AGATHOLOGICAL RATIONALISM
AND FIRST-ORDER RELIGIONS

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In one of the recent issues of the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*[1] Janusz Salamon has argued that the project of second-order religion put forward by Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican (henceforth TMM)[2] presupposes a watered-down vision of religion, or more of a philosophical worldview than a religion — an opinion with which I must agree. Salamon objects to TMM's idea, whose main function seems to be providing only an explanation why our Universe exists and why it is ordered as it is, without giving us any axiological content and eschatological hope. A true religion — true in the sense that it satisfies some minimal set of conditions which religious believers have in mind speaking about religion — cannot fail to provide some such axiological content, including moral principles and some reply to the question about the meaning of life. This is precisely the job that first-order historical religions, like Christianity, Judaism, Islam or Buddhism do. Salamon argues that the main task of religion is not to answer the cognitive questions concerning the beginning and the order of our Universe — questions that Millican and Thornhill-Miller are particularly interested in — but rather address the existential questions, like: what is the meaning of my life and of the life of my loved ones in the face of suffering and death. I find this existential and axiological bias, by and large, well-justified and uncontroversial.

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[1]   Janusz Salamon, 'Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse: Reply to Millican and Thornhill- Miller', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 7 no. 4 (2015), 197-245.

[2]   Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican, 'The Common Core/Diveristy Dilemma; Revisions of Humean Thought, New Empirical Research, and the Limits of Rational Religious Belief', *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 7 no. 1 (2015), 1-51.

However, it seems to me that we should not discard too easily the cognitive content of religion. For example, if the question of why there is something rather than nothing is raised, one can answer it in a theistic manner by pointing to God the Creator as the explanation of why there is something rather than nothing. An atheist can answer the same question by referring to a random coincidence of physical events or to a physical, natural necessity of some brute facts or states. Any religion should have in its intellectual resources an answer to this kind of metaphysical questions, thus providing an alternative to the naturalistic view of the Universe.

I also agree with Salamon's response to TMM that first-order religions can be rational and that it is not true that all such religions (i.e., religious beliefs held by their adherents and generated by them) are positively irrational. The main idea of TMM is that all first-order religions are irrational mainly because of their diversity and the mutual incompatibility of their creeds' propositional content. On the other hand, they think that science provides at least some reasons for believing that the physical Universe is fine-tuned and this might provide a point of departure of an argument that would ground second-order religious belief in the existence of a divine Designer of the fine-tuned Universe. They also believe that such new second-order religion could bring a range of social and psychological benefits analogical to those which first-order religions offer, and hence could replace all first-order religions which TMM consider to be irrational without exception.

When defending the rationality of first-order religions, Salamon resorts to his own philosophical view of religion which he calls agatheism, because it identifies the Absolute or the Ultimate Reality with the Ultimate Good (*to agathon* in Greek) and sees religious beliefs as products of 'agathological imagination'. The key point of his position in discussion with TMM is that the agatheistic defence of the rationality of first-order religious beliefs is grounded not in the considerations of the facts about the physical Universe, but in the realm of human values. As he puts it: 'agatheism ascribes to the Ultimate Reality the function of being the ultimate ground and ultimate end (*telos*) of all that is good, thus making sense of the teleological and value-laden nature of our self-consciousness, of our thinking about our existence as of self-conscious, ra-

tional and free persons whose actions are explained by reference to value-laden reasons, not merely to efficient physical causes.'[3]

I suggest that Salamon's agathological conception of rationality of religious beliefs (for brevity: agathological rationality) implies that all believers of a given first-order religion can fall into three epistemic classes:

(a) ordinary believers

(b) reflective believers

(c) hyper-reflective believers

Ordinary believers are those who grew up in a certain religious tradition, maintain it by going to church, synagogue or temple, and live their lives in a way recommended by that tradition. They simply believe in all the things they have been taught as belonging to their home religious tradition, and stick to their own tradition without questioning the truthfulness and accuracy of their creed, and without considering in any critical manner the question of the truthfulness of alien religious traditions. Reflective believers, in turn, seek to answer certain troubling questions, they reflect on their own religion and try to respond to objections raised by sceptics, atheists and other critics of their religious tradition or of religion in general. Hyper-reflective believers are like reflective believers, but they go one step further, namely, they are ready to admit that it is *possible* that other first-order religion(s) can be equally close or closer to truth of the matter and may grasp the Ultimate Reality more truthfully than their own religious tradition does. Hyper-reflective believers continue to trust in the God of their own tradition, but they also allow for the *possibility* that adherents of some other religion may be right in believing in the Divinity that is worshipped in their tradition because it satisfies their expectations regarding the divine perfection (something Salamon expresses in terms of 'agathological verification').

On Salamon's view, hyper-reflective believers have a special epistemic instrument at their disposal called 'agathological imagination', which allows them to evaluate the rationality of first-order religions. Agathalogical imagination

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3   Janusz Salamon, 'Atheism and Agatheism…', p. 202.

— one may also call it axiological intuition — allows them to evaluate whether and to what extent God or the Ultimate Reality (the Divine) of a given first-order religion is *sufficiently* perfect, in the sense of being maximally good.

Now, we are ready to formulate some critical points concerning agathological rationality of first-order religions. Salamon's agatheism seems to imply that if two first-order religions fulfil the requirements of agathological rationality in the same degree, then they are equally rational and believing in them is equally rational, too. If two first-order religions fulfil the requirements of Salamon's agathological rationality differently, then they are not equally rational and believing in them is not equally rational, either. It may perhaps be the case that some first-order religions do not fulfil the requirements of agathological rationality at all, and such religions and believing in them will be irrational. Thus, on Salamon's view about the rationality of religious beliefs, it is possible that

(1) two (or more) first-order religions can be equally rational meaning that they are simply rational;

(2) some first-order religions can be more rational than others;

(3) all first-order religions can be irrational;

(4) all first-order religions can be rational.

Surely, Salamon and Thornhill-Miller and Millican, refer to different concepts of rationality of religious belief. Salamon's rationality of religious beliefs is based on axiology and TMM's view of rationality of beliefs is grounded in the standards of science. Given Salamon's agatheism, I assume that, possibly, all first-order religions could be irrational because it is agathological imagination which is the final criterion of their rationality, and agathological imagination works in time, and, hence, it can change. There is no reason, as far as I can see, why in Salamon's agatheism option (3) should be a priori eliminated. Therefore, it is at least possible that all first-order religions are irrational in an agathological sense. The question whether they all *are* irrational in this agathological sense, or only some of them, is left open. In other words, Salamon is focusing on what agathological imagination is and how it works but he has less to say about the final results of this work. *Are* all first-order religions equally rational or are all of them irrational? Or perhaps some of them are irrational, but then

which ones? Salamon presumably excludes option (3) (all first-order religions are irrational) since he is arguing against TMM's idea of second-order religion while defending first-order religions. However, why option (3) is rejected requires a better explanation.

Let us repeat, Salamon, as I understand his position, holds that all first-order religions can be rational (in his agathological sense of rationality), whereas Thornhill-Miller and Millican claim that all first-order religions are irrational (given their understanding of rationality of beliefs). Both sides of the debate assume that an internal coherence of the system of our beliefs is a necessary condition of their rationality and that a given (rational) belief should cohere with the whole body of knowledge of an epistemic agent.

Keeping all this in mind, we may ask the following: what is the position of a hyper-reflective believer who sticks to a particular first-order religion like Christianity? He either believes that Christianity is equally rational as other first-order religions or that Christianity is more or the most rational of them. It would be irrational and incoherent *ex definitione* for a Christian hyper-reflective believer to believe that Christianity is less rational than other first-order religion(s) and still to believe in a Christian God. However, a hyper-reflective believer allows for the possibility that some other first-order religion(s) can prove more rational (in agathological sense) than Christianity. This is so because agathological intuition is always working and the future is open. Therefore, it is possible that our present agathological intuition will be refuted and replaced in the future by another. Thus, a hyper-reflective believer is someone who holds that

(i) his/her own first-order religion is at least as rational as some other first-order religions, but it may well be more or the most rational of them

and

(ii) other first-order religions may, conceivably, be assessed in the future as more rational than his/her own religion.

The question arises if the above-sketched position is a coherent view. A hyper-reflective Christian believer believes, for example, that Jesus is God and that God's nature is truine. He also believes that such a 'social' nature of God is more satisfactory for agathological imagination than a belief that God

is a 'a metaphysically single being', or that the Divine or the Ultimate Reality is impersonal. But still he holds that *it is possible* that other first order religions which reject Christ's divinity are closer to God or to the Ultimate Reality, or simply to the truth. In brief, a hyper-reflective Christian believer believes that Jesus is God and that it is a *good* thing that Jesus is God. However, that believer also holds (as a hyper-reflective believer is obliged to hold) that it is possible that *it is not a good* thing that Jesus is God. Agathological operator 'it is good that…' plays here a crucial role since we are discussing the agathological notion of rationality.

At first glance it seems to be a coherent view. Surely, one can believe that *p* and believe that it is possible that not-*p*. However, here arises another question: is that believer still a Christian? Or, more generally: is such first-order agatheistic religion really a first-order religion? Let us remember that first-order religions consist of yet another element which is inherent and irreducible part of their creed: religious authority. A religious authority is based on some traditions, recorded past events, divine revelations, written texts, social and religious institutions, etc. As grounded in the past that authority is in a sense necessary and closed to any revision or falsification.

Christianity — as the first-order religion — teaches us that Jesus is the Son of God and that it is a good thing that Jesus is the Son of God. But surely it does not teach us that it is possible that it is not a good thing that Jesus is the Son of God. We would probably get into the same dilemma if we considered any specific belief constituting the creed of any other first-order religion. Therefore, my point is that it is not coherent to be a believer of a first-order religion (a hyper-reflective believer in particular) and, at the same time, to be an agatheist. Salamon proposes a new religion or, more accurately, a new spiritual worldview deeply rooted in the Platonist philosophical tradition. But his proposal is rather an alternative to first-order religions — just like TMM's second-order religion is an alternative to them. The difference between Salamon's view on the one hand and Thornhill-Miller and Millican's proposal on the other, concerns the foundation of religious beliefs. Salamon's philosophical construction is based on axiology and TMM is based on cosmology. In fact, both views are deeply rooted in the Platonist philosophical tradition: the former because of the idea of the Good, and the latter because of the idea of the Demiurge.

My view is that 'true' first-order religions are grounded mainly in religious authority and in the past. An ordinary believer of a certain first-order religion, say, an ordinary Christian believer, believes that if his God decided to act in some way, He really acted in that way. The very fact that there exist people who believe that a Christian God could not have wished to act or could not have acted so-and-so because such divine action would be at odds with human imagination or it would contradict human science does not necessarily weaken the rationality of that ordinary Christian believer. That believer can think that God he believes in is truly omnipotent and that He really did things which are beyond the imagination of philosophers and scientists — the agathological imagination included. That ordinary believer can rationally think in the following terms: if God could not do all the things that the religious authority says He did, and if His acts have to be comprehensible to our human imagination and compatible with the current state of scientific knowledge, He would not be a true and almighty God.

If so, what are the prospects for a promising global, or at least regional, dialogue between the believers of various first- and second-order religions? Alas, they are not as bright as many would like them to be. But such a dialogue need not be a hopeless task. As in the case of any dialogue, the outcome much depends on the will to respectfully listen to and think over what the others say. Accordingly, I consider the proposals put forth by Branden Thornhill-Miller, Peter Millican and Janusz Salamon to be interesting, important and worth listening to — with due criticism since critical thinking is part of our tradition.