justified by something other than reasons. One option here is experience, as when I believe the wall is white simply because it appears white to me, or I believe the cat is on the mat simply because it appears so to me. Call the *practice* of forming such mundane perceptual beliefs *SP*. (Alston's defense of the foundationalist epistemology implicit here can be found in 1989b.)

Now, for many people, it seems to them that they have experiences in which they are directly aware of God's comforting, guiding, forgiving, strengthening, and communicating with them, for example. Thus, given PC, if these people believe that God loves them, is guiding them, forgives them, and communicating with them, etc., and those beliefs are based on those experiences, then those beliefs are justified, absent defeaters. Call such beliefs *M-beliefs*, for *manifestation*, and call the *practice* of forming M-beliefs on the basis of those experiences *MP*.

There are objections to the model, naturally. First, mundane perceptual beliefs are justified on the basis of sense experience because there is good reason to think that *SP* is reliable. But there is no good reason to suppose the practice of forming M-beliefs on the basis of putative perception of God is reliable. By way of reply, Alston makes two points.

First, the best arguments we have for thinking that *SP* is reliable are *epistemically circular*. That is, we assume the reliability of *SP* in using it to generate or defend at least one of the premises; we rely on the deliverances of *SP* in order to argue that *SP* is reliable (Alston 1991, 1993a). If we allow this for *SP*, we should allow it for *MP*, in which case those who participate in *MP* do have good reason to think *MP* is reliable by way of the deliverances of *MP*.

Second, to suppose that we must have good reason to think that SP is reliable in order to form justified perceptual beliefs on the basis of sense experience is tantamount to denying PC. PC countenances such beliefs being justified directly on the basis of sense experience, and not on the basis of arguments for the reliability of SP. To endorse PC yet simply insist that participants in MP must have good reason to think MP is reliable in order for M-beliefs to be justified on the basis of putative perception of God is to evince a *double standard*.

A second objection is that, even though engaging in SP puts us in effective cognitive contact with the world and sensory experience is a basis for directly justified beliefs about objects in the world, there are several differences between SP and sensory experience, on the one hand, and MP and religious experience, on the other hand, that show that MP does not put us in contact with God and, consequently, that religious experience cannot be a basis for directly justified M-beliefs. These differences include the following: (1) SP includes standard ways of checking the accuracy of perceptual beliefs, MP does not; (2) by engaging in SP we discover regularities that allow us to predict the course of our experience, MP does not; (3) SP is engaged in by every normal adult, MP is not; (4) sense experience is continuous and unavoidable while we are awake, religious experience is not; (5) sense experience is vivid and richly detailed, religious experience is not. In response, Alston makes two points.

First, although these differences are real, they must not be exaggerated. As for (1), MP does include standard ways of checking the accuracy of M-beliefs, although as in SP they are not conclusive. For example, in diverse religious communities we find these checks: (a) conformity with what would be expected given certain doctrines about the nature and purposes of God, (b) consequences of the experience such as inner peace and spiritual growth, and (c) content of experience that is not likely to have been drummed up by the one who has the experience. With respect to (2), by engaging in MP its practitioners have discovered that those who are more receptive and spiritually attuned are somewhat more apt to have such experiences. Regarding (3), many anthropologists argue that not all cultures objectify sense experience in the same way; if they are right, then, unless we load the dice by defining normality in terms of engagement in SP, SP is not engaged in by every normal adult. Moreover, sociological surveys reveal that many more normal adults take it that they have perceived God on some occasion than the objection lets on. As for (4), some practitioners of MP report what they take to be the continual presence of God, e.g. Brother Lawrence in *The Practice of the Presence of God*. With respect to (5), within sensory modalities we find great diversity in vividness and detail; contrast typical visual experiences with typical aural or gustatory experiences, for example.

Second, and much more importantly, there is no good reason to suppose that these differences constitute good reason to distinguish practices and experiences that put us in effective, experiential cognitive contact with reality from those that do not. Regarding (3) and (4), neither the degree of dispersal of a practice nor the rarity of its implementation shed any doubt on its capacity to inform us about what the world is like. Think in this connection of connoisseurs, experts, and idiot savants, or those blessed with the sort of physical insight that led to the Special and General Theory of Relativity. As for (5), human aural and gustatory experience can put us in contact with the world, and we can form a limited range of justified beliefs on the basis of them, even though those experiences tend to lack the sort of vividness and richness of detail characteristic of normal human visual experience. Likewise, less vivid and rich religious experiences might well put us in contact with God, and we can form a limited range of justified religious beliefs on the basis of them, even if such experiences do not justify other sorts of religious beliefs. Remember: Alston's model is concerned with *M-beliefs*, beliefs to the effect

that God loves one, is guiding one, forgiving one, present to one, and communicating with one, not just any belief with a religious content. With respect to (1) and (2), checks and predictions, to suppose that these constitute indicators of effective cognitive contact with reality is a sort of *imperialism*. It is to suppose that the only sort of reality to which we can have access is one whose character is such as to be conducive to checks and predictions; it is to impose standards that pertain to one practice of forming beliefs about what there is and what it's like to another. In this connection, note that neither introspection nor rational intuition are subject to the sorts of checks and predictions characteristic of SP. So why impose standards that are appropriate only for SP to MP?

A third objection to Alston's model is that whereas we have adequate purely naturalistic explanations of religious experience, we do not have adequate explanations of sense experience that do not appeal to physical objects and their properties. Alston responds that there is no non-epistemically circular way to rule out various alternative explanations of sensory experience (a point systematically developed at length in Alston 1993); it should hardly count against religious experience if it cannot do the same. Moreover, it is not clear whether we have any good purely naturalistic explanation for religious experience, and even if we do, at best it can only account for the proximate causes of religious experience, which leaves it open whether God plays a role in causing such experiences and whether he can be perceived therein.

A fourth objection is that the diversity of religious beliefs that stem from MP counts as reason to think it is unreliable. By way of reply, Alston distinguishes a multitude of things that might be expressed here, arguing that many of them do not pass muster. Still, he concedes that, in light of the most compelling version of the objection, the *degree* of justification that M-beliefs enjoy is less than it otherwise would be. Nevertheless, they can still enjoy a substantial degree of justification despite religious diversity.

The problem of evil

Alston's thought about the problem of evil focuses on various versions of the evidential argument from evil, especially those put forward by his former student, William Rowe. Rowe asks us to consider some especially horrendous instances of intense suffering, e.g. a fawn that is trapped in a forest fire caused by lightning being badly burned, suffering for days before dying, or a young girl who is brutally tortured, raped, and strangled to death (Rowe 1979, 1988). About these cases, which Rowe labels 'E1' and 'E2' respectively, Rowe contends (roughly) that, so far as we can see, there is no morally sufficient reason for God to permit them; thus, it is reasonable to believe that there is no such reason; thus, it is reasonable to believe that there is no God. In reply, Alston defends *the agnostic thesis*: grounds for belief in the existence of God aside, we are in no position to infer reasonably that there is no morally sufficient reason on the basis of our inability to conceive of one (1996c, 1996d).

Toward this end, Alston first canvasses various "theodical suggestions," attempts to explain what reasons might morally justify God in permitting suffering in general. He distinguishes sufferer-centered reasons from non-sufferer-centered reasons. The former include punishment, John Hick's soul-making theodicy (1978), Eleonore Stump's suggestion that natural evil contributes to God's aim to get us to turn away from things of the world to God by undermining our satisfaction with temporal goods (1985), and Marilyn McCord Adams's claim that our suffering makes possible a kind of empathetic identification with the suffering of God, which will deepen our intimacy with God, here or in the hereafter (1999). The latter include free will and natural law theodicies. Alston argues that each of these reasons might morally justify

God in permitting *some* suffering, perhaps even a good deal of it. However, Alston thinks that, with the possible exception of McCord Adams's theodicy, the sufferer-centered reasons *we know of* do not seem to be live possibilities for God's reason in permitting E1 and E2, especially the former. And non-sufferer-centered reasons could not be the *whole* of God's reason for permitting any suffering, as this would violate demands of divine justice, compassion, and love, unless the sufferer was adequately compensated, perhaps in an afterlife. Despite some sympathetic gestures toward some of these reasons, Alston concedes, for the sake of argument, that none of the sufferer-centered reasons could be any part of God's reasons for permitting E1 and E2, and that non-sufferer-centered reasons could not be the whole of God's reason for allowing any case of suffering. Thus, Alston concedes, for the sake of argument, that Rowe's premise is true: so far as we can see, there is no morally sufficient reason for God to permit E1 and E2.

Even given this concession, Alston argues that it is not reasonable to infer that there is no such reason on the basis of this concession. That's because it is reasonable to draw the inference only if it is reasonable to suppose that there is no morally sufficient reason available to God we don't know of, and it is not reasonable to make this supposition. There could be a morally sufficient reason available to God that we don't know of in two ways. First, we might not know all the conditions for the realization of some good that we do know of, e.g. perhaps, unbeknownst to us, the supreme fulfillment of one's deepest nature or beatific union with God requires horrendous suffering (or its permission). Second, there could be some significant good for the sufferer we don't know of, and that good might require horrendous suffering (or its permission). Importantly, these are not wacky, *ad hoc* possibilities; they represent common, sensible themes in lived theistic religions (see the book of Job among other sacred texts). Alston exhibits why it is unreasonable to suppose that there is no morally sufficient reason outside our ken in three ways, which together underscore the point that it would be unsurprising if there were justifying reasons outside our ken.

First, the pervasiveness of human intellectual progress in evaluative and other matters makes it reasonable to believe that what we now know is only a fraction of what there is to be known. "This creates a presumption that with respect to values, as well as the conditions of their realization, there is much that lies beyond our present grasp" (1996d: 320).

Second, Rowe's inference takes "the insights attainable by finite, fallible human beings as an adequate indication of what is available in the way of reasons to an omniscient, omnipotent being" (1996d: 317). But this is like supposing that when I am confronted with the activity or productions of a master in a field in which I have little expertise, it is reasonable for me to draw inferences about the quality of her work just because I 'don't get it'. I've taken a year of university physics. I'm faced with some theory about quantum phenomena and I can't make heads or tails of it. Certainly it is unreasonable for me to suppose it's likely that I'd be able to make sense of it. Similarly for other areas of expertise: painting, architectural design, chess, music, and so on.

Third, the inference under discussion "involves trying to determine whether there is a so-and-so in a territory the extent and composition of which is largely unknown to us" (1996d: 318). It is like people who are culturally and geographically isolated supposing that if there were something on earth beyond their forest, they'd likely discern it. It is like a physicist supposing that if there were something beyond the temporal bounds of the universe, we'd probably know about it (where those bounds are the big bang and the final crunch).

According to Alston, these considerations make it clear that it would not be surprising in the least if there were justifying reasons available to God we do not know of. Thus, it is not

reasonable to believe that there are no such reasons on the basis of our inability to think of one. For critical discussion of the sort of response typified by Alston, see Howard-Snyder 1996 and Trakakis 2007.

The nature of propositional faith

It is generally agreed that propositional faith, faith that *p*, involves two components, one cognitive and the other affective-attitudinal. Traditionally, the cognitive component is thought to be belief and the affective-attitudinal component some complex of tendencies toward certain feelings, desires, and behavior. Alston argues that the cognitive component of propositional faith, both religious and secular, need not be belief; acceptance can play the cognitive role (1996b).

Alston draws a sharp line between belief and acceptance (inspired by Cohen 1992). Belief differs from acceptance in at least three crucial ways. First, belief is a dispositional mental state while acceptance is a mental act. One finds oneself with a belief, whereas accepting *p* is the adoption or taking on of a positive attitude toward *p*. Second, belief is not under direct voluntary control while acceptance is. Third, while the act of acceptance results in a complex dispositional state much like belief (a state also called 'acceptance'), the complexes differ in an important way. If one believes that *p*, then if one considers whether it is the case that *p*, one will tend to feel that *p* is the case in the sense that one will be immediately and spontaneously struck with a sense of *p* being how things are, whereas if one accepts that *p*, one will definitely not tend to feel that *p* is the case if one considers whether it is the case that *p*; the immediacy and spontaneity central to belief is absent.

Alston describes several cases to help clarify the distinction. Consider a field general who must dispose his forces for impending battle with information insufficient to believe any of several competing hypotheses about how he might best deploy them. So what does he do? He takes the hypothesis that seems the most likely of the alternatives to be true, he commits himself to its truth, and acts on that basis. In short, he accepts it. A case that does not involve pressure to act can be found in the acceptance of theoretical positions. Alston likens his stance with respect to libertarian freedom in this way. He doesn't believe it; he doesn't find himself spontaneously feeling confident of its truth. But he adopts it, regards it as true, and draws various consequences from it in his reasoning.

Alston is concerned to display acceptance as an attractive alternative to belief for the cognitive component of a devout religious faith, especially Christian faith. In this connection, he makes several points. First, both propositional belief and propositional acceptance are found in devout Christians. Some Christians have no doubt that the Christian story is true, while others find it, in T.S. Eliot's words, the least false of the options. Second, many biblical and creedal formulations of what is required on the cognitive side are better understood as expressing propositional acceptance rather than propositional belief. Third, worries about a lack of faith are often worries about a lack of belief, worries that might well be mitigated with an understanding of acceptance. Fourth, faith is thought to be required and meritorious, but if the cognitive component of faith requires belief and belief is involuntary, then faith cannot be required or meritorious. However, if the cognitive component of faith only requires acceptance, then this impediment to faith's being required and meritorious is removed. Fourth, critics of religious faith often claim that it is unreasonable since religious belief is unreasonable. But if acceptance is sufficient for the cognitive component of faith, the question arises as to whether reasonable acceptance differs from reasonable belief in relevant ways. "Do belief and acceptance have different statuses vis-à-vis the need for evidence, reasons, grounds? Do judgments of rationality

and irrationality, justifiability or the reverse, apply differently to them? Or is the same story to be told about the two?" (1996b: 23). If the same story is *not* to be told about the two, then the prospects for reasonable acceptance *absent* reasonable belief may well arise, in which case the unreasonability of religious faith is much less easily established.

In the 1940s, when Alston entered academic philosophy, philosophy of religion in the West was on its deathbed. Today, it is a vibrant, flourishing field within the discipline. It is difficult to measure the influence of a single person on a transformation as dramatic as this, but I venture the conjecture that no single person has done more to contribute to it than William P. Alston.¹

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¹ Many thanks to James F. Sennett for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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