

RELI 4015 Mysticism and Religious Experience

Tutorial Reading (4.4): Kai-man Kwan, "The Argument from Religious Experience." In William Craig & J. P. Moreland, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, June 2009), pp. 498-552.

The Conflicting Claims Objection

Many critics claim that since religious experiences are so various and mutually contradictory, we should regard all of them with suspicion. Even if we grant some force to religious experiences, different religious experiences cancel one another's force in the end (Flew, 1966, pp. 126-127; Michael Martin, 1986, pp. 87-88). So it seems that the challenge of RE to naturalism can be easily neutralized.

<The Application of the PCT to Conflicting Experiences>

Firstly, the existing contradictions between religious experiences do not render the PCT inapplicable to them. To apply the PCT to some experiences is to have *initial* trust in them and, if they are defeated, to salvage as much as possible from them. It does not entail that they are all or mostly reliable. There is no contradiction in saying that we should have initial trust in conflicting experiences. Indeed, almost all sorts of experience or doxastic practices produce conflicting beliefs sooner or later. Empirically speaking no experience in which we trust is completely free from this problem. (Just think of the empiricists' "argument from illusion".) So why do we think that the presence of contradictions in religious experience should debar us from having initial trust, at least to some degree, in religious experience?

Now the critics seem to suggest a Sceptical Rule (SR):

SR When experiences or claims conflict with one another, we should reject all of them.

Should we adopt the SR instead? I don't think so. Consider the conflict of witnesses in the courts. It would be indeed stupid to reject all their accounts just because they conflict! It seems to be a rational strategy to try to reconcile their reports as much as possible. For example, a common core¹ can be identified. Another example: suppose a phenomenon occurred very briefly which led to conflicting reports: A reported seeing an aeroplane, B a spaceship, and C an air-balloon. It is absurd to suggest that we should reject all their statements and think that nothing has ever happened! At the very least we should accept the common content of their experiences: there is an *unidentified flying object*. Moreover, historical documents are also liable to massive contradictions. However we don't deduce from this phenomenon that historical enquiry is entirely pointless. The job of the historian is to utilize all these materials to reconstruct the past by harmonizing them without producing too much strain in the overall interpretation. Many historical accounts of a momentous historical event, e.g. China's Cultural Revolution, are contradictory. It is difficult to determine the exact course or nature of this event but it would be preposterous to deny that the Cultural Revolution has happened. All the above examples count against the sceptical policy and show that conflict of presumptive data is not irremediable.

In line with the above suggestions, although there is a significant degree of conflicts of the religious experiences at the highest level of description, a certain common core can still be extracted from them at a lower level of description.² For example, Davis carefully sifts through the data and suggests the following as the common core:

" (i) the mundane world of physical bodies, physical processes, and narrow centres of consciousness is not the whole or ultimate reality.

1 Indeed it is not the case that a "common core" has to be shared by all the eye-witness accounts. Sometimes it is sufficient that it is shared by the large majority of the accounts, provided that either the error of the deviant witness in that aspect can be explained or overwhelming explanatory power is attained by adopting the common core. Admittedly there are borderline cases in which we have to rely on our judgments.

2. Davis (chapter 7) provides detailed suggestions how the conflicts can be reconciled.

- (ii) ... there is a far deeper 'true self' which in some way depends on and participates in the ultimate reality.
- (iii) Whatever is the ultimate reality is holy, eternal, and of supreme value; it can appear to be more truly real than all else, since everything else depends on it.
- (iv) This holy power can be experienced as an awesome, loving, pardoning, guiding (etc.) presence with whom individuals can have a personal relationship ...
- (v) ... at least some mystical experiences are experiences of a very intimate union with the holy power ...
- (vi) Some kind of union or harmonious relation with the ultimate reality is the human being's *summum bonum*, his final liberation or salvation, and the means by which he discovers his 'true self' or 'true home'" (p. 191).

All the religious experiences point to the fact that there is another realm *up there* or *beyond* the naturalistic world. So even if REs have internal conflicts, arguably they can still lend support to ARE insofar as they tilt the balance away from naturalism. However, it is a kind of general support for the religious worldview instead of a specific support for theism at this level.

<Re-classification of Religious Experience>

To evaluate the epistemic status of TE relative to other kinds of RE, the Rule of Ground Level Sifting is helpful. What we need to do is to segregate the presumptive data into consistent subsets and then choose the one which has maximal weight. So let us reclassify REs in the following way:

A) *Theistic experience*

B) *Theism-compatible non-TE*

These REs, though not specifically theistic, are logically compatible with theism. It can be further divided into:

- 1) *theism-friendly non-TEs*: these experiences go quite well with theism and they can be readily interpreted theistically without distortion or implausible reinterpretation.
- 2) *theism-neutral non-TEs*: these experiences are compatible with theism and they can be interpreted theistically; however, they do not strongly suggest a theistic interpretation, and they can also be interpreted in a way which goes against theism.
- 3) *theism-unfriendly non-TEs*: these experiences are logically compatible with theism but seem to suggest an interpretation which is in tension with theism.

C) *Theism-incompatible non-TEs*: These experiences, if veridical in their most ramified description, are incompatible with theism because the Ultimate disclosed in these experiences is not personal.

I just explain my classification scheme above, and will soon discuss what kinds of religious experience can be placed within it. I have defended the claim that TE is a well-established type and so the Type PCT is applicable to it. As for other non-theistic experiences are concerned, they are also covered by the Token PCT, which means that they at least have some force. Now there seems to be a major conflict between TE and theism-incompatible non-TE. If we also take into consideration the theism-compatible non-TEs, then there are two competing groups of RE: the *pro-theistic group* which consists of TE plus theism-friendly non-TEs, and the *anti-theistic group* which consists of theism-incompatible plus theism-unfriendly non-TEs. (Since the theism-neutral non-TEs do not point in any specific direction, we can ignore them here.) The question is to decide which group has the greater weight. Before discussing this question, we need to clarify the nature of monistic mystical experience.

<Pure Consciousness Event and Monistic Mystical Experience>

How to accurately describe the monistic mystical experience is in fact a controversial question, and the mystics sometimes offer paradoxical descriptions. To clarify the problem, we need to distinguish these two experiences:

- 1) Awareness of undifferentiated unity, the One, the Self, and so on.
- 2) A pure state of awareness which is undifferentiated unity.

The first experience is more like an intuition, an insight into reality but the intentional structure of experience is intact. The second experience is the pure consciousness event (PCE) and it does not have an intentional structure at all. They are logically incompatible: no person can have both experiences at the same time. I propose that the phrase 'monistic mystical experience' should be used to refer to the first intuitive experience rather than the PCE because the PCE in itself is not specifically monistic. Indeed it *cannot* yield support to monism by virtue of its epistemic seeming because there is no conceptual element in the PCE. The PCE is not without its conceptual difficulties (see Katz) but we have empirical evidence for the PCE (Forman, Part I).

Consider this report:

"I would settle down, ... and there would just be a sort of complete silence void of content. The whole awareness would turn in, and there would be no thought, no activity, and no perception, yet it was somehow comforting.... I did not yet identify myself with this silent, content-free inner space. ... Then ... I began to recognize in it the essence of my own self as pure consciousness. Eventually, ... "I" as a separate entity just started to have no meaning ... There is no thought, there is no activity, there is no experiencer" (Forman, pp. 27-28).

The description is littered with paradoxes. Certainly, there was some experience akin to a PCE but it was also "somehow comforting". Did this sense of comfort feature within the experience or not? If yes, the experience is no longer pure. If no, then the sense of comfort should be another experience *subsequent* to the PCE. This is probably the case. I also wonder how the person can report a PCE afterwards. In the PCE, there is no thought and feeling and no awareness of any sort. How then can the subject later ascribe this experience to *himself*? This must be explained by the continuous operation of the memory even if it is somehow hidden during the PCE. But whose memory and whose PCE? To give intelligible answers to this question, it is difficult to avoid positing a self who possesses this PCE even though the sense of self is not present *in* the PCE. Indeed it is the interpretation adopted by the subject originally. But later the subject comes to another interpretation: "there is no thought, activity and experiencer". But this *thought* cannot be *given* in that experience. So this must be an *interpretation* imposed on the PCE due to subsequent reflection. So the question as to why this interpretation is justified has to be raised.

Perhaps we can conceive of the experiences as a unity. First, the subject has a PCE without monistic mystical experiences. However, when he comes back from this contentless state, *he* immediately has some monistic illuminations. The two experiences seem to go together and the PCE *in this context* may then be legitimately interpreted as an experience of the Self.. However, the same move is available to the theists. Pike argues that when the Christian mystics experience a 'monistic' interval within the context of dualistic experiences of God, it is legitimate to think that this "moment of experience in which the soul detects no distinction between itself and God is a kind of experiential fiction" (Pike, p. 156). The spirit is simply "deluded by love into not noticing the difference between itself and God." The upshot is that there is no simple way to connect PCEs with monistic mystical experiences, either conceptually or evidentially. So PCEs are theism-neutral.

Coherence and Conflict of Theistic Experience with Other Religious Experiences

I have just argued that Pure consciousness events (PCEs) are theism-neutral. The main reason is that a PCE has no propositional content and hence it cannot contradict theism). In fact in the earlier Cases, some people can have both PCEs and TEs, and they do not see any contradiction between them.

I think nature mysticism is also theism-neutral. It can be interpreted in either a monistic or theistic way. For example, Jonathan Edwards's experience of nature mysticism is explicitly integrated with a TE:

“The appearance of everything was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost everything. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, and trees; in the water and all nature” (quoted in Hick, 2006, p. 29).

The kind of unity sensed in nature mysticism can reflect either the unity of all things rooted in their common source- their Creator God, or the kind of metaphysical unity envisaged by monism.

Second, let us assess the weight of the Pro-theistic Group. I have contended that TE is a well-established type of experience, and it is plausible to think it has the highest degree of intra-coherence among REs. So TE is weighty in itself. Furthermore, many kinds of religious experiences are compatible with theism and can readily be interpreted theistically, and hence theism-friendly:

- a) Ecstasy and peak experience
- b) Encounter of the Light Being in a near-death experience
- c) Experience of evil spirit, angels or departed saints
- d) Experience of contingency - a spontaneous feeling that the world is somehow dependent on something beyond.
- e) Experience of design- experience of being struck by the beauty and intricacy of the natural order and the feeling that this order is ultimately due to Intelligence

(a) suggests a kind of spiritual depth in human beings which is more consonant with theism than with naturalism. If (b) and (c) are veridical, then there exist immaterial beings outside the bounds of nature. This is compatible with theism but incompatible with naturalism. (d) and (e) point somewhat in the direction of a Transcendent Creator-Designer. If these experiences are veridical, they are certainly friendly with theism, and can even offer significant support for theism. I think these experiences are not that uncommon but the empirical case cannot be made here. Anyway, as far as RE is concerned, the Pro-theistic Group has considerable weight.

Now let us assess the weight of the Anti-theistic Group. The prime examples of theism-incompatible non-TE are monistic mysticism and the experience of Nirvana. Since these experiences suggest the Ultimate is essentially impersonal, it conflicts with theism. I'll examine this conflict later. Let us now discuss theism-unfriendly non-TEs. Perhaps the experience of minor deities: e.g., visions of Kali or Buddha or Apollo, belong to this group. Michael Martin argues that they are *indirectly* incompatible with theism because they are embedded in a worldview which is at odds with the theistic one. Martin has a point but I would like to emphasize that logically speaking, it is possible that both God and these minor deities exist at the same time. The tension only arises because we have a further assumption that if God exists, He would not have created these minor deities. Otherwise, we can just regard these beings as spiritual creatures in God's world. However, perhaps given some plausible assumptions, these experiences may be *theism-unfriendly*. Since the conflict is not directly given in the experiences, I think it is quite possible to remove the tension by appropriate adjustment of our underlying assumptions and reinterpretation of those experiences.

As I have argued, cognitive adjustment is frequently needed even in our SEs, memories, and scientific inquiry. Deliverances of SE and memory often directly and indirectly conflict with one another. Some experimental data are frequently “indirectly incompatible” with other experimental data because the former are incompatible with the simplest law which are suggested by the latter. We might decide to stick to each

and every experimental datum *no matter what*, but no cognitive systematization is then possible. If we are not willing to forgo at least some presumptive data and take theoretical gain into considerations, no universal laws can be substantiated. For example, after performing an experiment, we have six data which fall roughly on a straight line but also an anomalous datum not even close to that line. I submit it is rational to discard the anomalous datum in favour of the six others. This is what the CTA advises, and is also what the scientists in fact are doing.

Martin objects that acceptance of the PCT would result in a bloated ontology. This reflects a lack of understanding of the CTA. He seems to think that the PCT automatically commits us to accept each and every experience of minor deity *in toto*. This kind of picture is not even true of our more mundane epistemic practices. So in accordance with the CTA, the rational way to do here is:

- We search for the neatest ontology or worldview which can preserve the maximal weight of the presumptive data here.
- Some of these data can be rejected if they are more vulnerable to defeaters and it results in a sufficient gain in simplicity or coherence. However, even in this situation, we should try to preserve their cognitive force as much as possible.

These considerations are just corollaries of the principles of the CTA. The theist does not need to give detailed answers about each and every RE in human history. He can be contented to point out that the argument for TE would be defeated *only if* the process of cognitive adjustment described above results in the truncation of the whole lot of TE. I do not think it is the case. To the contrary, it seems to me that those lesser divine beings are not as widely experienced as God is. So it seems to be justified, on all the evidence, to regard the existence of God as the defeater of the experiences of those lesser beings who are incompatible with existence of God, and not the other way round. Moreover, it is much simpler to accept theism, which is supported by the significant weight of the Pro-theistic Group.

We also need to investigate how common are these experiences, e.g., experience of Apollo. We can raise these questions: does it survive the test of age and culture? Is it widespread? Does anybody claim to have an experience of Apollo which can be described as a 'life in Apollo'? As far as I know, there is no evidence to show at least one third of people in contemporary Western societies have had an experience of Apollo, and that significant minorities in every culture have organized their life around the experiences of Apollo. I have never heard of a single Chinese having an experience of Apollo but many of them have definitely experienced God.

A theist does not need to choose between blanket rejection or blanket acceptance. He can adopt a more nuanced, case by case approach towards these experiences of minor deities.

- For those minor deities who are not really experienced by a sizable number of people across eras and cultures, the related experiences can be treated as anomalous data- either rejected or shelved
- There is no need to reduce all those REs to sheer self-deception or hallucination. For those minor deities who have a more substantial experiential basis, the related experiences can be explained as the work of spiritual beings, or treated as genuine phenomena in the spiritual world which we do not yet have a full understanding. In cases like an experience of Virgin Mary, it may readily be interpreted as a veridical vision which doesn't commit us to her literal existence in the manifested form.
- In any case, experiences of minor deities *apparently* point in a consistent direction beyond naturalism. If they can be readily defeated, say, by naturalistic explanations, then the problem of indirect conflict with TE is removed. If the naturalistic explanations available are not really adequate,³ then the whole group of such experiences can be taken to support a less specific claim: there are some spiritual forces in the world. This would actually provide further support for the theistic interpretation of the world.

3 For example, those experiences of minor deities may be supported by paranormal experiences which are hard to discredit.

- These experiences may be re-interpreted by monism as part of the *maya*. For example, Kali can be regarded as just one aspect of the Ultimate (the One) rather than an independently existing deity. This is possible but it is hard to see how those experiences can provide positive support for monism.

The theistic interpretation is further reinforced by considerations of inter-coherence and worldview coherence: we can also ask does anybody have an experience of Apollo or the like through experiences of nature, goodness, beauty, finitude, freedom, and so on? How does the veridicality of the experience of Apollo help to explain other experiences? Is there any worldview which revolves around the existence of Apollo which is coherent and having explanatory power, say, with regard to contemporary scientific findings like fine-tuning? Is there ever a natural theology for the existence of Apollo? I think the theistic worldview will fare much better in these aspects. The entire content of this book is a support for this claim.

To sum up, experiences of minor deities taken at their most ramified description may be somewhat theism-unfriendly. However, from the perspective of TE, there are plausible re-interpretations of experiences of minor deities (whereas the reverse does not seem to be true) which can salvage much of their epistemic force, which supports the claim that there are spiritual forces in this world. This is confirming theism as well.

<Is the Ultimate Reality Personal or Impersonal?>

As for the contradiction between the personal versus impersonal understanding of the *nature of the ultimate reality*, I believe it is not as stark as it is commonly made out. The Personal Ultimate can manifest himself in a non-personal way. The manifestation can still be veridical and revelatory. Consider Yahweh's epiphany to Elijah. God can be said to be manifested in the earthquake and the whirlwind but this is not yet a personal manifestation. However, the whole thing is transformed when the 'still small voice' is added to the scene. The whole experience becomes an unambiguous personal manifestation. So non-personal manifestation need not mean it is anti-personal. Indeed, the Old Testament scholar Rowley says, "we find *personal and impersonal factors* woven together in what the Hebrews believed to be God's manifestation of himself" (p. 45).

Wall suggests that

“experiences of God, some personal and some impersonal, may be analogous to viewing an object from different sides. Or perhaps it is like viewing an object from different distances: From a distance we do not see the needles of a pine, but up close we do; yet regardless of the differences in the experiences, we do not begin to think that we have seen different trees.” So “we might say that ‘from a distance’ we may see God as impersonal but ‘up close’ as personal” (Wall, pp. 319-20).

So in the end there is a conflict only if one claims that the Ultimate is *essentially personal*, and the other claims that the Ultimate is *essentially impersonal*. However, “we rarely, if ever, run across claims to the effect that someone was aware of experiencing God’s essential nature or some aspect of God as essential. In all cases I collected or examined I found neither claim made” (Wall, p. 320).

So in the end we do need to resolve the conflict between the claim that the Ultimate is essentially personal, and the contrary claim that the Ultimate is essentially impersonal. I explore the conflict of theism and monism of the Advaita Vedanta school below.

<Conflict of Theism and Monism>

The Advaita Vedanta school makes these claims:

- Brahman as the Impersonal Absolute is the Ultimate Reality in which there is no distinction and differentiation.
- Atman is Brahman, i.e., every human self is metaphysically identical to Brahman; hence every self is metaphysically identical to another self.
- The world is ultimately *maya* (illusion).

Obviously, these claims conflict with theism which asserts that the Ultimate is a Personal God who creates the world and distinct selves. Theism also claims that although all the latter are contingent upon the continuous creative act of God, they are nonetheless real and distinct from one another. In my CTA, we have resources to resolve this conflict: Principle of Comparison and Principle of Conflict Resolution. The crucial point is whether theistic experience is a better established type than monistic experience or vice versa. Let us briefly discuss this question:

1) Intra-coherence:

a) It seems to me the people who have monistic experiences (hereafter MEs) are confined to a relatively small group of mystics in various religious traditions, and mainly Eastern ones, whereas I have argued that theistic experience is present in various traditions and shared by a substantial portion of humankind.

b) I have argued that tokens of TE do form intricate coherence relationships whereas monistic experiences do not exhibit many modalities; nor do their tokens exhibit a complex pattern of coherence.

c) It seems to me the articulation of the monistic experience suffers from many conceptual difficulties: how is an experience of Nirvana or the Absolute possible? A noetic experience has an intrinsic structure but the Absolute is structure-less. If it is literally ineffable, how can it be communicated to form an inter-subjective type of experience? Hick is also aware of this kind of problem:

“to lose one's individual identity completely, like a drop becoming part of the ocean — a familiar simile in mystic literature — would be to lose the individual continuity of consciousness and memory in virtue of which the mystic would later be able to report the experience. How could someone remember being in a state in which he or she no longer existed as a distinct individual? There must, surely, have been a continuing strand of consciousness to enable them later to speak about it, while still enjoying something of its bliss” (Hick, 2006, p. 22).

I have defended the conceptual coherence of TE above. TE seems to have a higher degree of intra-coherence than ME.

2) Inter-coherence:

The degree of intercoherence of TE is high. It does not conflict with other basic types of human experience. It can even provide a framework for explaining them (e.g., moral experience and rational intuition). The following points concentrate on the intercoherence of ME with various kinds of noetic experience.

a) SE:

It seems that SE discloses a world of multiplicity and change. Since SE is one of the best established types of experience, then SE can serve as the defeater of almost all other types of experience. Now ME apparently comes in conflict with SE and this seems to be a serious problem. For example, Gale thinks that concerning monistic experiences, their “descriptions are often contradictory or in conflict with our best-established empirical beliefs, such as that there exists a multiplicity of distinct objects and events in space and time” (p. 303). This criticism has been pressed by Madhva in the thirteenth century *within the Hindu tradition itself* (Copleston, p. 80). The postulation of *maya* does not clearly help: isn't it introducing multiplicity within Brahman itself? There is also the move of *qualification*: there are degrees of reality and SE discloses something real at its level but not ultimately real. I, however, have the problem of understanding its exact meaning. If it means that the physical world, though real, is only contingent, it does not conflict with either SE or theism. If it means that the world is real only as an appearance, it again comes into conflict with SE.

b) Moral experience:

Monism also seems to come in conflict with the basic assumption of moral experience, i.e., there is an objective distinction between good and evil, right and wrong. It is questionable how this can be preserved in a system when All is One. Does it mean that in the end we can't distinguish Hitler from Mother Teresa, and Stalin from Gandhi? If so, it is a mockery of our ordinary consciousness, not to mention the morally

dangerous doctrine that Brahman is beyond good and evil. Of course, many monistic mystics exhibit a high degree of moral consciousness and display virtues in their lives. What I am pressing is the *logical* problem: are the moral experiences of the monistic mystics compatible with their monistic experiences? Furthermore, moral strife seems to presuppose a self distinct from Brahman:

"the teaching of the Advaita school about the need for moral purification, for detachment from selfish passions, and for the advance from ignorance to knowledge presupposes that it is in fact the human being who is being urged to turn to the One. It is the human being, not Brahman, who is called upon to recognize his or her relationship with the One. If the Advaita really means that the human being must disappear altogether, he should say so in an unambiguous manner ... Further, if the human being is appearance, to whom the appearance appear? To Brahman? If so, the Absolute presumably misleads itself, though why and how remains obscure" (Copleston, p. 84).

TE, on the other hand, provides an ontological explanation or basis for the basic distinction in morality and the categorical imperative, and there is experiential fusion between moral experience and TE. Conscience sometimes mediates the voice of God and experience of grace is often experienced in and with the experience of moral improvement and so on (see Kwan, 2006c).

c) Interpersonal experience:

Our interpersonal experience reveals the otherness of the *Thou*. Again this seems to be in conflict with the monistic doctrine that all these distinctions are just illusory. On the other hand, this type of experience is coherent with TE. For example, theism allows for ecstatic union of souls and the ecclesiological doctrine of the Body of Christ also suggests that although human persons are distinct, they are destined for intimate communion. So some insights of monism are preserved.

a) Experience of change:

According to monism, change is an illusion. But "nothing seems plainer than that there are a multiplicity of things in the world around us and that these, and our experience of them, are constantly changing. To deny the reality of change, variety and multiplicity seems to be the most bizarre of all religious or metaphysical procedures" (Lewis, 1969, p. 296).

So TE also seems to have a higher degree of intercoherence than ME.

3) Worldview coherence:

I assume that the theistic worldview has substantial explanatory power (see other chapters in this book). If there is not a comparable rational case for monism, then TE will have an advantage over ME. This question cannot be fully settled here of course.

As a summary, it seems possible to argue, with respect to clauses (a) and (b) (and possibly (c)) of the Principle of Comparison, that TE should be taken as the better established sub-type of RE. Therefore, in accordance with the Principle of Conflict Resolution, it is plausible to claim that TE would serve as the defeater of ME rather than the other way round.

4) Cognitive Adjustment:

Of course, it is not plausible just to dismiss the whole type of ME. For my case to be more convincing, some plausible post-experiential re-interpretation of ME is needed. First let us consider the case of extrovertive mysticism which

"takes its start from the facts of the world around us, and ... finds that all things run into one another in a unity in which all separate existence and variety is lost. There is nothing but the One, but the One is seen 'in or through the multiplicity of objects'" (Lewis, p. 302).

It seems that the core experience is a kind of nature mysticism which, as I have argued, is compatible with theism. On the other hand, there are also plausible interpretations of introvertive mysticism. Maritain suggests:

"The Hindu experience does appear therefore, to be a mystical experience in the natural order, a fruitive experience of the absolute, of that absolute which is the substantial *esse* of the soul and, in it and through it, of the divine absolute" (pp. 97-98).

The PCE can be interpreted as an experience of the substance of one's soul which is indeed grounded in God. Because the PCE is a purely negative experience, it is not surprising that a monistic intuition can occur after that. Although it is defeated, it can be seen to be a plausible error. Furthermore, theistic mysticism shows that the mystical path can be accommodated within theism, i.e. it is not at all surprising that God will bring about the experiences of emptiness. According to Louis Dupre, negative theology may be the first step to achieve spiritual poverty and humility. This enables us to see the emptiness of creaturely things and our inadequacies and liberates us from the attachment to things (Dupre, p.48).

Can it be done the other way round? Can the way of devotion be incorporated into the mystical path? Yes, but ultimately it is more like a concession than an integration. The Advaitin would allow that the *bhakti* is a legitimate way to Brahman but ultimately a loving devotion to Brahman, if he is consistent, must be regarded as based on ignorance. It is because devotion presupposes some sort of dualism and it conflicts with Advaita's non-dualism. So

"theism can give us a profound and beautiful way of integrating the insights of prophets with those of contemplatives and combining the paths of devotional worship and mystical endeavour. But if you try to do it the other way round the main teachings of theism begin to disappear: devotion fades and the revelations wither. While theism can convincingly absorb and enrich the mystical path without detriment to the latter, the mystical path cannot absorb theistic belief without relegating it to second place" (Smart, 1960, p. 72).

If this is the case, then the theistic way of cognitive adjustment preserves more PFJ than the monistic way. In accordance with the Principle of Conservation, the former is to be recommended.

Of course, the above is just the beginning of a critical dialogue between different religious traditions. I also have no time to discuss other theism-incompatible REs, e.g. experience of Nirvana (yet many things said above also count against these 'mystical' theism-incompatible REs). Nevertheless, I suggest tentatively that the CTA may have significant resources to resolve the conflicts, and at least it is not obvious that TE is *defeated* by monistic experience or other types.⁴ Yandell (1999, chapter 13) has also offered a strong critique of monistic non-TEs.

<Conclusion>

The degree of conflicts among REs is usually grossly over-estimated. Many REs are just different and far from logically inconsistent. REs as a whole still support theism more than naturalism. Among the REs, TE is a relatively well-established type, and it is also widely corroborated by a diverse group of theism-friendly REs. It is at least compatible with many mystical experiences, e.g., nature mysticism. Moreover, in accordance with the principles of CTA, a plausible case can be made that the Pro-theistic Group has a greater

4 Perhaps some may object that my interpretation of monistic experience is uncharitable. For example, Hick agrees that accounts of ME, when taken literally, are indeed incoherent. His solution is that we should interpret the mystical literature metaphorically: "the unitive language of Advaita Vedanta is ...metaphorically ... expressing a ... vivid awareness of the limitless reality in which we are rooted" (Hick, 2006, p. 23). I am not sure Hick's revisionism is really true to the monistic mystics' experience or traditions. In any case, a vivid awareness of the limitless reality in which we are rooted is compatible with theism because God is limitless, and we are indeed rooted in Him. So in any case, TE seems less problematic than monistic experience. If taken literally, the monistic experience is plagued by apparent incoherence. If taken metaphorically, it is not incompatible with theism, and cannot be taken to offer support for monism over against theism.

weight than the Anti-theistic Group. So TEs are by no means defeated by conflicting religious experiences. I have a fuller treatment elsewhere (Kwan, 2003).