

A Palamite Perspective on Conflicting Religious Experiences

Travis Dumsday
Concordia University of Edmonton

ABSTRACT: The claim that religious experiences provide evidence for the truth of theism faces the objection that the contents of such experiences are so diverse (sometimes even *contradictory*) as to belie any notion that they could boost the probability of theism. In reply, theistic philosophers have put forward a variety of explanations for this diversity. One suggestion is that at least some of the apparent conflict can be resolved when one takes into account the fact that God may have diverse attributes or aspects; thus, perhaps some encounter God *qua* manifested in one attribute, and others encounter Him via another. After surveying recent formulations of this aspectival explanation, I single out one version as especially promising, though it has heretofore received little in the way of sustained attention: namely, a version drawing on the Palamite theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

1. Introduction

The argument from religious experience forms an important part of the cumulative case for theism. Moreover, in the lives of a great many actual adherents to faith traditions, personal experience of the supernatural (or at least what *seems to them* to be supernatural) remains a key factor in motivating and/or sustaining belief. But is there adequate warrant for thinking that religious experiences¹ can properly play these roles?

A number of longstanding objections stand arrayed against the claim that they can. For instance, it is often alleged that a naturalistic explanation or set of explanations—whether neurological or psychoanalytic or sociological etc.—can fully account for the occurrence of such experiences, such that no recourse to the supernatural is needed. Or it is argued that the internal problems faced by theism are independently so crippling as to render it ineligible for receiving experiential support (e.g., the problem of evil makes theism rationally unsustainable, such that experiential evidence supposedly in its favour can be properly dismissed). Prominent among this slate of objections—which slate could be expanded—is what is sometimes referred to as the *problem of the diversity of religious experiences* or the *problem of conflicting religious experiences*. In an oft-cited statement of the basic difficulty, Antony Flew

¹ Many readers will already be familiar with the concept ‘religious experience’ as discussed in contemporary philosophy of religion, and with the common divisions between major types of such experience (e.g., quasi-sensory versus numinous versus mystical etc.). Those looking for a refresher might consult the partially overlapping taxonomies presented by Davis (1989, chs. 1 and 2), Jones (2021, chs. 1 and 2), Kwan (2009, 512–519), Netland (2022, chs. 1 and 6), Swinburne (2004, 293–303), and Yandell (1993, ch. 1; 1999, ch. 4). I trust as well that most readers will have some familiarity with case studies of religious experiences, a wide range of which can be consulted in sources like Allison (2022), Cohen (1979), Dumsday (2024), Fox (2003; 2008; 2014), Katz (2013), Klimek (2018), Maxwell and Tschudin (1990), Mills (2022), Paper (2005), Wiebe (1997; 2004; 2015), and Woollacott and Lorimer (2022).

(1966, 126–127) writes: “Religious experiences are enormously varied, ostensibly authenticating innumerable beliefs many of which are in contradiction with one another. . . . The varieties of religious experience include not only those which their subjects are inclined to interpret as visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary or senses of the guiding presence of Jesus Christ, but also others more outlandish presenting themselves as manifestations of Quetzalcoatl or Osiris or Dionysus or Shiva.” Davis (1989, 166) frames the problem in similar (though more diplomatic) terms: “[S]ince subjects cannot agree on a description of the alleged percept, their experiences must be at worst, illusory, at best, serious misperceptions, and in any case, generally unreliable.” Thus, some have visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, others of Kali or Buddha; some claim to be miraculously healed by the intervention of an angel, others by the ministrations of a long-deceased ancestor or nature spirit;² some experience mystic union with an impersonal Absolute, others with a personal God, etc. The prevalence of such conflicting phenomenological content allegedly shows that none of these experiences should be taken as veridical. Whatever evidential force any one such experience may initially be thought to carry is cancelled out when placed side by side with its innumerable competitors. Here is one way of stating the objection a bit more formally:

Premise 1 If God really existed and was the main source³ of religious experiences, then the phenomenological content of those experiences would be reliably consistent.

Premise 2 But the phenomenological content of those experiences is not reliably consistent—in fact it is frequently conflicting.

Conclusion 1 / Premise 3 Therefore God either does not exist or at least is not the main source of religious experiences.

Premise 4 If God either does not exist or at least is not the main source of religious experiences, then religious experiences cannot provide good evidence for theism.

Final Conclusion Therefore religious experiences cannot provide good evidence for theism.

The last example of conflict referenced above—conflict between mystical encounters—has received a particularly large amount of attention in the literature. This is partly because it is sometimes claimed that mystical experiences constitute a higher or deeper type of religious experience, as contrasted with comparatively superficial visions or auditions or other sorts of quasi-sensory encounters.⁴ Also it is thought by some that seeming conflict among the latter

² I here assume that experience of an apparent miracle counts as a religious experience, a widely though not universally held assumption. That being the case, Hume’s well-known treatment of conflicting miracles can be considered an important early modern locus of something like the present problem. See his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, book 10, section 95.

³ I use ‘main source’ rather than ‘source’ here in order to accommodate those theists who believe that there may also be subordinate incorporeal agents (e.g., angels or glorified saints) who sometimes produce religious experiences in people.

⁴ Note that I am merely relaying a normative judgement here, not endorsing it. A representative example of someone affirming that judgement is Wainwright (1981, 6): “Buddhist and Christian mystics tend to be

can more easily be accommodated by theism, there being no strict incompatibility between the reality of Kali or Apollo (conceived as minor deities or some other sort of lesser supernatural beings) and the reality of a unique infinitely perfect God.⁵ Moreover the conflict in the realm of mystical experience is taken by some to be particularly stark, the apparent incompatibility here being even less apt for reconciliation. Gellman (1997, 110) writes: “The claim is, then, that the existence of God is logically incompatible with the existence of Brahman. God is allegedly experienced to be a being who is *both* maximally valuable and personal. And Brahman is allegedly experienced to be a being who is *both* a maximally valuable being and impersonal. But there can be only one maximally valuable being, and it cannot be both a personal and an impersonal being. Hence, it cannot be the case that both God and Brahman exist” [emphases in original]. Or to cite Davis (1989, 171–172) on the same point: “How can ‘ultimate reality’ be both a personal being and an impersonal principle, identical to our inmost self and forever ‘other’, loving and utterly indifferent, good and amoral, knowable and unknowable, a plenitude and ‘emptiness?’”⁶ For all these reasons, this type of conflict between religious experiences (i.e., impersonal versus personal mystical encounters) will be the principal focus of this paper, though not the sole focus.

Philosophers opposed to naturalism, and thus disinclined simply to dismiss the evidential significance of religious experiences, have of course developed strategies of response to the problem of conflicting religious experiences. Notably, some adopt forms of religious pluralism (e.g., the Neo-Kantian solution championed by Hick (1989)), while others identify a particular tradition as the most accurate (whether for confessional or philosophical reasons) and from that anchor proceed to discern the extent to which the diverse religious experiences associated with *other* traditions can be accommodated by it.

That latter strategy can take on a variety of forms, as the explanatory details shift depending on the anchor tradition and the *prima facie* competing experiences under consideration. Confessional approaches also vary according to degrees of specificity; one

suspicious of visionary experiences . . . and to distinguish them from other more valued experiences.” Or consider Dupré (1981, 79): “Even to visions which illuminate, rather than deceive, we should not attach any importance, Saint John of the Cross advises. . . . At best sensory and imaginary visions or voices play a supporting role in the mystical development.” See also Sherrard (1998, 72).

⁵ Kwan (2009, 540) for instance writes: “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.” Similarly, Swinburne (2004, 316) notes that “a Greek’s claim to have talked to Poseidon is not necessarily in conflict with a Jew’s claim to have talked to the angel who watches over the sea; it is so only if to admit the existence of Poseidon is to commit one to a whole polytheistic theology, and there is no need to suppose that generally it is.” See also Wainwright (1981, 132–133).

⁶ Gellman and Davis both use the term ‘impersonal’ as their contrast to ‘personal,’ and we shall see other authors do likewise. By ‘impersonal’ they intend roughly ‘a quality or other entity that needn’t pertain to a person.’ I too follow this linguistic convention, which is common in the literature. However, ‘nonpersonal’ is really the better contrast with ‘personal,’ given the wider, potentially misleading (and sometimes pejorative) connotations that ‘impersonal’ can have in ordinary language contexts. (E.g., ‘impersonal’ sometimes carries the sense of ‘aloof’ or ‘unfriendly’ or ‘uncaring.’) So the reader should bear in mind that ‘impersonal’ in this discussion carries a narrower, technical sense. Moreover it should be noted that in highlighting the contrast between personal and impersonal mystical experiences, I do not thereby intend to downplay important distinctions within each of these two broad types. Notably, impersonal mystical experiences can differ significantly among themselves—e.g., some mystics speak of experiencing union with an impersonal One whereas others speak of it as union with the All or with Nothingness; some speak of that union as the realization of an identity of self with the One, whereas others describe it as involving a total dissolution of the self, etc. Some of these differences arguably played a significant role in religious history, for instance in the splitting off of Buddhism from the Hindu tradition.

might put forward a very Pentecostal-specific explanation (for instance) of conflicting experiences, drawing on distinctive insights of that tradition. Alternatively, one might put forward a more generically theistic explanation of, say, the Buddhist mystic's immersion in nirvana, an explanation usable as easily by the Pentecostal as by the Sikh or the Jewish believer.

Among the more generic theistic solutions that have been developed is what is sometimes termed the *aspectival solution*. This view holds that God, as an infinite Being, can be accurately characterized as having distinct aspects or attributes, some of which manifest His personal nature while others do not. Thus a mystic⁷ who encounters God via one of His impersonal traits or aspects, and subsequently adopts the belief that that represented the *whole* of the Ultimate's nature, will be mistaken on that point. This error is rooted in misreading a limited piece of data for the whole. When the internal richness of the divine Being is taken into account, the diversity of content involved in different people's experiences of Him becomes unsurprising. (To relate this solution back to the formal statement of the objection laid out above: it is challenging the truth of premise 1 by suggesting a reason why theism does *not* actually imply reliable consistency in the phenomenological content of religious experiences, but instead permits—perhaps *predicts*—a degree of diversity.)

The aspectival solution naturally has its pros and cons; the account I wish to take up here, which can be seen as a version of it, enjoys some distinctive advantages which make it worthy of special attention (or so I will argue). This account is associated with a specific tradition—the Palamite theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church—yet of itself is potentially employable more broadly, by any theist open to the truth of some of the core ideas constituting Palamism. So, **the overarching thesis of this paper can be summed up as follows:** the argument to theism from religious experience can reasonably be thought to withstand the critique arising from the problem of conflicting religious experiences, and it can do so partly by reference to a Palamite version of the aspectival solution to that problem (which version carries some advantages over and against other versions of that solution).

I should emphasize the relatively modest nature of this thesis; I am not claiming that the Palamite solution resolves the problem of conflicting religious experiences all by itself, but only that it can form *part* of an effective response—I am happy to grant that a fully satisfactory answer to the problem likely requires a multifaceted, cumulative case approach drawing on a wider set of conceptual and doctrinal resources. (To be fair, I think much the same can be said of most effective strategies of reply to major objections within the context of natural theology; for instance, I doubt that any single answer to the problem of evil or the problem of divine hiddenness is fully satisfactory when taken in isolation.) Moreover I am putting forward the Palamite solution within a specific dialectical context, namely, that of the attempt by theistic philosophers to defend the argument to theism from religious experience. Natural theology is by no means the only context in which the problem of conflicting religious experiences can be usefully discussed, and I do not wish to imply that non-theistic philosophers have no strategies of their own to put forward in their own contexts (nor would I in any way seek to devalue what they have written on it). The problem of conflicting religious experiences is a problem for any non-naturalist philosopher of religion, whether theistic or non-theistic, and the strategies of reply adopted by thinkers in the latter camp are absolutely worthy of serious consideration. Still, the present project is concerned more

⁷ As we shall see, presentations of the aspectival solution often focus on mystical experiences, though some authors take it as having a wider applicability to other types of religious experiences.

narrowly with developing and defending a theistic strategy of reply, and its audience will consist primarily (though I hope not exclusively) of theists who are wrestling with the problem. Finally, it is also worth bearing in mind that the problem of conflicting religious experiences can itself be seen as falling within a larger context, that of the problem of conflicting religions. (From a theistic perspective: Why would God permit competing revelations or pseudo-revelations?) Solving the former would play a role in addressing the latter, but would not by itself address it completely.⁸

The remainder of the paper is divided as follows: in the **next section** I provide some case studies of impersonal and personal mystical experiences, by way of providing some concrete examples to keep in mind when examining the philosophical import of their phenomenology. Then in **section three** I provide additional stage-setting regarding the aspectual solution to the problem of conflicting religious experiences, running through some of its major presentations in the recent literature. Along the way we shall see how the Palamite version of the solution has been alluded to on a few occasions, yet left mostly undeveloped. **Section four** sees some necessary background regarding Palamism, for the benefit of those readers who may be unfamiliar with it. (Though Palamism is increasingly the object of respectful attention in both philosophical and theological circles, it remains relatively little known outside of its Orthodox ambit.) In **section five** I lay out the Palamite solution to the problem of conflicting mystical experiences and argue that it boasts distinctive explanatory virtues. I also say something about the resources offered by the Orthodox tradition for addressing the wider variety of conflicting religious experiences (such as conflicting visions). In a concluding **sixth section** I deliver a short recapitulation of central claims and point to areas for future work.

2. Case Studies

2.1 Impersonal Mystical Experiences

Amit Goswami is a theoretical physicist and retired professor at the University of Oregon. In a recent essay he recounts an experience he had in 1976 during a meditation session:

On a sunny November morning, I was sitting quietly in my chair in my office doing japa.⁹ This was the seventh day since I had started, and I still had a lot of energy left. After about an hour of japa, I got an urge to take a walk outside. I continued my mantra deliberately as I walked out of my office, then out of the building, across the street, and onto the grassy meadow. And then the universe opened up to me. . . . I seemed to be at one with the cosmos, the grass, the trees, the sky. Sensations were present, in fact, intensified beyond belief. But these sensations paled into insignificance compared to the feeling of love that followed, a love that engulfed everything in my consciousness—until I lost comprehension of the process. This was ananda, bliss. There was a moment or two for which I have no description, no

⁸ A nice piece drawing out the relationship between the narrower and broader problems is Mavrodes (1993). For an accessible entry point into the broader problem, see McDermott (2009). For some of my own reflections on it, see Dumsday (2008).

⁹ This is a meditation practice involving recitation of a Sanskrit mantra.

thoughts, not even feeling. Afterwards, it was just bliss. . . . The feeling of all bliss did not stay long. By the end of the second day, it started fading. When I woke the next morning, it was all gone. A comparison with the literature told me that what I had experienced was called ananda Samadhi, Samadhi with bliss as an aftereffect. The Sanskrit word Samadhi stands for a convergence of two poles of experience, subject and object. In our ordinary ego experience, the split of subject and object is huge and quite distinct. In my experience, in that split second, there was hardly a distinction. [In Woollacott & Lorimer (2022, 21-22)]

This is a fairly representative example of a certain class of mystical experiences; it is impersonal in the sense that (so far as one can tell from Goswami's description) it did not involve any sort of communication or other interaction with anything perceived as a distinct personal entity. The core feature was instead a sense of unity with all. And yet the experience was also characterized by a strong affective component, described as love. This is interesting, in that love is often viewed as essentially interpersonal (paradigmatically, love obtains between persons). Here we have an experience of love, but seemingly prescinding from any explicitly personal source (or at least any Goswami could discern). There is also a kind of metaphysical ultimacy ascribed to the experience, evident not just from the language of bliss and total unity, but also from Goswami's later identification of the encounter as a form of Samadhi (which within Hinduism is typically understood as a kind of absorption into or union with the Ultimate/Absolute/Brahman).

For more than fifty years the Religious Experience Research Centre, currently hosted by the University of Wales, has been collecting data on religious experiences. It has assembled a substantial archive of reports collected from the general public, mostly from the United Kingdom. Though today its archives are digitized and available online, in the past the Centre would periodically publish anthologies of its archived experiences. Here is a report from their 1990 volume *Seeing the Invisible*. Published RERC reports were anonymized, but typically still came with basic demographic data appended, such as the sex and age of the experimenter. The following report was submitted by a 38-year-old woman:

I was standing alone on the edge of a low cliff overlooking a small valley leading to the sea. It was late afternoon or early evening and there were birds swooping in the sky—possibly swallows. Suddenly my mind 'felt' as though it had changed gear or twitched into another view of things. I still saw the birds and everything around me but instead of standing looking at them, I *was* them and they were me. I was also the sea and the sound of the sea and the grass and sky. Everything and I were the same, all one. It was the most peaceful and 'right' feeling imaginable and I knew without any smallest doubt that everything happened for a reason, a good reason, and fitted into everything else, like an arch with all the bricks supporting each other and their cornerstone without cement, just by their being there. I was filled, swamped, with happiness and peace. Everything was RIGHT. I don't know how long it lasted, probably only a second or two. I have never had this feeling again. (Maxwell and Tschudin 1990, 47, emphases in original)

The phenomenology involved here is clearly comparable to that featured in Goswami's experience, though substituting a sense of universal providence for the affect of love.

Here is another account published in the same RERC anthology, this time submitted by a 25-year-old man. He recounts two experiences, the first of which took place six years in the past while he was hiking in Scotland. He had become exhausted and was in a bad mood when the experience took place:

I was completely oblivious of my surroundings and walked automatically as if in a trance. Then I heard a sound behind me that I had never heard before and when I turned round to investigate, I saw four buzzards directly overhead. I felt as if they had called to let me know that they were there. From the moment I turned I felt all the fatigue drop away, all the pessimism and anxieties. The feeling of being narrow and cut off from something became a feeling of being vast and unbounded, as if I was connected with the whole universe. I understood William Blake's poem 'To see the world in a grain of sand.' Everything, including the stones on the path, seemed to be infinitely significant. As I watched the buzzards spiralling in the blue sky I felt identified with them and yet at the same time I was intensely aware of my own identity. I felt as though I were the centre of the universe and at the same time the centre was everywhere. I was conscious of a sustained power and the buzzards seemed to be a manifestation of it. . . . I felt as if a filter had been taken from my sense and I was seeing the concrete world as it really is and the purpose and meaning of it all. Time was suspended; I watched the buzzards until they were out of sight but I have no idea of how long it was. (Maxwell and Tschudin 1990, 173–174)

His second experience took place two years later, after a time of personal trials had prompted him to sample transcendental meditation:

Fortunately, I heard about Maharishi Mahesh Yogi insisting that it was easy to tap the 'source of power, meaning, and purpose' inside oneself. I had nothing to lose and I decided to give it a try. At least, I thought, if I can aim for that state of consciousness and reach it, I will know that it is not hallucination and that it can be induced purposefully instead of by accident. After three days of practicing meditation for two periods a day of a half hour each period, I attained the 'peak experience' of my life. From the beginning of my meditation I could feel an increase in energy and clarity of mind. When I experienced this transcending of thought, I felt again what I had felt in Scotland: unbounded, in harmony with the universe, decisive, clear, patient, serene, godlike. I felt as though I were being swept up into an unbounded ocean of energy and all I had to do was let myself be carried by it. I was conscious of a vast light that radiated from nowhere, not a dazzling light but soft like a pastel shade. I was intensely aware of my body, my breathing and heartbeat, and again I felt at the centre of everything, but with a profound sense of humility. I could hear my bedroom clock ticking but it wasn't associated with time, just the sound of the mechanism was infinitely beautiful for its own sake. Through my experiences and research I have come to believe that there is a purpose behind the universe. (Maxwell and Tschudin 1990, 174–175)

Although he clearly sees this second mystical experience as of a piece with his first, it is described somewhat differently, in terms of harmony rather than identity or unification, and with reference to the language of boundless energy and omnipresent light (radiating from no particular spatial direction or source); though a sense of timelessness was clearly an aspect of both.

Jordan Paper is Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at York University. In his book on mysticism, he recounts a profound experience he had in his youth (2004, 1–2):

In 1972, the most momentous event of my life took place on a perfect summer day at an ideal summer occasion, a weekend folk music / jazz festival on the beautiful park-island that forms the outer boundary of Toronto's harbor. . . . I was lying on my side and directly in my vision across a sunlit, mown field I perceived an attractive woman. Without moving my head or eyes, I focused on her, enjoying the vision with little or no thought, save a pleasant erotic feeling. At first she slowly filled my vision, as if I were floating toward her or her toward me. Then with increasing speed she came closer and closer, followed by trees, rocks, the field, then the entire universe, whirling in a giant vortex that funnelled into me. As everything literally became one with me, I perceived a bright light inside rather than outside of me. This light can best be described as white, but it was all colours simultaneously, and it was bright beyond the brightest light imaginable. I, the universe, began to fly faster and faster toward this light. At that moment, I comprehended that I had to make an instantaneous decision: I could enter the light into which I would merge and be gone or stop and end the experience. Somehow, I recognized what was happening; I sped into the light and dissolved in an immense flood tide of joy. Later—it could have been a quarter of an hour or an hour or more—I regained awareness. At first I was aware of a blissful nothingness; that is, the first awareness was simply of being aware while awash in the afterglow of bliss. Then there was an awareness of a somethingness, which I began to perceive as components took on specific qualities, took on names and meanings. The world was again around me; there was an 'I' that was again in a remembered world. But it was not the same 'I' as before. It was an 'I' that knew with absolute certitude that the state of being an 'I' was less true than the state of being not 'I,' that the only reality is a blissful, utterly undifferentiated nothingness in which there is no 'I.' As soon as I was again, that is, existing as a self-conscious, distinct entity, still not having moved, my readings of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Daodejing*, and of various Chan Buddhist texts came to the forefront of my consciousness. I realized that I had just experienced the primordial nothingness becoming a oneness; the oneness distinguished into a twoness; the twoness beaconing the myriad things. I truly understood *ziran* (spontaneity / nature), for I had just recreated myself and the world around me. Death could never again be a mystery, for I had experienced not-being.

Paper's experience shares several features with those cited above, including the sense of unity with all things, a profound sense of bliss, and an encounter with a light or energy that is immanent and pervading; however, his description places greater focus on the seeming loss of identity. Interesting too is his seemingly paradoxical notion that the Ultimate, sole reality

can properly be described as nothingness, a description seemingly influenced by his recent studies in Buddhist and Taoist thought.

In his book Paper goes on to cite comparable mystical experiences of others, drawing on a variety of sources. Here is part of a report from a 37-year-old psychiatrist (Paper 2004, 134):

The beginning of the experience was very sudden and dramatic, I was hit by a cosmic thunderbolt of immense power that instantly shattered and dissolved my everyday reality. I completely lost contact with the surrounding world; it disappeared as if by magic. . . . At that time, my only reality was a mass of swirling energy of immense proportions that seemed to contain all of Existence in an entirely abstract form. It had the brightness of myriads of suns, yet it was not on the same continuum with any light I knew from everyday life. . . . I had no categories for what I was witnessing. I could not maintain a sense of separate existence in the face of such a force. My ordinary identity was shattered and dissolved; I became one with the Source. Time lost any meaning whatsoever.¹⁰

The description here is notable in part because of its possible implication (arguably?) that his sense of lost or absorbed identity with the Absolute was not the result of a literal self-extinction but was due instead to an overwhelming sense of awe (and comparative smallness of self) in the face of this force/energy.

Athena Potari received her PhD in philosophy from Oxford University, and then in 2023 did a postdoctoral fellowship at Harvard University's Center for Hellenic Studies. She is also a longtime meditation practitioner, and reports the following:

That evening we had gathered with my sangha (i.e., group of fellow spiritual practitioners) in our meditation hall in Athens. The collective energy was vibrant and blossoming. . . . During meditation, one may experience deep states of absorption where sometimes it feels like the body is drifting away. That experience can be frightening, and thus there is often resistance to letting go; but that evening I did not care anymore. I allowed myself to let go completely into a deep absorption state which felt like I was literally dying. Everything stopped; my entire body numbed; I could not move. My thoughts stopped; I fell into an abyss that felt like death and life at the same time. Truly, no words can describe it! An invisible fire was swallowing me up. I gracefully let go into that swallowing until I was not there; or rather, there was 'I' yet not 'me.' After a while (I do not know how long since there was no sense of time) . . . I cracked open from the centre of my heart and everything opened up. Everything was, is ONE! I was not anymore, and I AM everything! There was no I; living consciousness revealed itself as ALL. All IS IT and I am That! The walls, the chairs, the ceiling, my fellow practitioners, the sky, the earth, everything that we believe as alive and not alive, animate and inanimate, the entire scenery we call 'life' and 'the world' revealed itself as one and alive vibrating consciousness 'waving at itself.' Waking up to itself! Dropping the veil of 'cosmic cinema'—the 'drama' that

¹⁰ Paper notes that the original source of this report is a book by Stanislov Grof (1998, 28).

covers the divinity and oneness of Being. Matter is consciousness; space is consciousness; everything is One spirit playing the role of ‘you’ and ‘I,’ of ‘it’ and ‘them,’ ‘here’ and ‘there’ in a vast dimensionless eternity which our mind divides into time. Veiling itself through the forgetting that there is only that one being, pure consciousness, alive emptiness-wholeness, apparently dividing into many, appearing as mind and matter, space and time. What I ‘saw’—realized in an indescribable living way—is that the entire world, or rather Being, is one, alive, vibrating, self-knowing consciousness. (Woolcott and Lorimer 2022, 10–11, emphases in original)

Again there is repeated use of energy terms (vibration, life, an absorbing/pervading invisible fire), an assertion of atemporality, an assertion of ultimacy (with the ascription of divinity to this underlying One/Being), and the tension between the sense of a *loss* of self-identity versus the *re-identification* of self with something far greater. It is interesting that Potari ascribes to the Ultimate not just consciousness but also self-awareness, and yet there is no impression that the experience involved connecting with a person or any sort of communion with a personal other (or Other).

As a final example, consider the experience of Jessica Corneille. Today she is a research psychologist and yoga instructor, but in 2016 she was an avowed atheist with little interest in religion or spirituality. That changed when she spontaneously had a mystical experience one morning:

I was suddenly overcome and overwhelmed by a tremendous sense of deeply embodied interconnection with everything and everyone in the entire universe. A spontaneous and noetic sense of absolute Oneness imbibed and activated every fibre in my body, and it felt as though a veil had been lifted from my eyes, or as though my lens of perception had been cleansed, and I was finally able to perceive the true nature of reality beyond all layers of conditioning—a reality that had been staring at me in the face my whole life, but that I had been blinded to until that very moment in time. I was bathed in the clearest ‘understanding’ of an all-pervading, infinite, and benevolent ‘intelligence’ that not only permeates the universe, but is the very essence from which it is made. Every cell in my body was suddenly overwhelmed with a love I had never previously experienced, in a state which remains indescribable after all these years. Of course, words are rather useless at conveying the experience. . . . Much like awakening from sleep, it felt as though I had awoken from reality—to Reality. Having said this, I was equally aware of the existence of multiple ‘layers’ of reality or perception through which one could experience life, and of their equal importance as derivatives of the same, One truth. I was also filled with the deep realization that the universe exists both outside and within each and every one of us, and that the answers lie within. Through self-realization, therefore, one could finally remember their true god-nature—not as a ‘god’ intended in religion and dogma—but as the connecting force that makes the universal dance possible. An overwhelming tsunami of gratitude hit me that morning, and I cried for what felt like hours, but in hindsight was probably more like minutes—time and space entirely ceased to make sense in that state. Everything around me, the animate and the inanimate, gleamed with life, and felt so quintessentially

innocent and benevolent, and yet so deeply wise. In many ways it was like being reborn—seeing life through child-like eyes, with a child-like heart. Colours and shines, touch, sounds, smells, and taste were amplified, and I felt as though my cells were vibrating with a new life-energy. (Woollacott and Lorimer 2022, 64–65)

Here again are themes of omnipresent energy or force, unification, a sense of overpowering love, and of divinity, though with an evident reluctance to understand that divinity through the lens of personalist theism—even while ascribing to it benevolence and intelligence. This encounter thus almost seems to straddle the borderline between impersonal and personal mysticism. It is thus a useful transition to a recounting of some explicitly personal mystical experiences.

2.2 Personal Mystical Experiences

Here is another case from the RERC files, related by a 60-year-old female clinical psychologist:

I had an experience when I was a young woman of 22, married and living with my husband in America. It was not an uneventful period of my life in general, but on the day of this experience I was under no particular stress and cannot recall having any emotion at all, or at least nothing approaching an ‘emotional state.’ It was about mid-morning. I came from the kitchen into the bedroom, sat at my dressing table, opened a drawer and began to do something quite ordinary, I can’t remember what, when I was suddenly overwhelmed by the presence of God. I was absolutely astounded. I hadn’t known there was a God at all. Having rejected the Roman Catholicism of my childhood while still in my teens, I was pretty much an atheist or agnostic and had no interest in religion. I had no such thoughts at the time, however. I was just shattered, shaken to the roots of my being. My initial reaction was that man wasn’t supposed to know this and I must surely be going to die, and I stumbled over to the bed, got in and pulled the bedclothes up over me like a terrified child; it wasn’t an attempt to escape—which would have been ridiculous, as God was manifestly within me—it was more a gesture to hold together, absorb the shock and not actually shatter. This was not a vision; no lights, no voices, but a much more immediate and definite kind of perception, as it involves recognition and not just apprehension of something or someone. In other words, this was not the apprehension of some being of incredible power and beauty and majesty who-must-be-God, this was ‘our’ God, awesome indeed in the majesty of His power, which I found personally to be absolutely breath-taking and could never have imagined, but ‘ours’ nevertheless in the sense of being non-alien, almost familiar in some way, the one whom on some level or another we have always known and instantly recognize even if we are seeing Him for the first time. God was entirely within me, not just some ‘divine spark’ or bit or whatever, but all of God; also, God was entirely without me, complete—I could lift my eyes to where He was—and this was one and the same God. This did not seem at all odd at the time, just natural, the way it was. Also, in case it needs saying, this was not

an experience of some divine ‘force’ or emanation or other impersonal manifestation. God is a personal being to whom we can relate, not that I dared to address Him. I told no one about the experience; it changed my life radically, but apparently in ways that were apparent only to me, as no one else appeared to notice any change in my behaviour. I did not return to church; nothing seemed more obvious to me at the time than that the Churches had no idea what they were playing with. Later, I trained as a psychologist, obtaining a PhD in clinical psychology and later worked as an Associate Professor. For the last few years I have been in private practice. Nothing in my professional training or experience has ever made me doubt the reality of what I have tried to describe to you. I am as convinced now, at age 60, as I was during those astonished days immediately following the experience. Indeed, I am still astonished sometimes. Why *should* there be a God? I can think of no convincing reasons. And a personal God at that! It all seems so unlikely! Then I am astonished all over again. (Maxwell and Tschudin 1990, 84–85, emphasis in original)

There are a number of interesting elements to this encounter, though for present purposes the chief item of note is the experiencer’s resolute insistence that God is personal, even while being radically immanent (and at the same time utterly transcendent).

Somewhat similar in tenor (if not in context) is the experience of Fr. A. James Bernstein. Today an Eastern Orthodox priest, Fr. Bernstein was raised in an observant Jewish home in New York City. In his teens he became friends with various Christian schoolmates, from whom he received a copy of the New Testament. This led to an interest in the claims of Christianity, prompting an extended inquiry which culminated in the following experience, which he recounts in his memoir (2008, 38–39):

Wrestling with the issues of truth is no simple matter. The more I struggled the more frustrated I became. I was entangled in a web of conflicting ideologies, and I realized that regardless of my effort, I might not be capable of discovering ultimate truth, of knowing God. This led to serious discouragement and a sense of futility. As a young man of sixteen, I was idealistic enough not to surrender to despair—but it was not easy. Often, in exasperation, I would wonder: If life has no ultimate design or purpose, why continue living? I arrived at a point of crisis when my need to discover the truth of God became all-consuming. I continued to study and win chess tournaments, and superficially appeared ‘normal,’ but beneath it all was an unseen maelstrom. Then a glimmer of hope appeared. I became aware that though my desire for God was praiseworthy, my efforts to discover or experience Him were futile: it was not possible for me as a finite creature, through my efforts alone, to discover the eternal God. The only way I could find Him was if He first found me. My only hope was that if I desired God enough, God in His love and mercy might reveal Himself to me. So I began praying, “God, if You exist, I beg of You, reveal Yourself to me.” Because I was so impressed with the Gospels and life of Christ, I also pleaded with most desperate intensity, “Enable me to know whether Christ is true or not.” For a few days I continued, in private and with an abundance of tears, to beseech the Creator to rescue me. Then the totally unexpected happened.

One day when I was alone in my bedroom, I very suddenly, as if from nowhere and yet also from everywhere, experienced a dramatic sense of the presence of God. It was much more than an inner warmth gradually building to a point of culmination. It was more like a flash of lightning coming from the pitch-black darkness of night. It was sudden and overwhelming, and I felt it at the core of my being. It is not possible to adequately describe the essence of this encounter. It was the living light of the presence of God. I did not merely think, I knew that it was God. I knew it as clearly as I knew my own existence and the existence of the world. The Presence communicated to me directly in an indescribable way, “I AM, I exist, I am always here with you, at all times and in all places. Do not fear; I love you and always will.” These were not words that I heard, but rather the sense of what was communicated. Also revealed was that Jesus Christ and the Gospels are true.

Note again the use of energy-terms (*living light* of the presence of God), but also the clear sense of this being a personal encounter, one which included the communication of explicit propositional content (though apparently in a non-verbal manner).

Craig Keener is a New Testament scholar and theologian, and a remarkably prolific author in those disciplines. Here he describes the experience that prompted his conversion (2021, 8–9):

I started out as an unchurched atheist who knew a lot more about ancient Greek myths than about Christianity, while for years some devout Methodist relatives prayed faithfully for my family. As an atheist, I allowed Christianity only about a 2 percent chance of being true. (Technically, by that point I was somewhat agnostic since I was no longer 100 percent certain about atheism. But I didn't tell anyone that, since I enjoyed looking down on most theists.) It looked to me as though most people who claimed to be Christians (back then it was maybe 80 percent of Americans) did not live as if they took their faith seriously. . . . Once I started thinking about it, however, I didn't want to stake my eternal destiny on even a 2 percent possibility of being wrong. I wasn't familiar with Pascal's wager, but that concept would have made sense to me: the stakes involved in trusting or denying God are rather high. I had been convinced enough of my atheism to make fun of Christians, but I was scared to make fun of God. I was not so sure of myself that I wouldn't consider evidence if somebody presented some. Indeed, on occasion I secretly asked any superior being that might be listening, if there was one, to show me the truth. For a seeker, asking God to show himself to you is not a bad place to begin. He shows himself more often where he is more welcome—though he does not usually show himself on our terms. I was hoping for empirical or historical evidence, of which, I now know, there is a lot. . . . In my case, though, the Lord chose a more humbling route. What convinced me initially was not historical evidence, scientific evidence, witnessing a miracle, or anything of the sort. One day, some Bible-wielding, conservative Baptist street preachers in black suits—students at a local, church-run Bible college—confronted me with what their Bible said about Jesus: God's Son, Jesus Christ, died and rose to save me. I argued with them for forty-five minutes and finally demanded, “If there's a God, where did the dinosaur

bones come from?” The question is logically fallacious—why should the existence of God conflict with the existence of dinosaurs?—but neither I nor (apparently) they yet understood that point. On the spot and having to come up with a quick answer, one retorted, “The devil put them there.” Disgusted, I walked away. (Their off-the-cuff response to my question about dinosaurs still draws my hearers’ laughs; they were certainly not paleontologists. But they did know what their Bible said about being made right with God.) Yet I experienced a sort of evidence that was less public but more compelling on the personal level. Over the next hour or two, I was overwhelmed with God’s own presence until my knees buckled under me and I gave in. I didn’t understand how God made me right with him by Jesus’s death and resurrection, but since that was what he was saying, I accepted it. I’d studied various religions and philosophies, but I experienced something that day that I had never experienced before. The presence, which I have often experienced since then, was more real and direct than that of another person physically talking to me in the same room. I actually felt God come inside me. The next few years were a journey of finding out the answers to the kinds of questions those Baptist Bible college students understandably hadn’t been able to answer. Nevertheless, biblically speaking, God himself had entered my life and begun to make me new.

Here again we find an overwhelming sense of the presence of the divine, accompanied by a revelatory communication of some kind; the encounter is clearly of an interpersonal nature.

In our globalized and multicultural modern environment, it is no longer all that uncommon for a person to belong to multiple spiritual traditions over time; occasionally this allows for comparison of experiences undergone in those distinct traditions. One example of this phenomenon can be seen in the life of Ágúst Magnússon, a philosopher at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee. Growing up in Iceland, he became an atheist in his teen years, but later developed an interest in Asian spiritual traditions. He began to practice Zen meditation, which at one point resulted in an impersonal mystical experience.¹¹ Later, while attending an American university, he underwent a gradual conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy. The following experience was a pivotal event in that conversion process. He recounts it in Magnússon (2012, 311–312):

After my experience at St Nicholas [attending a Paschal Liturgy], I decided to pray for the first time since I was a small child. This was done in a completely empirical mindset, an experiment to see if God was as accessible to the human person as the Orthodox theologians claimed. I had bought a small prayer rope and decided to pray the Jesus prayer, not viewing it as a mantra or a replacement for *zazen*, but rather as a way of discovering whether God was truly real. I sat cross-legged on my bed, lit a stick of incense, and started to breathe deeply: “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a

¹¹ He writes of this event as follows (2012, 303–304): “In the summer of 2004, I had what I can only describe as a mystical experience. It occurred after a period of intense meditation, fasting, and abstinence (thankfully; had it not, I probably would have dismissed its validity). Descriptions of such things are always inadequate, so I will not attempt one here. I will say that it was a moment of intense peace and joy, with my breath going deep and my soul feeling light. My eyes were opened for the first time in many years, and I could see the world as being filled with goodness, beauty, and grace.”

sinner.” My breath flowed, easy and light. My heart beat to the rhythm of the prayer. I felt relaxed, let go of thoughts, images, worries, anxieties. It was very similar to my experiences with Buddhist meditation. My fingers were moving over the knots of the rope, entering deeper into the prayer. And then, very suddenly, in the blink of an eye I felt my prayer was answered. I was not asking for anything or petitioning God. I was simply reaching out. And he was there. It was shocking, completely different from anything I had encountered in Hinduism or Buddhism, completely different from anything I had *ever* experienced [emphasis in original]. Here was not an abstract concept or a metaphysical reality but a Person. And as I stood in the presence of this Person, I felt peace and I felt love. Christ was there, in the room with me, noetically entering into my heart, my mind, my body, filling my life with his presence. It was no longer a question of whether or not to believe in the existence of God. He was as real as my friends and family. On that day I started to believe, not that God exists (of that there could be no doubt) but that he is in communion with us, beckoning us towards his love and mercy.

Another example of someone having experiences across multiple spiritual traditions is the Greek author writing under the pen-name of Dionysios Farasiotis. His memoir of years of spiritual searching, splitting time between various gurus in India and the monks of Mount Athos (especially the revered Elder Paisios (1924–1994)), became well-known in Greece after its publication there in 2001; an English translation appeared in 2008. He had powerful religious experiences of various kinds during his time studying in India,¹² but he ultimately became convinced that Eastern Orthodoxy was the only wholly true path. Here is an example of one of the experiences he had in the company of Elder Paisios, as told in Farasiotis (2008, 292–295):

Once I had the great blessing of driving Elder Paisios somewhere in my car. Sometimes, in the presence of his unaffected simplicity, natural kindness, sense of humour, and great humility, I would forget myself and get carried away in a familiarity that bordered on audacity. . . . So on that day, in my bold forgetfulness, I asked, “Elder, tell me about God. What is He like? Speak to me.” The elder didn’t say a word, so I simply continued to drive up the curving mountain road in silence. Suddenly, I began to feel God’s presence everywhere: in the car, out in the hills, and to the reaches of the farthest

¹² Here is an example, which occurred during his stay at the ashram of the prominent guru Satyananda Saraswati (1923–2009), as recounted in Farasiotis (2008, 202–203): “One morning around ten o’clock, I decided to meditate for a while, so I crossed my legs in the lotus position, closed my eyes, and began. After only a few minutes, a power suddenly seized hold of me with the force of a fierce blow. It repositioned my body, tightening my muscles and making my spinal column perfectly straight. It literally forced me into a flawless lotus position. Simultaneously, I saw in my mind an image with lurid colours, portraying the three most important energy channels, or *nadis*. It resembled the staff of Asclepius, the symbol for the medical profession, but with two entwined serpents, as in Hermes’ caduceus, instead of just one. The large central channel, called the *Sushumna nadi*, had a vivid yellow colour, while the two thinner ones, the *Ida* and *Pingala nadis*, which intertwined around the central channel, were red and blue. This state lasted a few moments and then left me, like a strong hand releasing my mind and body. I had been daily having the experience of being seized by some power, but this experience had an intensity of a different order. It was quite literally overwhelming. Naturally, I talked about this experience with the yogis, who viewed it as a sign of a special aptitude which I should make the most of by beginning to work on the energy channels. . . . Still, I had my reservations.”

galaxies. He was ‘everywhere present and filling all things,’¹³ without being identified with any of them. He permeated everything. . . . Indeed, His power is everywhere present, yet beyond all perception. . . . This power is what brought the trees, the mountains, the stars, and man himself into existence and what sustains them. . . . Simultaneously, I felt in my heart that God’s almighty power is also infinitely noble, with a refinement that could never allow His power or presence to pressure anyone. Although He is so very near us, He remains unseen so that we feel neither weighed down nor obligated even by His presence—for He in no way wishes to restrict us, but instead desires us to be completely free. . . . My soul felt such joy, contentment, and repose in the presence of God, Who is so simple, yet so mysterious. . . . In God’s embrace, I was filled with a deep calm that cast out all fear. Resting in the palm of His almighty hand, I had nothing to fear, for He knows all things in perfect wisdom and love. I felt a certainty about the origin of this world, its path through time, and its ultimate destination. And I rejoiced, for I knew that in the end He would be victorious and that His kindness and holiness would prevail. I wasn’t in this state for very long—perhaps for about two or three miles along the winding mountain road—but it was a very distinctive state, set apart from other altered states one experiences under the influence of alcohol, drugs, pleasure, pain, distress, or fear. It was as though someone lifted a veil from my mind, enabling my soul to live, not in a different world, but in the same world—the same world in its entirety. . . . It is certainly worth noting that the elder responded to my request to hear a few words from him with fervent prayer that moved God to grant even a wretch like me such an inestimably rich and bountiful experience.

Many further examples of impersonal and personal mystical experiences could be given, but I trust that the preceding sampling will suffice for present purposes. It is clear that, at least *prima facie*, there are serious tensions (if not outright conflicts) between some of the experiences listed in (2.1) and some of those in (2.2)—hence the philosophical puzzle.

Let us now turn to one commonly discussed strategy for solving that puzzle.

3. The Aspectival Solution

Charles Taliaferro (2023) outlines the core idea: “Theists have proposed that more impersonal experiences of the Divine represent only one aspect of God. God is a person or is person-like, but God can also be experienced, for example, as sheer luminous unity.” Earlier he wrote (1998, 277) on the same theme:

The difference between God being ‘a caring loving person’ and ‘an impersonal absolute and ultimate reality’ may at first also seem a stark, uneliminable difference. But even here the contrast need not be strict. Could God be at once personal and yet also appear to have an impersonal aspect? God might be adequately described as a person insofar as God has intensions, knowledge and acts, and yet God may be described as impersonal

¹³ Here he is quoting a line from the Orthodox Liturgy.

in that God necessarily exists or that as an essentially good being God can function as a moral reference point (divine laws or principles) and thus appear as an abstract entity of sorts.

Thus someone could conceivably encounter God solely in His attribute of necessary being (perhaps in contrast with the mystic's own existential contingency and dependence), or solely in His aspect of inner unity/oneness (perhaps in contrast with the mystic's own internal disunity), without thereby experiencing God as personal. And if the mystic recognizes (correctly) that this necessary Being or One is the metaphysically and axiologically Ultimate, he or she might be led to conclude that this Ultimate is impersonal. Why? Because a partial aspect has been misinterpreted as representative of the entire divine Being. A part has been taken for the whole. And yet (it is hypothesized) that is not what the experience itself revealed, strictly speaking. The mystic, in other words, experienced the Ultimate's necessity or unity or status as moral foundation, etc., which are indeed attributes that can be understood in impersonal terms, insofar as they involve no conceptual entailment of personality. (Impersonal entities can be unified, and, at least if one recognizes the reality of platonic abstracta, they can also be necessarily existent.) But on this interpretation the mystic did not literally experience the *impersonality* of the Being possessed of these attributes. The impersonality of the Being possessing these attributes was not part of the phenomenological content of the encounter.

Though William Alston does not pursue the aspectival solution in much detail, ultimately preferring a different line of response to the diversity problem facing Christian mysticism, he is aware of it and seems to think it may be of some use in thinking through the problem (1991, 257): "Much of the controversy between religions comes not from incompatibility in positive assertions, but in the fact that each implicitly denies what is said by the others. If Vedanta or Yoga mystics report that they are aware of an undifferentiated unity, that attribution in itself is not incompatible with characterizing that same being as a personal agent, unless a denial of the latter is read into the former." Later he adds (1991, 264–265):

Again, if we take Hindu and Buddhist impersonalist accounts of the Ultimate as giving us merely one aspect of the matter, with personalist accounts giving us other aspects, and if we delete any claims to be giving the 'most fundamental' account, they will all be compatible, assuming that these various 'aspects' can in principle be possessed by the same being. After all, persons have impersonal aspects. I am a person, but I have many things in common with nonpersons, such as weight and size. This kind of point has often been made. . . . A personalistic and an impersonalistic account of the Ultimate are, or can be, incompatible if each purports to be the basic account of what the Ultimate is like in itself. If, on the other hand, each is simply spelling out the way the Ultimate is encountered, experienced, and conceptualized from the standpoint of a given cultural tradition, there is no logical conflict between them.

Jerome Gellman also advocates an aspectival approach to conflicting mystical experiences. He emphasizes God's ontological fullness, His infinite plenitude, which grounds the possession of diverse aspects or attributes (1997, 118–119):

Given all of this, judging from what is revealed of God in experience, we can readily see how it could be possible for God to be experienced in ways other than and contradictory to His being a personal being. For instead, other features of God could emerge into the open out of the plenitude, just as God's personhood does. God could be experienced wholly as an impersonal being. And we can readily understand how it could be possible that the experience of God as a wholly impersonal being would be pure 'bliss and joy,' as are experiences of impersonal Brahman. . . . The idea is not that God actually possesses contradictory properties. Rather, the idea is that out of God's inexhaustible plenitude He has the innate power to appear as either personal or as impersonal. Or to put it differently, God has an 'aspect' which is personal and an 'aspect' which is impersonal. Out of the plenitude can emerge either of these aspects in the absence of the other.

The mistake of the mystic affirming a wholly impersonal Ultimate is again to be found in misinterpreting a limited aspect of the divine Being for the whole.

Along similar lines, a substantial portion of Keith Ward's (1987) project in comparative religion is spent trying to show that even the most seemingly impersonalist of traditions (Advaita Vedanta and certain strands of Buddhism) in fact leave room for personal manifestations of the Ultimate in mystical experience, and that on the other hand Christianity, Judaism, and Islam all allow for some impersonal manifestations of the divine. Ward ultimately cashes this out in a version of the aspectival solution (1987, 127):

However difficult a concept it may be, it seems that the religious traditions considered so far agree that we must see in the ultimate reality—which we may call 'God', the ultimate focus of creative being and value—a duality of aspect. The primal aspect of God is that in which he is free from contact, the absolute One. He is not dependent on anything else, and so he is unchangeable, indivisible and unlimited in existence and value. This is the *ousia* or essence of God, complete, indivisible, and unchanging. . . . But that is not all one can say of God. Indeed, to say that alone is impossible, for it would be incomprehensible altogether and irrelevant to us. There is another aspect of the divine Being; and we may call this the qualified aspect; the *energeia* or activity of the same God. Without changing at all, God manifests his simple nature in time and creativity, as Ruler and Judge of all things.

Ward then adds the following in an endnote (1987, 189), giving us our first explicit mention so far of the Palamite tradition: "The distinction of *ousia* and *energeia* became at one time standard in Orthodox theology. Rooted in the work of Gregory of Nazianzus, it was developed by Gregory Palamas (1296–1359)." Unfortunately Ward does not expand on this reference to Palamas.

Caroline Franks Davis employs several distinct lines of reply to the problem of conflicting religious experiences, appearing to favour an eclectic or cumulative case response. One line of reply is the aspectival solution, and here we get another explicit reference to the Orthodox Palamite perspective (1989, 188):

The Greek Fathers reconciled experiences of God as immanent and transcendent, indwelling and object of worship, through doctrines of

deification (Dionysius' theory of the gradual divinization (*theosis*) of man has parallels in Brahman-Atman identity) and the distinction between the energies (*dunameis*) of God, through which God is present throughout creation, and in which we can participate, and the essence (*ousia*) of God, God in himself, transcendent, unknowable, the 'dazzling darkness' of the mystic quest. This could also be expressed as the distinction between God in his love and humanity, especially as revealed in the incarnation, and the unknowable God in his greatness and glory.

Again, the relevant patristic metaphysics here is not further elaborated by Davis, but like Ward she is clearly familiar with the basic idea.

S. Mark Heim also references Palamite doctrine as a part of his discussion of the aspectual solution, though it is a fairly small part (his larger focus being the relevance of other components of Trinitarian theology for addressing the diversity problem). Heim (2001, 27) writes:

In the Eastern Orthodox tradition the "energies" of God were distinguished as communicable aspects of God's nature. This recalls those portions of scripture that treat God's holiness and glory as somewhat impersonal qualities. The divine energies are certainly personal in that their communication to humans enhances and deepens human personhood, relation with God and others. Perhaps they might be called "interpersonal". They can be communicated from one to another. The divinity of the Word, who is already God, is incommunicable, but the energies are transferable. They flow out to humans and in no way diminish the source from which they come. God is no less God for sharing the divine energies. The primary image the tradition uses to describe these energies is light, the light which illumines Christ and Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, for instance. This light of glory or divine energy is thoroughly personal in the sense that it is intrinsically associated with the triune persons. When received, it becomes part of the person, a visible expression of communion with the divine. Abstracted or isolated, it is impersonal. It is the glory of persons, but by itself it is not a person. Taken by itself, it leads only in an apophatic direction.

The divine energies are distinct from the divine nature and the divine persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), and thus in a sense can be characterized as strictly impersonal; though inherently inseparable from the divine persons, some of these energies at least may be capable of being encountered by the human being in such a way that they are experientially and conceptually abstracted from the divine persons. Conceivably such experiences of the divine energies could account for what is going on in *prima facie* impersonal mystical encounters.

Heim later (2001, 34–35) emphasizes again the biblical basis for the propriety of attributing impersonal elements to God (whether labelled as energies or attributes or aspects):

There is a very real note in Scripture that highlights an impersonal side of the divine. In the Old Testament the holiness of God and the direct presence of God frequently have this character, like a fire in the presence of which

everything mortal is consumed. Theophanies, or even the continuing presence of God that rests in the ark of the tabernacle as it travels with the people of Israel, have this quality. Humans exposed to this presence are in great danger, in a purely “chemical” and impersonal sense, quite apart from any specific intention on God’s part. It is as if a creature stepped into a circuit where unimaginable current was being exchanged. The raw divine life is a “consuming fire”, and accounts of those who encounter it (Moses or Job, for instance) trade strongly on the language of impersonal forces like fire and wind. This divine power or force might be viewed as something like an electrical charge or field, generated by the constant interchange of the three divine persons with each other. Just as living organisms have a variation in electrical potential in the body, a living exchange, so does the divine life have its own generative process.¹⁴

Heim goes on to suggest that the activity/energy of God’s causally sustaining the created order might be an example of an aspect of the divine that could be experienced impersonally, and thus function as the foundation for mystical encounters associated with some Hindu schools of thought (among others). He writes (2001, 35): “Just as our personhood is not discernible at the level of the molecular interactions that take place in our bodies, so God is ‘impersonal’ when encountered in this dimension of the divine immanence.” Later he adds (2001, 38) that “Christians regard this as the immanent, sustaining activity of God. But taken alone it is liable to characterizations like ‘matrix’ or ‘force.’ . . . [T]he view of a sustaining power at the base of all things can lead toward a more positive image of an underlying reality, present alike in all that is. Nowhere is this perception more powerfully manifest than in the Advaita Vedanta tradition of Hinduism. Brahman, the one unshakable reality, sustains all things by pervading all things, by identity with all things.” The Hindu mystic is thus perceiving something real, and indeed something real about God, but draws incomplete (and thus somewhat faulty) conclusions from it; though accurately discerning the presence of divinity, he mistakes a single divine energy for the entire divine essence from which it flows, and mistakes a qualified and partial identity relation obtaining between creation and Creator with a total identification.

The preceding overview is incomplete; a fuller presentation would have included discussions of the aspectival solution as formulated by Byrne (1995; 2011), McKim (1988), and Wall (1995), among others. Still, it should provide a representative sense of the aspectival solution to the problem of conflicting religious experiences (especially of the mystical

¹⁴ That there is a biblical foundation for the aspectival solution is also noted by Kwan (2009, 542): “As for the contradiction between the personal and 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 nonpersonal way. The manifestation can still be veridical and revelatory. . . . So nonpersonal manifestation need not mean that it is antipersonal. 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’ (1956, 45)” [emphases in original].

variety).¹⁵ Advocates of the reply clearly develop it in somewhat different ways, though a common core is evident across them.

It is worth observing that, for the most part, advocates of the aspectival solution do not delve much into the metaphysics or philosophical theology involved—that is, they tend not to clarify what model of God they are working with, and so leave unspecified how exactly the divine nature is related to the diverse divine attributes, or how those attributes relate to one another. To be fair, those are deep waters, and one might suppose that such additional specification is not strictly necessary to run the basic aspectival reply. What is necessary is simply the affirmation of a genuine distinction (however exactly that is cashed out) between the divine essence or substance or nature on the one hand, and the divine aspects or traits or attributes or energies on the other. This minimal commitment allows for a broad employment of the aspectival reply across specific theological traditions and models.

That said, one might worry that even that minimal commitment may render the aspectival solution inadmissible by advocates of some prominent models of God—I think here especially of those versions of absolute divine simplicity according to which God has no attributes or aspects or energies really (objectively) distinct from His nature or essence. Thus it is not clear whether a Thomist (for instance) would be able to employ any version of the aspectival response. Given the popularity of Thomism, its tension with the aspectival reply (though perhaps not an insoluble tension?) draws attention to the fact that advocates of the reply might have done well to devote at least some further attention to the specifics of the relevant philosophical theology being presupposed.

That is one reason why it would be profitable to explore in greater detail the Palamite version of the aspectival reply. So far as I am aware, the recent literature has seen no further applications of Palamism to the problem, over and above the discussions by Ward (1987), Davis (1989), and Heim (2001) cited above; moreover those three authors employ it in a somewhat tangential fashion. In each case, the Palamite approach is not the primary focus, but rather a supplementary component of a wider discussion. That being the case, it is unsurprising that none has expanded on the relevant metaphysics of Palamism or sought to develop and defend it further as a distinctive version of the aspectival solution. That will therefore be the goal of the remainder of this paper.

To that end, let us first spend some time clarifying what exactly Palamite theology consists in, with an eye to those components of it which are most relevant to the aspectival solution.

4. An Overview of Palamite Theology

¹⁵ Most of the authors cited in this section self-identify as Christian, and their work can be considered as falling within the fields of analytic philosophy of religion and/or analytic theology. Moreover other Christian analytic philosophers and theologians have pursued still other answers to the problem of conflicting mystical experiences (answers distinct from the aspectival reply). I think for instance of Keith Yandell's (1993; 1999) detailed engagement with Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain mysticism from a Christian perspective, or the work of Mark McLeod-Harrison (2005), or, going a bit further back in time, the works of William Wainwright (1981) and H.D. Lewis (1969, ch. 15). With all that in mind, it is frustrating to see Spencer (2021, 1028–1030 and 1042–1043) lamenting at length the lack of interest by Christian analytic philosophers in mysticism in general, and in the problem of conflicting mystical experiences in particular. Spencer seems simply to have missed a large body of directly relevant research. (And I speak here only of work on mysticism by Christian *analytic* philosophers; there is a still wider body of pertinent writings by Christian scholars outside the analytic sphere, scholars like Stratford Caldecott (2013), Frederick Copleston (1982), Georges Cardinal Cottier (2003), and Jacques Maritain (1944, ch. 10), among others.)

'Palamism' is a label commonly used to refer to the thought of Byzantine theologian St. Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), which has been highly influential within the Eastern Orthodox Church. Palamas seeks to put forward a unified theological stance that coherently and accurately integrates ideas from earlier patristic sources.¹⁶

What is distinctive about Palamism, setting it apart from other Christian theological perspectives? Four interrelated commitments can plausibly be seen as constituting its core:

(i) It adopts a moderate conception of divine simplicity. There is genuine complexity within God, in the sense that there are objective (i.e., independent of human conceptualization) distinctions between the divine essence, divine Persons, and divine energies. The divine nature is thus not literally wholly identical to the divine goodness, nor is that goodness strictly identical with His power. This complexity is thought to introduce no *composition* within God, nothing that could compromise divine aseity or necessity by requiring external causal intervention in the divine Being. Palamism is in this respect in line with the philosophical theology of many contemporary Evangelical scholars, who commonly (though not universally) accept the reality of objective distinctions between essence and attributes, and amongst the latter.¹⁷ In affirming this moderate conception of divine simplicity, Palamism is also akin to some Scholastic systems, notably Scotism.¹⁸

(ii) Palamite theology acknowledges the reality of distinct types of divine energy. These include: divine activities, notably the external-facing acts of creation, conservation, providential governance, and deification (more on deification shortly); divine ideas (e.g., God's eternal knowledge of possibilities); divine intentions or acts of will; and God's assorted attributes/traits/properties, for instance His omnipotence, infinity, eternity, mercy, justice, etc. Each of these aspects of the divine Life has been denominated an 'energy' by Palamites at one time or another. Note that this fourfold taxonomy needn't be viewed as exhaustive—perhaps there are still other sorts of divine energy. And perhaps its members needn't be seen as mutually exclusive—maybe a divine energy could crosscut these categories, counting as both an act and an attribute, for instance. Drawing parallels to physics is always risky, but an analogy might be made here to the way in which charge is conceptualized both as an intrinsic property of a particle (when we say that an electron is negatively charged), and as an outward emanation from a particle (the electromagnetic field generated by the motion of an electron).¹⁹ Now, what groups this *prima facie* heterogeneous set of divine aspects under the rubric 'energy'? Bradshaw (2004, 273) suggests that it is their shared status as revelatory of God, if in different ways: "What could such a disparate group have in common? Simply that they are *acts of self-manifestation*" [emphasis in original]. This

¹⁶ Note that the degree to which Palamas succeeds in that integration project is controversial; still, within Orthodoxy he is viewed as a faithful transmitter and interpreter of earlier Fathers. Supporters of this continuity hermeneutic include Bradshaw (2004; 2023), Farrell (1989), Florovsky (1976), Golitzin (2013), Lossky (1957; 1978), Pino (2023), Russell (2019), and Tollefsen (2008; 2012; 2023).

¹⁷ Moreland and Craig (2017, 530–532) are representative in their critique of Thomist-style absolute divine simplicity. Plantinga's (1980) book-length attack of that doctrine is especially well-known, and it is interesting to observe that some of Plantinga's arguments amount to restatements of lines of reasoning found in Palamas. Compare Plantinga (1980, 46–47) with Palamas (1988, 199).

¹⁸ On the Scotist perspective see Steele & Williams (2019) for an accessible entry point. Other scholars have pointed out the theological sympathy obtaining between Palamism and Scotism here (and indeed on other points as well), concerning which consult the following: Bradshaw (2019); Iacovetti (2017); Jones (2005); Kapriev (2018); Knight (2016); Plested (2019); and Spencer (2017).

¹⁹ For a detailed and scientifically well-informed comparative study of the notions of energy in physics and in Orthodox theology, see Tanev (2017).

notion of self-manifestation, of an outflow or outpouring of the divine glory into creation for a variety of purposes (including revelation), is among the notions communicated via the frequent use of the sun-to-sun's-rays analogy of the relationship between the singular divine essence and the many divine energies. Indeed light-language is often used when discussing the divine energies. Thus St. Maximus the Confessor writes in his *Ambigua* vol. II (2014, 203–205): “[B]eginning from the moment when God was pleased to give substance to beings and existence to what did not exist, and, through His providence—like an intelligible sun whose power holds the universe together in stability and graciously consents to emit its rays—He deigned to vary the modes of His presence so that the good things He planted in beings might ripen to full maturity, until all the ages will have reached their appointed limit . . . and because He fills all things with eternal light through the inexhaustible rays of His goodness.” Palamas (1988, 191) himself writes: “Just as the sun, in that without diminution it bestows a measure of warmth and light upon those who participate, possesses these activities as natural and essential energies, so too the divine communications, in that without diminution they inhere in the one who bestows participation, are natural and essential energies of God, and therefore are also uncreated.” More recently Lossky (1957, 74) writes that “the energy is not a divine function which exists *on account* of creatures, despite the fact that it is through His energies, which penetrate everything that exists, that God creates and operates. Even if creatures did not exist, God would none the less manifest Himself beyond His essence; just as the rays of the sun would shine out from the solar disk whether or not there were any beings capable of receiving their light” [emphasis in original].

(iii) The immanence versus transcendence dialectic has long been a lightning rod for debate within Christian thought, as theologians have tried in different ways to reconcile the scriptural affirmations of each. For Palamites, the tension is eased by reference to the preceding distinction between God's essence (wholly transcendent and incomprehensible to the human mind) and His energies (some of which are immanent in and participable by creatures, and thus knowable by the human mind). At the foundation of all creaturely participation in God, and the prerequisite for any deeper such participation, is their baseline participation in God's activity of conservation (sometimes referred to as the immanent energy *being* or *omnipresence*). St. Dionysius the Areopagite often writes on this. For example, there is the following from *On the Divine Names*, chapter 5, 817D (1987, 98): “He is the being immanent in and underlying the things which are, however they are. . . . So he is called ‘King of the ages,’ for in him and around him all being is and subsists.” Or consider this from *The Celestial Hierarchy*, chapter 4, 177C–D (1987, 156): “It is characteristic of this universal Cause, of this goodness beyond all, to summon everything to communion with him to the extent that this is possible. Hence everything in some way partakes of the providence flowing out of this transcendent Deity which is the originator of all that is. Indeed nothing could exist without some share in the being and source of everything. Even the things which have no life participate in this, for it is the transcendent Deity which is the existence of every being.” St. John of Damascus in his eighth century work *On the Orthodox Faith* book one, chapter 13 (1958, 199–200) writes similarly of this divine energy: “[F]or all things that are are dependent upon Him who is, so that it is impossible for anything to be, unless it have being in Him who is. Indeed, in so far as He sustains their nature, God is mixed in with all things.” Or as Palamas (1988, 173) himself puts it: “Every nature is utterly remote and absolutely estranged from the divine nature. . . . But . . . all participate in him and receive their constitution by this participation, not by participation in his nature, far from it, but by participation in his energy. Thus is he the very being of beings.” Later he adds (1988, 201): “God is within the universe and the universe is within God, the one sustaining, the other being sustained by him.

Therefore, all things participate in the sustaining energy but not in the substance of God. Thus, the theologians maintain that these constitute an energy of God, namely, his omnipresence.” Or consider what he says regarding the divine glory, which is a common synonym for ‘energy’ in his work (1983, 67): “How, then, could one think that the glory of God is the essence of God, of that God who while remaining impalpable, indivisible and impalpable, becomes palpable by His superessential power, and communicates Himself and shines forth and becomes in contemplation ‘One Spirit’ with those who meet Him with a pure heart.”

(iv) The fourth distinctive commitment of Palamism is tied into that last quote: namely, a commitment to the reality of *theosis* or deification. The idea is that human beings can, by God’s gracious pouring out of His energies upon us, be rendered so glorified as to warrant the title ‘divine’; we are made gods by grace, though *not* by nature. Palamite theology is always cognizant of the need to retain a sharp divide between created and Uncreated. Florovsky (1976, 67–68) writes: “There is a real distinction, but no separation, between the *essence* or *entity* of God and His *energies*. This distinction is manifest above all in the fact that the Entity is absolutely incommunicable and inaccessible to creatures. The creatures have access to and communicate with the Divine Energies only. But with this participation they enter into a genuine and perfect communion and union with God; they receive ‘deification.’” Palamas (1988, 171) writes: “There are three realities in God, namely, substance, energy, and a Trinity of divine hypostases. . . . [T]hose deemed worthy of union with God are united to God in energy . . . the uncreated energy of the Spirit and not of the substance of God.” It is worth emphasizing in this connection that for Palamite theology, the energies are distinct from the divine essence and Persons and yet intimately connected with them and inseparable from them. The energies are fully *divine*: they are aspects of God, and by participating in them, the human being genuinely participates in the very Life of God.

For Orthodox readers, this brief summary of Palamism’s distinctive commitments will undoubtedly come across as too brief, indeed so incomplete as to court the charge of oversimplification. But for readers unfamiliar with Palamite thought, I trust that the preceding will at least suffice to convey the basic idea while providing enough citations to allow for deeper digging if desired.

With this additional background in place, let us turn now to consider in greater detail Palamism’s utility for the aspectival reply to the problem of conflicting religious experiences (especially the problem of conflicting mystical experiences).

5. Palamism and the Aspectival Solution

I maintain that the aspectival solution can benefit from an explicit grounding in Palamism, in at least a few ways: first, as noted already, existing formulations of the aspectival solution tend to be noncommittal as to the background metaphysics or philosophical theology being assumed. This is understandable, since one could suppose that the theological commitments required to run the response are relatively minimal, mostly consisting in an affirmation of the existence of diverse divine attributes or aspects really distinct from one another and from the divine nature/essence/substance. Such an affirmation is available to many theological systems across multiple world religions. And yet, it is not available to all of them. As we have seen, some prominent theological systems (notably Thomism) dissent from that minimal affirmation by virtue of a commitment to absolute divine simplicity. The same can be said of

other Christian theological perspectives (e.g., some Reformed thinkers),²⁰ as well as some in Judaism (e.g., Maimonides) and Islam (where absolute divine simplicity is common across multiple systems and key thinkers). So the aspectival reply does in fact rest on some plausible yet controversial claims about God: namely, the aforementioned distinctions between nature and attributes, and among the attributes. Thus one advantage of explicitly making the aspectival reply from within a Palamite framework is that one is then operating from unambiguously suitable theological presuppositions.

Still, that might seem a minor advantage, and one not especially distinctive of Palamism. After all, other philosophical and theological systems or perspectives affirm the sort of minimal essence versus attributes distinction required, for instance Scotism (to reference that important historical system yet again). Palamism, by way of its essence versus energies distinction, is certainly one pathway to this advantage, but not the only one.

Consequently it is worth drawing attention to a second way in which Palamism can be of use to proponents of the aspectival solution: its distinctive take on the immanence versus transcendence dialectic. On Palamism, some of the divine energies are radically immanent. As noted, the most foundational of these is the energy *being/omnipresence*, which is that by which contingent creatures are sustained in extra-mental existence (i.e., as concretely real entities rather than eternally known contents of divine ideas—Fido the concrete dog versus the abstract platonic form ‘canine’). On this front, Palamism shares with some Scholastic systems the recognition of a kind of objective (i.e., independent-of-human-conceptualization) distinction between the essence of a created thing (i.e., *what* it is) versus its concrete existence or act-of-being (i.e., that it *actually is*). But the way this distinction is conceptualized between Palamism and those Scholastic systems is not equivalent in every respect, and one of the differences consists in how this notion of concrete existence is integrated within the larger theological stance. For Palamism, the act-of-existence actualizing this creaturely essence can be seen as identical with a divine energy.²¹ God’s instantiation of that creaturely essence (i.e., His act of conserving the creature in concrete existence) amounts to His making that abstract creaturely nature participate in this divine energy *being/omnipresence*. That energy thus plays a role in the ontic makeup of the finite creature for so long as that creature exists.²² If that divine energy is withdrawn, the concrete creature ceases to exist, since the act-of-being actualizing the creaturely essence is removed. The sharp divide between created and Uncreated is preserved

²⁰ See for instance the defences of absolute divine simplicity undertaken by James Dolezal (2011; 2017).

²¹ The wording ‘can be seen’ is intentional. While there are solid textual grounds in Palamas and his predecessors (including St. Dionysius the Areopagite and St. John of Damascus) for the interpretation I am putting forward, it must be granted that there is room for interpretive dispute here, and for alternative readings of Palamas’s metaphysics of creation and conservation. For a more thorough discussion of that metaphysics within the context of its patristic and Neoplatonic background, see Dumsday (2023).

²² Note that this is not the same as saying that this divine energy is a component or constituent of the created entity in the usual sense. The created entity participates in this divine energy *being/omnipresence*, and so that energy might be said to be a ‘part’ of it (it *qua* actualized/concretized), though not in the standard mereological sense of ‘part’ employed in ordinary language (and often also in metaphysics). For instance I as a created thing partake of this divine energy so long as I exist, but it isn’t a part of me in the way that my leg is a part of me (a proper part of me or piece of me), nor in the way that my intellect might be called a ‘part’ of me (an essential characteristic of me); rather this divine energy is that through which I am exemplified so long as I am exemplified. This divine energy is in no way essential to me or part of my nature (which would entail my necessary existence).

(indeed underscored), with the finite creaturely essence posited as concretely existing merely contingently even while a radical form of divine immanence is affirmed.²³

What does this bit of (somewhat abstruse and admittedly controversial) metaphysics have to do with comparative mysticism? Expanding on Heim's (2001) discussion above, I suggest that what may be going on in at least some instances of mystical encounter with what is perceived as an impersonal Ultimate (indeed, often an impersonal Ultimate which is intuited as being intimately linked with one's deepest being) is an experience of this particular divine energy. Somehow, whether by personal striving or divine assistance (or some synergy thereof), the mystic consciously experiences this divine energy, recognizes it *as divine* (as in some sense bound up with an existentially and axiologically Ultimate), and intuits its foundational inwardness as closely linked with the mystic's own deepest self (by way of actualizing its very selfhood, its individual essence). Moreover since it is the same divine energy actualizing all created things, even the mystic's sense of an all-pervading unity or a oneness with the whole universe can be understood as sourced in an intuition of or encounter with that energy. Now, these elements of the phenomenology of such an encounter may be entirely valid. This energy is not itself a person (however inseparably it may be related to the three divine Persons in terms of the underlying ontology), and so it is not surprising that it could be *experienced* as impersonal; moreover the energy is radically unified with the self (indeed constitutes its very existential foundation) and with all other created entities sustained in existence by it, so an intuition of a deep union with it and with all the cosmos (so deep as to be mistaken for wholesale identity?) is likewise unsurprising.

Consequently if the mystic, perhaps under the influence of concepts derived from a non-theistic tradition, subsequently interprets the experience in an exclusivist sense (i.e., interprets it as having revealed *all there is* to the divine and to the depths of the self), then that mystic will have drawn a false conclusion from the encounter. It will be an understandable fall into error, but still a fall. In other words, if the mystic draws a monistic or pantheistic conclusion from the encounter (or if later *bearers* of the mystic do so on the basis of his or her faltering attempts to describe what was encountered), that conclusion will not be an inevitable deduction from the phenomenology, which remains capable of being interpreted in a theistic (Palamite) manner that still fully respects and acknowledges that phenomenology.²⁴

Moreover (and here I am being even more speculative), conceivably a mystical intuition or encounter with the divine energy that actualizes oneself might lead a mystic not to mistake that energy with her deepest self (as in the *atman = Brahman* notion associated with some branches of Hindu mysticism) in the manner just suggested, but rather, under other circumstances or under the influence of other background beliefs, it might lead her to a sense of the Reality of this energy that is so absorbing of attention as to eclipse

²³ For more on this radical immanence, see especially Ware (2004).

²⁴ Readers familiar with Maritain's (1944, ch. 10) previously cited Thomist model of the phenomenology of Hindu mysticism, an explanation framed in terms of the mystic's intuitive apprehension of the *esse* (act-of-being) actualizing his own self, may wonder what the Palamite ontology adds. We now have an answer: Maritain's model cannot as easily account for why the mystic would mistake this act-of-being for something Divine. Maritain suggests that the mystic may intuit the efficient causal link between self and God and thereby end up confusing cause with effect. That may be a workable notion, but the Palamite's is at least *prima facie* superior, insofar as it saves more of the phenomenological data. In particular, it preserves the validity of the mystic's sense that something divine has indeed been directly encountered, since the act-of-being instantiating the finite self is now conceived as a divine energy, as an aspect of God's own overarching Being. For more on Maritain's model of Hindu mysticism in dialogue with the Palamite account, see my "Jacques Maritain's Account of Conflicting Mystical Experiences" (unpublished manuscript).

self-awareness altogether (for a time). In other words, a mystical intuition of or encounter with this divine energy might lead one to perceive a loss of self (however paradoxical that might sound) or lead one to a sense of the comparative unreality of the self, phenomenological contents often associated with forms of Buddhist mysticism.

All of this relies on an understanding of a single divine energy (which Palamas labels *being* or *omnipresence*) in relation to one or two broad classes of impersonal mystical experience. Palamism of course affirms the reality of multiple divine energies; consequently, time permitting one might delve into the potential explanatory resources offered by a wider range of divine energies recognized within it. Thus, perhaps experiential immersions in other divine energies might help to explain other features of mystical experiences—indeed perhaps other sorts of religious experiences generally. (E.g., if one accepts the Palamite energy *beauty* as a real divine energy, might that recognition help to explain what is going on in some instances of so-called ‘nature mysticism’? Or if one accepts the Palamite energy *eternity* as a real divine energy, might that recognition help to explain what is going on in those religious experiences characterized by a powerful sense of timelessness? Or if one accepts the Palamite energy *infinity* as a real divine energy, might that recognition help to explain what is going on in those religious experiences featuring a sense of boundlessness? Etc.) Indeed it is also possible that God might bestow upon someone a simultaneous experience of multiple energies, which could explain the several features exhibited in the phenomenology of some mystical encounters (including some of the case studies referenced in section two above).

Naturally though, there are limits to what the Palamite model can achieve on its own, in terms of explanatory breadth; I doubt that the divine energies ontology will be of any use in explaining certain sorts of quasi-sensory experiences. For instance if someone has a vision of Kali, with her full traditional (horrifying) symbolism, this can hardly be seized upon by an Orthodox Christian as a misidentified or misinterpreted divine energy. For experiences of that sort, however, Orthodoxy does offer a range of other explanations for what may be going on (including *but not limited to* demonic deception).²⁵ Still, other sorts of quasi-sensory or numinous encounters may well be amenable to interpretations involving one or another of the divine energies.

There is a third respect in which Palamite distinctives might help buttress the aspectual solution to the problem of conflicting mystical experiences, and that is by way of its account of deification. Palamism may leave room open for recognizing that the Hindu or Buddhist or Jain (etc.) mystic may, in consequence of having entered experientially into a deeper bond with the divine via the energies, have thereby obtained a greater participation in the divine Life. That greater participation may in turn bear fruits (e.g., of increased personal righteousness, repentance, manifestation of spiritual gifts, etc.). In other words, perhaps Palamism allows for a recognition not only of the legitimacy of mystical experiences found in other traditions (even where their philosophical import falls prey to later misinterpretation), but also of the genuine saintliness of some of those traditions’ representatives. Admittedly I tread here on choppy theological waters, and Orthodox theologians are divided on many issues pertaining to the theology of world religions.²⁶ But the import (both existential and evidential) of mystical experiences lies not only in what they reveal directly about Reality, but also in their long-term effects upon the lives of the mystics themselves. To the extent that

²⁵ For a well-known Orthodox discussion of the diversity of religious experiences which draws heavily on that idea, see Rose (2004). It also plays a role in some of Farasiotis’s (2008) reflections.

²⁶ For a recent overview see Ladouceur (2019, ch. 12).

Palamism provides a route towards understanding the inter-religious significance of mysticism in its pragmatic and moral dimensions, that may be a further point in its favour.

6. Conclusion

Briefly to recap the flow of discussion: one of the common objections against the veridicality of religious experiences (and thus the legitimacy of appealing to such experiences as evidence for theism) is their diversity. Often the contents of such experiences are quite divergent, sometimes even seemingly contradictory in nature. By way of defending the veridicality of such experiences, some theistic philosophers have appealed to the aspectival solution: namely, that God has diverse aspects or attributes, and that at least some of the seemingly conflicting phenomenological content of religious experiences can be accounted for by supposing that different people are encountering different attributes of one and the same divine Reality. In particular, it is claimed that this may explain what is going on in apparently conflicting mystical experiences in which some experience the Ultimate as personal and others as impersonal. After reviewing recent formulations of the aspectival reply (some of which alluded to Palamism), we examined the distinctive commitments of Palamite theology and how they might be applied in this context to supply a version of the aspectival reply boasting some distinctive advantages.

I should stress again the modest nature of the overarching argument. I have not tried to show that Palamism supplies the best version of the aspectival reply (let alone the only workable version); rather, I have simply drawn attention to some neglected, distinctive strong points. Nor have I supplied anything like a complete defence of the Palamite account, and I am well aware that a fuller treatment would have to examine a range of potential philosophical and theological objections.

I am aware too that even if the Palamite version of the aspectival solution actually worked, providing a plausible theistic explanation for conflicting mystical experiences (and possibly shedding light on a wider body of seemingly conflicting religious experiences), there remain many pressing questions in the neighbourhood that would still demand scrutiny. For example, granting that Palamite metaphysics provides the necessary ingredients to account for the phenomenology of the Buddhist mystic's experience (for instance), we are still left with the question of why God would permit or grant such an experience and yet not intervene subsequently to prevent that mystic's misinterpretation. Why not simply reveal Himself more fully, and more personally? Indeed, given the risk that errors will be perpetuated, why permit or grant such experiences outside of the Christian tradition (or, some would urge, outside the purview of the Orthodox Church)? Moreover the Buddhist philosopher will have her own explanations for the conflict, explanations which favour her own perspective (i.e., models for how seeming experience of a personal Ultimate might be accounted for in terms of a metaphysics of an impersonal Ultimate). Is that explanation any less compelling than the Palamite's?

As it happens I do think that Palamism has constructive (and novel) things to contribute to those debates, but showing this would take us well beyond the limited aim of this paper (namely, to assist in addressing the conflicting experiences objection facing the argument for theism from religious experience). Still, if Palamism does in fact help with the problem of conflicting religious experiences, that will at least provide some motivation for pursuing its application to these related areas of dispute.

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to two anonymous referees for the *JAT*, whose extensive and thoughtful input resulted in substantial improvements to the final version of this project.

References

- Allison, Dale. 2022. *Encountering Mystery: Religious Experience in a Secular Age*. Eerdmans.
- Alston, William. 1991. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Cornell University Press.
- Bernstein, A. James. 2008. *Surprised by Christ: My Journey from Judaism to Orthodox Christianity*. Conciliar Press.
- Bradshaw, David. 2004. *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*. Cambridge University Press.
- Bradshaw, David. 2019. “Essence and Energies: What Kind of Distinction?” *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 6: 5–35.
- Bradshaw, David. 2023. *Divine Energies and Divine Action: Exploring the Essence-Energies Distinction*. International Orthodox Theological Association.
- Byrne, Peter. 1995. *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion*. Macmillan.
- Byrne, Peter. 2011. “A Philosophical Approach to Questions About Religious Diversity.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Diversity*, edited by Chad Meister. Oxford University Press, 29–41.
- Caldecott, Stratford. 2013. *The Radiance of Being: Dimensions of Cosmic Christianity*. Angelico Press.
- Cohen, Daniel. 1979. *Close Encounters with God*. Simon & Schuster.
- Copleston, Frederick. 1982. *Religion and the One: Philosophies East and West*. Crossroad.
- Cottier, Georges Cardinal. 2003. “Metaphysics and Mysticism.” *Nova & Vetera (English edition)* 1: 269–281.
- Davis, Caroline Franks. 1989. *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. Oxford University Press.
- St. Dionysius the Areopagite. 1987. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid. Paulist Press.
- Dolezal, James. 2011. *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness*. Wipf & Stock.
- Dolezal, James. 2017. *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism*. Reformation Heritage Books.
- Dumsday, Travis. 2008. “Robert Boyle on the Diversity of Religions.” *Religious Studies: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 44: 315–332.
- Dumsday, Travis. 2023. “Platonism as a Path to Palamism: Arguing from Abstracta to Uncreated Divine Energies.” *Journal of Analytic Theology* 11: 41–66.
- Dumsday, Travis. 2024. *The Marian Apparitions at Zeitoun: An Evidential Inquiry*. St Vladimir’s Seminary Press.
- Dupré, Louis. 1981. *The Deeper Life: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*. Crossroad.

- Farasiotis, Dionysios. 2008. *The Gurus, the Young Man, and Elder Paisios*, translated by Hieromonk Alexis. St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood.
- Farrell, Joseph. 1989. *Free Choice in St. Maximus the Confessor*. St. Tikhon's Seminary Press.
- Flew, Antony. 1966. *God and Philosophy*. Hutchinson.
- Florovsky, Georges. 1976. *Creation and Redemption*. Nordland Publishing Co.
- Fox, Mark. 2003. *Religion, Spirituality and the Near-Death Experience*. Routledge.
- Fox, Mark. 2008. *Lightforms: Spiritual Encounters with Unusual Light Phenomena*. University of Wales Press.
- Fox, Mark. 2014. *The Fifth Love: Exploring Accounts of the Extraordinary*. Spirit & Sage Ltd.
- Gellman, Jerome. 1997. *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief*. Cornell University Press.
- Golitzin, Alexander. 2013. *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita*. Liturgical Press/Cistercian Publications.
- Grof, Stanislav. 1998. *The Cosmic Game: Explorations of the Frontiers of Human Consciousness*. State University of New York Press.
- St. Gregory Palamas. 1983. *The Triads*, translated by Nicholas Gendle. Paulist Press.
- St. Gregory Palamas. 1988. *The One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, translated by Robert Sinkewicz. Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies.
- Heim, S. Mark. 2001. "The Depth of the Riches: Trinity and Religious Ends." *Modern Theology* 17: 21–55.
- Hick, John. 1989. *An Interpretation of Religion*. Yale University Press.
- Hume, David. 1777/2008. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter Millican. Oxford University Press.
- Iacovetti, Christopher. 2017. "God in His Processions: Aquinas, Palamas, and Dionysius on God's Relation to Creation." *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic & Evangelical Theology* 26: 297–310.
- St. John of Damascus. 1958. *Writings*, translated by Frederic Chase Jr. Catholic University of America Press.
- Jones, John D. 2005. "An Absolutely Simple God? Frameworks for Reading Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite." *Thomist* 69: 371–406.
- Jones, Richard. 2021. *An Introduction to the Study of Mysticism*. State University of New York Press.
- Kapriev, Georgi. 2018. "Gregory Palamas and George Scholarios: John Duns Scotus' Differentiation Between Substance and Energy and the Sources of the Palamite Tradition." *Analogia: The Pemptousia Journal for Theological Studies* 5: 35–56.
- Katz, Steven (ed.) 2013. *Comparative Mysticism: An Anthology of Sources*. Oxford University Press.
- Keener, Craig. 2021. *Miracles Today: The Supernatural Work of God in the Modern World*. Baker Academic.
- Klimek, Daniel Maria. 2018. *Medjugorje and the Supernatural: Science, Mysticism, and Extraordinary Religious Experience*. Oxford University Press.
- Knight, Christopher. 2016. "An Eastern Orthodox Critique of the Science-Theology Dialogue." *Zygon: Journal of Religion & Science* 51: 573–591.
- Kwan, Kai-Man. 2009. "The Argument from Religious Experience." In *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology*, edited by William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland. Wiley-Blackwell, 498–552.
- Ladouceur, Paul. 2019. *Modern Orthodox Theology*. T&T Clark.
- Lewis, H.D. 1969. *The Elusive Mind*. George Allen & Unwin.

- Lossky, Vladimir. 1957. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, translated by the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius. St Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Lossky, Vladimir. 1978. *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*. St Vladimir's Seminary Press.
- Magnusson, Agust. 2012. "Beautiful Malady." In *Turning East: Contemporary Philosophers and the Ancient Christian Faith*, edited by Rico Vitz. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 291–315.
- Maritain, Jacques. 1944. *Redeeming the Time*, translated by Harry Binsse. Geoffrey Bles.
- Mavrodes, George. 1993. "The God Above the Gods: Can the High Gods Survive?" In *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honour of Norman Kretzmann*, edited by Eleonore Stump. Cornell University Press, 179–203.
- St. Maximus the Confessor. 2014. *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, Volumes 1 & 2, translated by Maximos Constas. Harvard University Press.
- Maxwell, Meg, and Tschudin, Verena (eds.) (1990) *Seeing the Invisible: Modern Religious and Other Transcendent Experiences*. Penguin.
- McDermott, Gerald. 2009. *God's Rivals: Why Has God Allowed Different Religions? Insights from the Bible and the Early Church*. InterVarsity Press Academic.
- McKim, Robert. 1988. "Could God Have More than One Nature?" *Faith & Philosophy* 5: 378–398.
- McLeod-Harrison, Mark. 2005. *Repairing Eden: Humility, Mysticism, and the Existential Problem of Religious Diversity*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Mills, Paul. 2022. *Science, Being, and Becoming: The Spiritual Lives of Scientists*. Light on Light Press.
- Moreland, J.P., and Craig, William Lane (2017) *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd edition. InterVarsity Press Academic.
- Netland, Harold. 2022. *Religious Experience and the Knowledge of God: The Evidential Force of Divine Encounters*. Baker Academic.
- Paper, Jordan. 2004. *The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Analysis*. State University of New York Press.
- Pino, Tikhon. 2023. *Essence and Energies: Being and Naming God in St Gregory Palamas*. Routledge.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 1980. *Does God Have a Nature?* Marquette University Press.
- Plested, Marcus. 2019. "St. Gregory Palamas on the Divine Simplicity." *Modern Theology* 35: 508–521.
- Rose, Seraphim. 2004. *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*, fifth edition. Saint Herman of Alaska Brotherhood.
- Rowley, H.H. 1956. *The Faith of Israel*. SCM Press.
- Russell, Norman. 2019. *Gregory Palamas and the Making of Palamism in the Modern Age*. Oxford University Press.
- Sherrard, Philip. 1998. *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press.
- Spencer, Daniel. 2021. "The Challenge of Mysticism: A Primer from a Christian Perspective." *Sophia* 60: 1027–1045.
- Spencer, Mark. 2017. "The Flexibility of Divine Simplicity: Aquinas, Scotus, Palamas." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57: 123–139.
- Swinburne, Richard. 2004. *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition. Oxford University Press.
- Taliaferro, Charles. 1998. *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*. Blackwell.
- Taliaferro, Charles. 2023. "Philosophy of Religion." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman. URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/philosophy-religion/>.
- Taney, Stoyan. 2017. *Energy in Orthodox Theology & Physics: From Controversy to Encounter*. Wipf

- & Stock.
- Tollefsen, Torstein. 2008. *The Christocentric Cosmology of St Maximus the Confessor*. Oxford University Press.
- Tollefsen, Torstein. 2012. *Activity and Participation in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought*. Oxford University Press.
- Tollefsen, Torstein. 2023. *The Christian Metaphysics of St Maximus the Confessor: Creation, World-Order, and Redemption*. Brepols.
- Wainwright, William. 1981. *Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications*. The Harvester Press.
- Wall, George. 1995. *Religious Experience and Religious Belief*. University Press of America.
- Ware, Kallistos. 2004. "God Immanent Yet Transcendent: The Divine Energies According to Saint Gregory Palamas." In *In Whom We Live and Move and Have Our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, edited by Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke. Eerdmans, 157–168.
- Wiebe, Phillip. 1997. *Visions of Jesus: Direct Encounters from the New Testament to Today*. Oxford University Press.
- Wiebe, Phillip. 2004. *God and Other Spirits: Intimations of Transcendence in Christian Experience*. Oxford University Press.
- Wiebe, Phillip. 2015. *Intuitive Knowing as Spiritual Experience*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Woollacott, Marjorie, and Lorimer, David (eds). 2022. *Spiritual Awakenings: Scientists and Academics Describe their Experiences*. Academy for the Advancement of Postmaterialist Sciences (AAPS) Press.
- Yandell, Keith. 1993. *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Cambridge University Press.
- Yandell, Keith. 1999. *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction*. Routledge.