The Semantic Problem of Hiddenness

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> Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?"
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> They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life."
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> "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

1 Introduction

As a Catholic, I believe that God exists. I also believe a host of other, staggeringly more specific claims about God. Some beliefs are metaphysical—i.e. that it is possible for a person to be resurrected. Some are historical—i.e. that certain events happened in Jerusalem some two millennia ago. Some are ethical—i.e. that we are enjoined to selflessly love one another and God. I have what I have called elsewhere a "thick" religious faith.[1] And when asked what evidence I have for my vast array of beliefs, I will cite a variety of sources.

A few of my beliefs I have reasoned out for myself. For instance, if God exists, he God must be highly creative given how complex and surprising the universe is. If God is omnipotent and perfectly good, then there must be some morally appropriate reason reason why he permits evil. Still, these conclusions are conditional, and as a matter of course, I get very little of my theology directly from my own reasoning. In this, I suspect I am like many others with thick religious faiths.

I also believe there have been times in my life when I have experienced God directly, and these experiences give me some kinds of evidence about what God is like. Religious experiences sometimes happen in prayer or when participating in sacraments. They sometimes happen in more secular venues—taking in

[1] Sullivan (2014).

a beautiful vista or feeling comfort in the midst of a crisis. Personal experiences fill some of the gaps left by reason. But I suspect that I am like many people of faith in that my religious experiences tend to be both limited in content and susceptible of doubt. The experiences are limited in content because, while I might sometimes have experiences that confirm God's existence or love, I have never had an experience confirming the doctrine of the Trinity, or the Atonement or many of the other more specific teachings of my faith. The experiences are susceptible of doubt because I can understand how they might originate from something other than God—perhaps by an intense emotion or by wishful thinking. Moreover, I know of many cases of others seeming to have religious experiences that I doubt were divine in origin, but I cannot point to any epistemically significant difference between these other believers and me. Given that experience is limited in content and susceptible of doubt, God is experientially hidden from me and, I suspect, the vast majority of other religious believers.

So where does my theology come from and what could justify it? Most often, when it comes to my beliefs about God, I am highly dependent on what others tell me. I receive testimony from a wide array of sources. I trust texts like the Bible (under an interpretation). I look to the teachings of the Magisterium and sources from Catholic tradition. I read articles published by my colleagues in philosophy and theology departments. I consider the testimony of friends and loved ones regarding their experiences of God. I consider the testimony of other traditions, adopting theories that seem trustworthy, useful, and consistent with my antecedent understanding of God. This multi-pronged approach is, I suspect, similar to the way that many other modern believers develop and justify their faith.

Indeed, if Saint Augustine is right, there is a deep theological significance to our dependence on the testimony of others. In the preface to *On Christian Teaching*, he writes, "the human condition would be wretched if God appeared unwilling to minister his word to human beings through human agency... Moreover, there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other if human beings learned nothing from other humans."[2] If Augustine is right, dependence on testimony is far from a last resort for believers given God's hiddenness—it can be seen as a part of God's plan for knitting us together. We can see Augustine as advancing a kind of "church-making" solution to the problem of hiddenness.[3]

Still, just as there are many ways one might be skeptical about religious experience, there are many

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[2] Augustine (1997, 5-6).

[3] Akin to the popular soul-making response to the problem of hiddenness. See Murray (2002).

ways to be skeptical about religious testimony. How do I know which (if any) texts are authoritative? Why trust the Church? What if my friends, family and colleagues are simply mistaken? And in this age-old "telephone game" of passing along information about God, how can any of us be confident that accurate content has been preserved? I'll admit that I have suffered all of these doubts. The Church works to relieve these doubts by offering accounts of the nature of revelation, inspiration, authority, and reason. I find these accounts compelling, and they go some way toward relieving internal skepticism, even if they only offer partisan solutions to these skeptical problems facing testimony.

But I've also suffered from another kind of doubt about religious testimony, which is the main subject of this essay. How can I be confident that language is able to successfully convey information about God? God's hiddenness makes it difficult to acquire knowledge of him directly or to verify information received indirectly. Does it also make it difficult to refer to God in the first place?[4] Theologians have long struggled with issues of understanding how human minds and human language can grasp a transcendent God. And philosophers have weighed in on the issue, including relatively recent works contending that skepticism about divine names motivates revisionary theology.[5] I hope to add a new wrinkle to this debate by describing a new philosophical challenge facing divine names, one which is peculiar to a causal-historical account of how speakers refer to God.

Here is how the paper will proceed. First, I will review some options for how a particular speaker might manage to refer to God when they use a divine name word in an assertion. I will argue that one account— reference by deference—gives the most plausible theory of how divine names refer. (Section 2) Then I will introduce some limitations of reference by deference that arise when the community using a particular name word is large and diverse. The connection between a name word and a referent is highly susceptible of disruption in such communities. (Section 3) I will argue that divine name words are particularly semantically vulnerable, which raises a skeptical problem for religious testimony. (Section 4) Can we overcome these skeptical problems? I will survey three replies to the challenge which I find implausible. (Section 5). Finally I will advocate a partisan theological response to the problem based on the doctrine of inspiration. But as we will see, even this response is controversial. (Section 6) The semantic problem of hiddenness deserves a place among the more widely-observed epistemic problems of hiddenness.

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[4]A similar question arises for the content of our thoughts, but I won't deal with this here.
[5]See for example Hick (1982) and Johnston (2009).

2 Ways We Might Fix Reference to God

How is it that a divine name word like "God" might come to refer to God when a speaker uses it in an assertion? To answer this, we must consider different options for how any names acquire referents in the mouths of particular speakers. Let's survey three of the leading options and consider their implications for divine names.

The first way is a process called "direct baptism". When reference is fixed by direct baptism, a name word "n" refers to an object o in the mouth of a speaker S because S is in a position to perceive o and S performs a speech act to bestow "n" on o. For example, when I was a child, our family adopted a kitten. My parents suggested I choose its name. Holding the animal, I declared, "Her name is 'Punky'." This speech act associated "Punky" with Punky, and ensured that in my mouth the name word "Punky" picked out that cat and no other.

It is pretty clear that the name word "God" does not refer to God in my mouth by direct baptism. I have never actually performed a speech act where I bestowed that name word on God. And to try to do so seems a risky venture, since he is experientially hidden.[6] More than this, it would be offensive for me to invent a name for the divine and give it to him—it would overstep the boundary between God and man. In general, if you regard someone as an authority, you must be deferential to their preferred ways of being called.

A second way a name word might be associated with a particular referent is by definite description. When reference is fixed by description, a name word "n" refers to object o in the mouth of speaker S because S associates some description (or weighted cluster of descriptions) D with the name word, and o uniquely satisfies D (or satisfies the most of the descriptions in D).[7] For example, I often teach a very large version of Introduction to Philosophy—over 200 students— with anonymized grading. Looking at my grade book, I might notice that only one student received a perfect score on a recent exam, and I might decide to call that student "Student A." Suppose it turns out that Leslie is the only student to earn a perfect score on the exam. In my mouth, "Student A" refers to Leslie just as long as (i) I associate the description "sole perfect score earner on Intro exam" with "Student A" and (ii) Leslie is the only thing that satisfies the description.

Does "God" get its reference in my mouth by definite description? This theory of divine names seems more promising than reference by baptism. After all, many of God's names seem to be descriptions of his

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[6]I use the male pronoun in this paper out of deference to tradition and to ease reading but without any presupposition that God has a gender.

[7]The weighted cluster theory is first described in Searle (1958).

titles and attributes. Christians typically call God "Father, "Lord" or"Most High". Muslims have ninety-nine names for God, all of which describe some attribute he enjoys, i.e. "Al Muhyi" (The Lifegiver) and "Al Hakam" (The Judge).

Though many of God's names seem to describe God, there are good reasons to think that description is not the predominant way that divine name words fix reference to God. There may even be good reasons to think divine name words never function as definite descriptions. Here I will describe five.

First, though many of the honorifics like "The Arbitrator" and "The Life-Giver" seem to be descriptions, they do not *uniquely* describe God, at least not without further background theological assumptions. Judge Judy is both an arbitrator and a life-giver (as a biological mother of two). But Judge Judy is not even a candidate for the meaning of "Al-Hakem" or "Al-Muhyi" in the mouths of observant Muslims. And this is because the honorifics are meant to be taken as referential uses of descriptions of God. Muslims do not mean to pick out any life-giver or other with "Al-Muhyi" but rather *that* particular life-giver which revealed Himself to Muhammad. These name words are *referential* descriptions—phrases that appear to refer by description, but in fact only pick out a single object, regardless of what else might satisfy that description or whether the description is actually an attribute of the referent.[8] For example, "The Queen Mary" is a name word that seems to be a description of a particular female monarch, but in fact refers to a ship in my mouth. It is a referential use of a descriptive phrase. If these divine names are also referential descriptions, then the definite description theory doesn't answer the question of how "God" comes to refer to God, since we still need a theory for how their reference is fixed.

Second, I believe that substantive interfaith disagreement is possible. More strongly, I believe that Jews, Christians, and Muslims of both liberal and conservative varieties are able to have substantive debates about one and the same God. This is not just wishful thinking; many variants of Judaism, Christianity and Islam explicitly teach that practitioners of the other faiths worship the same God. All three faiths overlap with respect to key scriptures. Shared devotion to God is a central theme of Pope Paul VI's *Nostra Aetate* proclamation to Catholics, one of the most important documents to come out of the Second Vatican Council. And Sura 29:46 of the Quran insists: "And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, 'We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our Allah and

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[8]See Donnellan (1966). Kripke (1977) points out that the theory could make sense of distinctions in how speakers might use the name "The Messiah". Thanks to Jeff Speaks for discussion here.

your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)."'

Can we make sense of substantive interfaith discussion on a descriptive theory of reference? Consider a common theological debate that occurs between Christians and Muslims:

Christian: God is three persons and one substance.

Muslim: You are wrong. Allah (blessed be His name) is not three persons. Allah cannot be divided in this way.

For this debate to be substantive, "God" and "Allah" must refer to the same being. But if "God" and "Allah" are merely abbreviations for descriptions and the most important descriptions of God are contested, then it is not clear the debate is substantive. If there is no agreement about the definite description, there is no reason to believe the terms co-refer.

We could solve this problem by insisting that reference-fixing descriptions are only descriptions that are uncontested. For example, what if we assume "God", "Allah" etc are just shorthand for whatever is the causal origin of the universe? Jews, Christians and Muslims can agree that God satisfies that description. But such an assumption would save the substantivity of interfaith disputes only at the cost of explaining the substantivity of common theist/atheist debates. Here is one such debate:

Theist: God is the causal origin of the universe.

Atheist: You are wrong. The Big Bang is the causal origin of the universe.

How can the atheist claim the theist is wrong if "God" in the theist's mouth just means *whatever is the causal origin of the universe*? We might soup up the description to *whatever is the personal causal origin of the universe*. But what exactly God's personhood consists in will be a matter of further controversy within the faiths, again raising the fear that religious disputants are talking past one another rather than co-referring.

Could disputants insist on some shared historical description—for example, perhaps "God" refers to *whoever made a covenant with Abraham*? Jews, Christians, and Muslims share the Pentateuch as a common scriptural text. And atheists will presumably deny that anything made a covenant with Abraham. So this would solve the earlier problems. But only at the cost of preventing substantive religious dialogue with theists who deny the historical veracity of the Pentateuch. More generally, it is difficult to find a reference-fixing description of God that (i) enjoys wide-enough agreement to do justice to the assumption that many

different faiths co-refer and (ii) is not so permissive as to make it impossible for theists to disagree with atheists about whether "God" refers at all.

Third, the descriptivist theory of divine names fails to explain how children and those who are incapable of grasping any theologically-rich reference-fixing descriptions of God can nonetheless refer to Him. I know many two year olds who appear to know the name "God" but know nothing of the divine attributes or God's work in history. I should like to think that when these children offer simple prayers, they are directed to God, even if their theology is highly limited. William Alston raises this point in favor of a causal theory of divine names. [9] In general, the descriptive theory places too much emphasis on the speakers having prior knowledge of God. This is a more common problem for reference by description—there are many name words we seem to be able to use to refer without having much background knowledge of our subject.[10]

Fourth, and again borrowing from Alston, the descriptive theory does a poor job of explaining our judgments about cases of deception. Suppose that Jim knows nothing of God. And suppose that Satan sets out to deceive him. Satan reveals himself to Jim, performs some pyrotechnics, calls himself "God" and convinces Jim that he is the all-powerful ruler of the universe. Satan then commands Jim to pray to him. It is natural to think that he is in fact praying to Satan when he uses the name word "God."[11] But on a descriptive theory, if *all-powerful creator of the universe* is the primary description Jim associates with "God", then he *is* referring to God.[12] More generally, descriptive theories fail to account for the phenomenon that we seem to be able to use a name to refer even if we are radically mistaken about the referent. And again, this is an example of a more general problem for reference by description.[13]

Finally, the descriptivist theory cannot accommodate certain forms of thorough-going apophaticism. Some strands of the Abrahamic traditions deny that we have access to any true, unique description of God. If descriptions are needed to fix reference to God, then such apophatics are forced to conclude that we cannot refer to God. This may seem like a further reason to reject extreme forms of apophaticism. More mild forms of apophaticism admit we can have some true descriptions of God, but no true description which expresses God's essential nature. Such moderate apophaticism is in principle compatible with a descriptive theory of divine names as long as those names are non-essential descriptions of God. For instance "God" might be an

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[9] Alston (1989).

[10] See Lecture II of Kripke (1980).

[11] See (Alston, 1989, 110-111).

[12] Descriptivists might insist that Jim is primarily deferring to some other description when he worships—for instance *whatever is the source of the pyrotechnics*. This highlights a puzzle for understanding how descriptions are weighted in the "weighted cluster" version of descriptivism. In this case, we assume Jim does not primarily intend to refer to this other description.

[13] See again Lecture II of Kripke (1980).

abbreviation for the description "whatever being created and sustains me." Still such a theory does a poor job of accommodating common Jewish, Christian and Muslim teachings about the holiness of divine names. In each of these traditions, the divine names enjoy a protected moral status because they are revelations from God. But by the lights of the descriptive theory, any true definite description is as good as any other for the purposes of naming. "The Almighty Lord" is just as much a reference-fixing name for God as "The divine being which created and sustains Ozzie Osbourne." And moderate apophatics must rely on more contingent descriptions, like the latter, to name God. But descriptions like the latter seem far less worthy of the title *divine name* than descriptions like the former. And names like the latter are certainly not the ones we've received in revelation.

And as I mentioned in the introduction, I have a host of very specific beliefs about God, many of which I take to be literally true claims. So I am no apophatic. Even still, I acknowledge the possibility that I am radically mistaken about God's true nature or that all of our knowledge of God is only analogical. I admit it is possible that on the day of judgment, I will realize I was mistaken in most of the historical facts and I did not understand God's real nature. If this is revealed to me, I would not conclude that I prayed to and worshipped something other than God all along. Rather, I would realize that I had worshipped God but very imperfectly and with radically mistaken assumptions. The descriptive theory has no resources to account for this.

All of these considerations lead me to hope that there is a way of referring to God that is less cognitively demanding, explains the substantivity of interfaith dialogue, can make sense of mistaken worship, and reflects a proper theological humility. Happily there is yet another way that a name word might become associated with referent which seems flexible enough to give an account for all of these desiderata.

The third way a name word might be associated with a referent is a way that I will call "reference by deference". The theory comes from Saul Kripke's hugely influential causal-historical account of reference.[14] We refer deferentially when we learn a new name word and form the intention to refer in exactly the same way as the name word refers for our teacher. More precisely, on the reference by deference strategy, a name word "n" refers to an object o in the mouth of speaker S because (i) S intends to defer to whatever the referent of the word is for some other speaker (or speakers) and (ii) S stands in a causal chain of reference by deference that terminates with either a direct baptism of o or a successful definite description of o. The upshot of reference by deference is a speaker need not know anything significant about the object they are

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[14]Kripke (1980).

naming in order to refer to it. They may even have radically mistaken beliefs. For example, suppose you tell me about a folk singer named "Neil Young". I don't know anything about the singer, but intend to use "Neil Young" to refer to whoever you are referring to. Later I come to the (mistaken) belief that Neil Young is the person who wrote "Sweet Home Alabama", and this is all the information that I associate with the name. If I was attempting to refer by description, "Neil Young" would not refer to Neil Young; indeed, it wouldn't refer at all since, there is no unique individual who wrote "Sweet Home Alabama".[15] But as long as I intend to refer deferentially, and as long as you are part of a causal chain that terminates with someone or other successfully associating "Neil Young" with Neil Young, then the name does refer to Young in my mouth.

Reference by deference can avoid many of the problems which faced the definite description theory of divine names. Speakers do not need a unique description of God, nor do they need even an accurate description of God in order to use a divine name to refer to him. Children and anyone else who finds themselves theologically impoverished can refer merely by deferring to others who are in a position to refer. Likewise, different traditions can co-refer as long as they defer to chains that originate with the same God. So reference by deference makes it substantially easier for divine names to refer. To allay skeptical worries, we just need to be confident that there is a chain of reference that terminates with someone successfully naming God and to which we can defer. Can we be confident that there is such a chain of reference?

3   Ways Reference Can Be Destroyed

There are two conditions that must be fulfilled for an agent to succeed in referring deferentially to something. First there must be a successful *start* to a causal chain—there must be some point in the history of the name where someone either directly perceived the referent or uniquely described it. In the case of God's names, we might think that there were several occasions where a causal chain might have started. Most directly, in the Abrahamic traditions it seems God initially knows his name (or names himself) and then shares the name with a prophet, as in the story of God sharing the names "YHWH" and "The Lord" with Moses in Exodus 3:13-15.[16] In other cases, a divine name might be bestowed by a speech act—for example with Joseph following the directives of the Angel and naming his son "Jesus" in Matthew 1:20. The more removed an initial naming event is, the more we might doubt whether it ever occurred. But let's set aside such worries

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[15]Ronnie Van Zant, Ed King, and Gary Rossington are jointly credited with the lyrics. See the liner notes for *Second Helping* (1974).

[16]There is perhaps some case to be made for the view that certain of God's names (like God Himself) have no starting point—they have always existed. They "start" in human language, when they are revealed.

about divine names for present purposes and focus instead on the second condition.

For an agent to succeed in referring deferentially, there must also be a proper chain of reference connecting the speaker back to that initial naming event. Reference by deference means the intentions of other speakers in one's community strongly influence the meanings of one's own name words. And as causal connections might change or break, so might reference change over time. There are at least three ways a causal chain might be disrupted, thereby destroying a name-referent relation. The first I will call *semantic break*:

> SEMANTIC BREAK: A semantic break occurs when speakers in a future generation cease to use a name word. If there is a long enough gap, the link between the name word and the original referent will be broken.

An example illustrates the mechanism:

> GEOFFREY: In the 6th century a peasant boy was born in an isolated village on the English coast. His parents named him "Geoffrey." A few years later, vikings invaded, killing everyone and wiping out all of the records of the village. Given that there is no current practice causally associating use of "Geoffrey" with the original baptism, Geoffrey's original name is lost to history. If a contemporary historian stumbles upon the fossilized remains of Geoffrey and coincidentally dubs the remains "Geoffrey", then she has a coined a new name rather than revived the old one.

The easiest way for a name to be destroyed is to fall out of use in a community.

The second way a name might be disrupted I will call *semantic shift:*

> SEMANTIC SHIFT: A semantic shift occurs when a competing chain of reference by deference enters the linguistic community, and speakers eventually defer primarily to this new chain.

Gareth Evans famously proposes cases like this as a challenge to some formulations of the causal-historical account of reference.[17] But the most famous description of this phenomenon comes directly from Kripke. Here is the case, paraphrased:

> MADAGASCAR: While sailing in the Indian Ocean, Marco Polo dubbed a region of mainland East Africa "Madagascar." He shared the name with other sailors who also began to call an

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[17]See Evans (1973) and Addendum (e) in (Kripke, 1980, 163).

island off the coast "Madagascar." Eventually everyone deferred to other sailors in the use of the name. Since the island is now the object at the source of the primary causal chain associated with "Madagascar", the island is now the referent of "Madagascar."

A name-referent relation can be broken if the name word is causally assumed by a new chain of deference with a different referent as its source. And this shift may happen without any speakers even noticing that they have begun deferring to a new causal chain.

Finally a name can be disrupted by what I will call *semantic pollution*:

SEMANTIC POLLUTION: Semantic pollution occurs when many competing chains of reference by deference enter the linguistic community, and speakers defer indiscriminately to the different chains.

Another example illustrates the phenomenon:

ARTHUR: In the 6th century, a boy was born and his parents named him "Arthur". His exploits in the Anglo-Saxon wars made him famous throughout Britain. Initially those close to Arthur successfully used the name to refer back to him. Over time an oral tradition celebrating Arthurian victories developed, with bards often merging the tales of his exploits with those of other soldiers, both real and mythical. Centuries later, these Arthurian legends were edited, embellished, and preserved in histories and Romantic poetry. Many real and mythical soldiers are the causal source of these different practices. And all contemporary speakers defer to this family of traditions when they use the name "King Arthur". Even though the name phrase "Kind Arthur" has remained in continuous use over intervening centuries, it no longer refers to the 6th century soldier. It does not refer to any person whatsoever.

A name-referent relation may become so swamped by competitors over time that there ceases to be a determinate connection between the name word and its original referent. In these cases, the name-referent relation is broken, and the name word ceases to determinately refer to anything. And as with semantic shift, semantic pollution can destroy a name-referent relation without speakers even being aware of the change.

If initial naming events are temporally remote and linguistic communities are significantly large and diverse, it increases the chance that semantic disruptions will occur. Remoteness means there are more links in the causal chain susceptible to change. Size and diversity mean there are more potential sources for competing causal chains to enter the community. A name word is *semantically vulnerable* if (i) speakers primarily use the name word to refer deferentially, (ii) the event establishing it as a name is remote, and (iii) the linguistic community is large and diverse.

The phenomenon of semantic vulnerability leads us back to the main theological question of this essay. If the arguments from Section 2 are persuasive, then the primary way that we refer to God is deferentially. It is also clear that initial divine naming events are very remote. And our current linguistic community is very large and very diverse, with many different forms of religious discourse. So divine name words meet the criteria for semantic vulnerability How troubling is this? It depends on how likely it is that divine name words have undergone shift or pollution. And this pushes us to think about the history and theology of shared religious language.

4   Hiddenness and Semantic Vulnerability

At this stage in the argument a bit of vertigo sets in. I've been using "God" throughout this essay as though it were referring to something. Now I am questioning whether it does. Doesn't that make the earlier arguments incoherent? To reduce the vertigo, we can pose the skeptical question as a challenge. Suppose (like me), you believe that God exists. And suppose you concede that most of your evidence about God comes from testimony. And suppose you acknowledge that divine name words are semantically vulnerable. Trusting testimony requires trusting that your various sources are all conveying information about God. And to convey information about God, these sources need a divine name word that refers to God. So to trust religious testimony, you must have reason to believe that even though divine names are vulnerable, they still refer to God. In particular, there hasn't been any shift or pollution. What grounds might you (or I) have for thinking this?

First, you might think that there aren't any competing causal chains for divine names that you might defer to, so there is no chance of shift or pollution for a divine name. We can call this the *no actual competition* response.

The no actual competition response seems wildly implausible as a social and historical posit. For one, we live in a religiously diverse, multicultural and increasingly connected world. Contemporary English is a language many tributaries issuing from these different traditions.

Moreover, there are explicit examples of cultural and linguistic mergers in the history of many religious traditions. To choose a case study close to home, the contemporary Catholic Church is the product of two thousand years of theological mergers and linguistic acquisitions. Recall the changes the Church underwent

in the 5th and 6th century, when neoplatonic metaphysics was taken up by the Christian tradition. In the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, many neoplatonic descriptions of "The One" were taken as a basis for theories about the God of Christianity. "The One" and "God" clearly have different causal histories; the former was initially fixed by definite description and a priori speculation while the latter (if the tradition is believed) was revealed. Indeed, early Church history is full of events where distinct cultures puzzled over how to combine their metaphysical theories with the growing church and made tricky decisions about common reference. And Catholics are not alone in this; nearly every major contemporary religion can find syncretistic events in their formative years. Of course, syncretistic events alone do not give sufficient reason to doubt that a particular faith is revealed by God. But they do give reason to suppose that there are different strands of traditions within major faiths that have distinct histories.

Competing causal chains can also arise within mature traditions. In a sufficiently large linguistic community there are bound to be speakers who divine name words to improperly. Idolators, blasphemers—any individuals who baptize the non-divine with a divine-name word—are sources of new causal practices which we might defer to without even recognizing the chains as new.[18]

Perhaps you concede that there are many competing causal chains, but you think God is the origin of all of them. We can imagine cases where the mere fact that there is a diversity of beliefs about an object do not entail any kind of semantic problem. For example:

> JAMES BOND: James Bond is an international man of mystery. He has caused some people to believe he is a top MI6 spy. He has duped others into believing that he is an affluent London business man. And he has fooled still others to believe he is a skilled thief. There are three different camps with respect to Bond theory. If the thief camp encounters the businessman camp or the spy camp, the thief camp is likely to think the others are wildly misguided. They may even deny they are speaking of the same person, given how divergent their beliefs are. Nonetheless "James Bond" refers to James Bond in all of their mouths, because he is the source of all of their different referential chains.

Might God be like James Bond—the causal source of all of the different belief systems in a diverse community? If so, competing causal chains do not owe any threat of semantic shift or pollution. Call this the *common source* response to the problem of semantic hiddenness.

The Bond-God analogy is problematic insofar as Bond intentionally deceives some groups as to his true identity, but presumably God is never deceptive. So the common source response requires an accompany-

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[18]See Sullivan (2012).

ing theological view about the pluralistic nature of divine revelation. John Hick offers a theory along these lines in his work attempting to reconcile religious pluralism and theistic belief. Hick proposes that every established world religion (not just the Abrahamic) is worshipping the same divine reality, but practitioners are worshipping under radically different modes of presentation. As Hick puts it, "our human religious experience, variously shaped as it is by our sets of religious concepts, is a cognitive response to the universal presence of the ultimate divine Reality that, in itself, exceeds human conceptuality. This Reality is however manifested to us in ways formed by a variety of human concepts, as the range of divine personae an metaphysical impersonate witnessed to in the history of religions."[19]

Hick's theology requires an extreme form of apophaticism. A Christian cannot truly claim that "Jesus was the Son of God *simpliciter*", she can only truly claim that "Jesus was the Son of God relative to our cognitive response to the divine reality." This common source response will not be acceptable for any theist who thinks some of their claims about God are absolutely true—true without respect to how different communities cognize the divine. Likewise, it is difficult for a Muslim to have a substantive disagreement with a Christian about core theological tenets, since it is not in doubt that *Christians believe* Jesus to be the Son of God. So this version of the common source response also fails one of our qualifications for a theory of divine names—that it explain substantivity of inter-faith disagreement. Another major difficulty for the common source response comes in squaring it with the particular theologies whose testimony it is meant to justify. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all have teachings about the exclusivity of God's revelation which are straightforwardly incompatible with Hick's theology. So this kind of common source response is no solution for adherents of these faiths.

We could supplement the common source response with a more exclusive theology than Hick offers. We might suppose that God reveals himself (non-deceptively) to many different traditions, but only one tradition—presumably one's own—accurately preserves the full content of revelation. Such an approach will preserve substantive interfaith debate. But it won't solve the problems of shift and pollution induced by blasphemy. And proponents of this kind of common source response still face the tricky issue of deciding which traditions to assume are revealed (in this attenuated sense) and which are not.

I've given reasons for thinking there are many competing causal chains of reference in our language and reasons to doubt the assumption that God is the source of all of these chains. Still, could we avoid the problem of semantic shift or pollution by resolving to only defer very selectively when we use divine

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[19](Hick, 2009, 64).

names? Suppose my community thinks only Moses was a trustworthy source of divine names. Suppose further that we resolve to defer to whatever Moses meant by "YHWH" and to defer to no other. "YHWH" in my mouth will refer to God just so long as Moses successfully established reference to God and so long as I do not slip back into deferring to the broader community's use of divine name words. And because I am using an unpolluted name word, I can still say true and false things about God. So religious testimony is secured, at least for me and my small community. We can call this the *quarantined deference* response to the semantic problem of hiddenness.

This kind of long-term selective deference is very difficult for speakers in a large pluralistic society to accomplish. Certainly believers (like me) who consult a wide variety of sources and traditions are not making any effort to quarantine their language. For proponents of quarantined deference, traditions outside of one's very local chain of deference cannot provide any testimonial evidence about God. But perhaps very insular religious sects are capable of these kinds of extended deferential uses. Still, even if each community reverts to selective deference to their favored prophet, it is not at all clear that inter-faith testimony is substantive. Consider an analogous case. I do not know Mary, but when I speak of her, I resolve to refer to whoever my friend Rob means by the name. You do not know Mary either, but you resolve to refer to whoever your friend Amy means by the name. If I tell you "Mary just finished her thesis." do you have any reason to believe I am talking about your Mary? It seems not. On the causal-historical theory, we only have reason to think name words have the same referent if we have reason to suppose they have the same causal-historical source. Jews, Christians, and Muslims who each insist on deferring to their particular favored historical prophet have no reason to believe there is a shared historical source. So there is no reason to believe that interfaith dialogue is substantive. At best, we have to relax the "shared reference" assumption as a pre-condition for substantive inter-faith dialogue. I think these are serious costs for the quarantined deference proposal.

5   Reference and Inspiration

The solutions I have considered thus far ignore any agency that God might exercise in securing the reference of divine names. And this points to a different kind of solution to the problem of semantic hiddenness—the one I prefer, but admittedly it also comes with costs.

There are theological precedents for thinking that God exercises corrective semantic power within lin-

guistic communities. For example, the Christian doctrine of inspiration holds that the Bible is God's revelation because God actively worked through the individual authors and editors of the different books of scripture to preserve a content across translations and over time. Ordinarily if a narrative were recorded by many different authors, in many different languages, and frequently retranslated, the content would change over time. But the Christian solution to this threat is a supposition that even though fallible human agents are involved at every step in transmitting the revelation, the Holy Spirit works in faith communities to prevent the distortion. The work is miraculous since it defies all of the causal and historical pressures that would ordinarily shift meaning.

If God has the power to ensure that entire contents are preserved across time and translation, it is not so strange to think God also has the power to ensure that one building block of content—names—also preserve their reference across time and translation. Indeed, it seems that God could not preserve the content of revelation without preserving the reference of divine names. Call this the *semantic inspiration* response to the problem of semantic hiddenness. According to the semantic inspiration view, we can be confident that divine name words have not suffered semantic drift or pollution because God wills through the Holy Spirit that they be preserved. Versions of this response could also be formulated for other theistic traditions that subscribe to a theory for how their holy books persist as revelations across time and translation.[20]

There are at least four kinds of objection one might raise to the inspiration response. I'll discuss them in order of the ones I find least troubling to most troubling.

The first is that the inspiration strategy is objectionably circular. The semantic problem of hiddenness is a problem for understanding how religious testimony could be a source of evidence for religious belief. Theological doctrines concerning the nature of revelation and the work of the Holy Spirit come to us via testimony. So these beliefs are subject to the very doubts that they are meant to assuage. To make use of the semantic inspiration response one must be already committed to the view that testimony justifies religious beliefs.

I don't find this objection particularly troubling, since the same kind of objection can be raised against secular testimony—and really any other source of knowledge. Suppose I became skeptical about whether historical writings were a good source of evidence about ancient Egypt. I discover an ancient text outlining the record-keeping practices of Egyptian scholars, and that text presents the scholars as having very exacting

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[20]In a similar vein, Kevin Hector offers an account of how the Spirit of Christ fixes the meaning of our concepts pertaining to God in Hector (2011).

standards. Discovering the text will boost my confidence about the historical writings more generally, and this boost is an epistemically appropriate response to the discovery. But my confidence is based on circular reasoning—testimony in this case seems to "bootstrap" its own justification. This is a central problem in epistemology. But defenders of semantic inspiration are under no obligation to provide a full-scale solution to the problem of epistemic circularity, and the kinds of bootstrapping used to defend religious testimony are no worse than the kinds of bootstrapping used to defend other means of knowledge.

One might also think the semantic inspiration solution is too partisan—it relies on highly specific claims from one theistic tradition to answer a more general philosophical problem. To be clear, most of the major religions we have considered thus far have some theory for how revelation is preserved over time. But for each of these religions, there are different and incompatible theories of the mechanism of this preservation. Any sufficiently developed version of the inspiration response will thus appeal to theological beliefs which will not be shared among faiths and which will not be endorsed by agnostics or atheists. How bad is this?

It depends on what one wants out of response to the problems of hiddenness (or out of philosophical theology more generally). For instance, one might want a theory that would persuade what Peter van Inwagen calls "ideal agnostics" of a given position.[21] The ideal agnostic is someone without pre-existing theological (or a theological) commitments who is willing to devote sufficient time and reasoning powers to evaluate the relevant philosophical arguments. The semantic inspiration response will not move any ideal agnostic to greater confidence in the justification of religious testimony. But the philosophical theologian's job is not merely to serve the ideal agnostics. As van Inwagen himself concedes, they are a difficult audience to please! There is also a respectable task of demonstrating that particular belief systems are coherent, and that those who subscribe to the system have the resources for answering skeptical objections from within their systems. In this project, the goal of philosophical theology is to explain particular theological doctrines in a way that makes them relevant to philosophical problems and still plausible enough to be endorsed by a practitioner of this faith. And in this project, the semantic inspiration response seems well-founded.

One might also object that the solution is too mysterious. It leaves us none the more enlightened as to the mechanism by which divine names work. This objection gives me a bit more pause; I am not typically very comfortable invoking the work of the Holy Spirit to solve my philosophical problems. And the semantic inspiration response seems miraculous, in the sense that it would require a deviation from ordinary and well-understood causal processes that determine meaning. Is it a strike against a semantic theory if it relies

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[21] van Inwagen (2006).

on a primitive, non-causal mechanism to settle reference?

There is some precedent in secular philosophy of language for thinking that some referents "attract" terms in a primitive, non-causal way. The process is called "reference magnetism", and it is typically deployed as a solution to skeptical challenges stemming from indeterminacy in the denotations of predicates. The idea is easiest to grasp by considering a common thought experiment. Suppose you think that causal processes determine the denotations of predicates. For instance, the meaning of the word "green" is just the set of objects that we've been disposed over time to classify as green. Then we are asked to give a definition of "green". We consider two options:

> Option 1: "Green" denotes the set of objects always disposed to reflect light in such a way as to appear greenish to normal human perceivers.
>
> Option 2: "Green" denotes the set of objects disposed to reflect light in such a way as to appear greenish to normal human perceivers before the year 2050 and to appear bluish to normal human viewers after 2050.

Presumably our use of the predicate "green" up until now hasn't been sensitive to how objects will appear after 2050—it is indeterminate between the two options. But Option 1 is a better candidate for the denotation of "green" than Option 2. In virtue of what is it a better denotation? There is no solution to be found in just our patterns of use. The best we can do is appeal to some primitive feature of Option 1 that makes it more eligible as a referent. Without such an assumption, it seems that denotations of predicates would be radically underdetermined.[22]

If it is acceptable to appeal to primitive, non-causal features to explain how predicates get their determinate denotations, then it should likewise be acceptable to appeal to primitive, non-causal processes to explain how indeterminacy in name words is resolved. In fact, the semantic inspiration response is less mysterious than the reference magnetism posit. The primary evidence for reference magnetism comes from a form of inference to the best explanation—something must resolve indeterminacy, it cannot be patterns of use, so we should infer there are primitive eligibility constraints. But semantic inspiration has outside theological support, and Christians have a detailed theory of how and why the Holy Spirit acts in the world more generally. There is little we can say about how reference magnetism works. There is a lot we can say about the Holy Spirit.

Finally one might object that the semantic inspiration solution carries with it a kind of objectionable semantic exclusivity. To my mind, this is the biggest challenge facing the inspiration response. Scriptural

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[22]See Lewis (1984), Lewis (1999) and Sider (2011) for discussions of reference magnetism.

inspiration is typically held to occur for a single community and its accepted revelations. And so Christians believe that collected books of the Bible are inspired by the Holy Spirit, but the Quran is not. Muslims believe the Quran was given to Allah directly from angels of God, while other faiths' scriptures are lesser revelations. But if the semantic inspiration response is to preserve co-reference of divine names across different faiths, then it must be an *inclusive* mechanism: God must inspire the meaning of divine names across the faiths. The theology of scriptural inspiration gives us no clear analogy for how and why God might do this. Presumably we'd need to augment our response with an account of how the Holy Spirit works in individuals outside of one's faith community. But developing such a theory will require confronting some of the most controversial issues in pneumatology—issues which, I fear, are beyond the scope of this essay.

6 Conculsion

In the introduction, I expressed sympathy for an Augustine-inspired "church-making" defense of our reliance on testimony (rather than religious experience). According to the church-making defense, our reliance on testimony is beneficial insofar as it encourages the formation of a religious community and promotes bonds of love and dependence between believers. The desire to make a church offers a potential reason for God's remaining experientially hidden. To the extent that it is the task of the Holy Spirit to make the Church, I think the inspiration response is particularly theologically fitting and of a piece with how we should approach other problems of hiddenness. But like other problems of hiddenness, the semantic problem resists a tidy and theologically neutral solution.

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