

FIRST-ORDER THEISTIC RELIGION: INTENTIONAL POWER BEYOND BELIEF

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Abstract. Diversity and disagreement in the religious beliefs among many religious people seem here to stay, however much they bother some inquirers. Even so, the latter inquirers appear not to be similarly bothered by diversity and disagreement in the scientific beliefs among many scientists. They sometimes propose that we should take religious beliefs to be noncognitive and perhaps even nonontological and noncausal regarding their apparent referents, but they do not propose the same for scientific beliefs.¹ Perhaps they would account for this difference in terms of more extensive diversity and disagreement among religious beliefs than scientific beliefs. We shall attend to the alleged significance of diversity and disagreement among religious beliefs, with an eye toward its bearing on epistemic and ontological matters in religion. In particular, we shall ask whether the significance recommends a retreat from first-order to “second-order” religion, as suggested by Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican.²

1. A PROPOSED DILEMMA FOR FIRST-ORDER RELIGION

Stephen Jay Gould has offered the following statement of what we may call a “second-order” approach to religion, along with a “first-order” approach to science.

Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important, but utterly different, realm of

1 See, for instance, Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (Ballantine, 1999).

2 B. Thornhill-Miller & P. Millican, “The Common-Core/ Diversity Dilemma: Revisions of Humean Thought, New Empirical Research, and the Limits of Rational Religious Belief”, in *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 7, no. 1 (2015).

human purposes, meanings, and values — subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve (4).

Religion, according to Gould, functions in the realm of “human purposes, meanings, and value”, but not *divine* purposes, meanings, and values. If the purposes in question were divine, religion would tap in to something causal and factual independent of human purposes, meanings, and values. Gould, however, denies such independence for religion. He offers science and religion as two “non-overlapping magisteria” characterized by mutual “respectful noninterference” (5). Religion will be “respectful” of science only if it avoids claims to causal and factual significance beyond human purposes, meanings, and values.

Thornhill-Miller and Millican (hereafter ‘TM&M’) offer an approach to “second-order religion” that extends the kind of “respectful noninterference” offered by Gould’s model of non-overlapping magisteria. They claim that “the contradictions between different religious belief systems, in conjunction with new understandings of the cognitive forces that shape their common features, persuasively challenge the rationality of most kinds of supernatural belief” (1). In addition, they hold that “an attractive compromise may be available by moving from the competing factions and mutual contradictions of ‘first-order’ supernaturalism to a more abstract and tolerant ‘second-order’ view, which itself can be given some distinctive (albeit controversial) intellectual support through the increasingly popular Fine Tuning Argument” (1). We need to clarify their suggestions.

TM&M rely on the following “dilemma”:

The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma: In so far as religious phenomena (e.g. miracle reports, religious experiences, or other apparent perceptions of supernatural agency) point towards specific aspects of particular religions, their diversity and mutual opposition undermines their evidential force; while in so far as such phenomena involve a ‘common core’ of similarity, they point towards a proximate common cause for these phenomena that is natural rather than supernatural (2; cf. 20).

They note that a natural proximate common cause for religious phenomena is consistent with a supernatural *ultimate* cause, but, as we shall see, they deny any (compelling evidence for) intervention of a supernatural ultimate cause in the domain of “causal order” (146).

TM&M claim that the “diversity and mutual opposition [of religious phenomena] undermines their evidential force.” This claim is not obviously true, because it seems to neglect the person-variability of evidence or “evidential force”. At a minimum, they would need to specify *whom* the evidential force is undermined for. You might have compelling evidence from your experience that God commands you to keep the Sabbath, for instance, whereas I could have compelling evidence from my experience that God does not require me to keep the Sabbath. My evidence would not automatically defeat your evidence for you, because your experience differs from mine regarding what God commands about keeping the Sabbath. My experience and evidence would not automatically trump yours regarding evidential force *for you*, because my experience and evidence need not be shared by you. Evidence is person-variable in this manner, and it thus contrasts with truth and factuality.

If God exists, God could issue opposing commands to you and me for keeping the Sabbath. You could get the divine command: Keep the Sabbath. In contrast, I could get the divine command: Do not keep the Sabbath. Each of us could have undefeated evidence for God’s having given the respective command to each of us. God could have different specific purposes for you and me, and thus issue correspondingly different, even opposing, commands to us. Perhaps, however, this kind of opposition is too weak for the dilemma in question.

TM&M may have in mind a stronger kind of opposition, such as a case where, on your evidence, God commands *all* people to keep the Sabbath while, on my evidence, God commands *all* people not to keep the Sabbath. If God is consistent in commanding, God would not command both that all people keep the Sabbath *and* that all people not keep the Sabbath. Going beyond actual truth and factuality, *evidence* among people is not constrained by such consistency. You could have undefeated evidence, relative to your overall experience, that God commands all people to keep the Sabbath, and I could have undefeated evidence, relative to my overall experience, that God commands all people not to keep the Sabbath.

Evidence that bears on human experience is a function ultimately of what one’s experience indicates overall, and it can be at odds with the evidence and experience of another person. So, diversity or opposition in this area of

experience will not undermine religious evidence for a person. This results from the fact that a person's undefeated evidence for a claim does not entail the truth of the claim or the factuality of what the claim is about. So, TM&M need to support their claim about the undermining of evidence in a way that does not confuse evidence and truth or factuality, and honors the person-variability of evidence.

A related problem emerges from the claim of TM&M that the "possibility [of a fine-tuned universe] therefore casts doubt on the unique authority of *any* particular religious orthodoxy, while at the same time potentially supporting the theory of a cosmic Designer in a manner that is potentially friendly to more general religious attitudes" (4). This is a mistake. A mere "possibility" will not cast doubt on the unique authority of a religious position that is not an analytic claim, because a mere possibility does not yield actual evidence against the authority of such a position. If the doubt in question is to be evidentially relevant, it must be supported by evidence and thus probable to some extent, and not a mere possibility. So, we would need a case for the evidential support of the claim that the universe is fine-tuned and for its bearing against a religious position, and this is no small task, given the various serious objections in circulation to fine-tuning arguments.³

2. NATURALISTIC EXPLANATION?

TM&M hold that "important new research from the psychology of religion, religious studies, and the cognitive science of religion now offers the prospect of persuasive naturalistic explanation for what appears to be a 'common core' of key religious phenomena such as religious experiences, afterlife beliefs, and the apparent perception of supernatural agency" (23). The alleged "persuasive naturalistic explanation" allows for an ultimate supernatural explanation, but TM&M advise that we not rely on a supernatural explanation regarding the causal order of things. Even so, if there is a compatible supernatural explanation, it will matter to inquirers who seek a suitably full explanation of religious experience. Such inquirers will want to include an explanation if it

³ See, for instance, Mark Colyvan, Jay Garfield, and Graham Priest, "Problems with the Argument from Fine Tuning", *Synthese* 145, no. 3 (2005).

refers to something causally real in religious experience. So, we would do well not to dismiss supernatural explanation without careful scrutiny.

TM&M rely on an alleged hypersensitive agency-detection device (HADD) and a particular theory of mind (ToM) among humans for their naturalistic case. Regarding HADD, they remark:

[The] *hypersensitive agency detection device* (HADD) is the human cognitive operator that has been postulated to explain why it is normal for us to see agency rather than randomness everywhere in the world around us: why we see faces in clouds, attribute illness and bad weather to witchcraft, and perceive the hand of fate in our lives rather than the action of abstract and impersonal forces. The evolutionary advantage of its hyperactivity is commonly explained with the observation that the cost of perceiving more agents than actually exist (e.g. mistaking wind in the tall grass for a predator) is low, while perceiving too few agents (e.g. mistaking a predator for wind) would, at some point, be fatal (9).

Regarding the particular *Theory of mind* (ToM), they refer to “the human capacity to attribute mental states — such as beliefs, desires, and intentions — to oneself and to others”, and suggest that this capacity is natural and common, if not routine.

TM&M add:

HADD and ToM together lead us to find specific kinds of meaning and design in randomness, to see the action of invisible agents even in unplanned, non-intentional processes, and to attempt to relate to such agents as we would to other intentional beings. Working together, these two processes — all by themselves — seem to provide a reasonably persuasive naturalistic explanation for the belief in invisible, intelligent supernatural agents like the gods and spirits found universally across human cultures (30).

This is a sweeping approach to naturalism and supernatural agents, by any standard. Whether the naturalistic explanation on offer is “reasonably persuasive” for a person will depend on the particular evidence actually had by that person for the existence of a supernatural agent. One cannot ignore such specific evidence by invoking a tendency of humans to attribute intentional agency in certain circumstances. A key issue is whether a person’s evidence includes a pattern of one’s being led toward a goal, intentionally, by an agent transcendent to humans. We shall return to this important matter after further identification of the motive for the second-order religion offered by TM&M.

TM&M add a practical consideration to their case against first-order religion:

If consideration of the practical benefit of holding religious beliefs is admissible in the naturalism/supernaturalism debate, we would argue that again there is much greater reason to discourage rather than encourage *first-order* supernaturalist beliefs. The in-group benefits to be gained are outweighed by the actual and potential out-group damage. And with such massive destructive power increasingly wielded around the world, there is perhaps today no greater threat to humanity than intergroup conflict motivated by exclusivist and other-worldly religious thinking (43).

It clouds the discussion now to invoke this kind of practical consideration, because the key issue now is *epistemic*, bearing on the *evidence* one has for various assumptions of first-order religion. The latter evidence could be strong even if some practical difficulties face first-order religion in human history. So, we should postpone practical considerations until we settle the key epistemic issue about first-order religion.

3. A DICHOTOMY IN DOUBT

TM&M suggest a dichotomy for science and religion akin to Gould's non-overlapping magisteria characterized by mutual respectful noninterference:

Functionally, naturalistic and supernaturalistic thinking can be seen as outcomes of two different human *learning systems*, the one oriented towards 'understanding and managing *physical causal* relationships in a mechanistic fashion', and the other 'concerned with understanding and managing *social relationships* in a normative and deferential fashion'. So even though supernaturalist beliefs serve poorly as explanations of how the world works, they might be seen as well-motivated — even 'rational' in a sense — if they function effectively to improve individual well-being and to supply the norms and customs that hold communities together (45).

Gould would approve of this kind of dichotomy, but we still need a case for it based on definite evidence among particular humans. We shall see that the evidence for first-order religion does not yield so easily.

According to TM&M:

The more subtle ... response is to abandon the competing dogmatism of *first-order supernaturalism* and instead fall back onto an undogmatic version of its *second-order* cousin, finding intimations of divinity in the general

structures of the world and in our own religious instincts, while remaining fully committed to the enterprise of natural science. On this understanding of things, although creation is seen as *ultimately* deriving from a supernatural source, that source is distant and unknowable, and the role of science is to reveal the *proximate* foundation of our existence: the empirical universe through whose causal processes we have been made. Thus even while believing that the world itself is ultimately created and sustained by a guiding supernatural power, our scientific and historical enquiry can proceed in the same way as for the atheist, without resort to magical or supernatural intervention in the causal order (146).

Here the plot thickens, to the point of being confusing. Is not “creation” itself, being inherently causal and “deriving” from a supernatural source, part of “the causal order”? If so, we will have first-order supernaturalism after all, at least by the lights of what TM&M offer, owing to creation causally “deriving” from a fine-tuner. In addition, are not “intimations of divinity” (even in human “religious instincts”) inherently causal, being causally intimated to someone or other in experience? If so, we will have first-order supernaturalism after all, if with more or less specificity. So, the dichotomy offered for first-order and second-order domains appears to break down, owing to overlap of the domains with regard to causal roles (of a kind disallowed by Gould’s model of two magisteria).

TM&M had promised to leave a place for *religious* belief-systems in their second-order story of religion. At least, Thornhill-Miller seems to be inclined in that direction, while Millican sides with Hume against religion (5). Why should we think, however, that the proposed fine-tuner is, even if supernatural, a *religious* object? Being an acknowledged supernatural object does not entail being a religious object. An object of magic, for instance, could be supernatural without being a religious object, as various anthropologists have noted. So, TM&M need to show that their supernatural fine-tuner serves also as a religious object. Given that their fine-tuner is, in their words, “distant and unknowable”, this will not be a small task.

A key issue concerns what is required of a religious object. We should not collapse religion into either ethics, philosophy, theory, magic, or the acknowledgment of a supernatural object. Otherwise, we will disregard what actually motivates *religious* people, namely, something irreducible to either ethics, philosophy, theory, magic, or the acknowledgment of a supernatural

object. At a minimum, a religious person is devoted, as a priority, to something (beyond a mere belief) that gives the ultimate meaning or significance of his or her life, beyond any passing meaning in life. This “giving” of ultimate life-meaning in religion is causal (but not necessarily coercive), and not just a belief or a theory. So, religious devotion is *de re*, and not just *de dicto*. It is related to a causal meaning-giving reality beyond a belief, and not just to intellectual content, even if that reality is described in a way that falls short of full accuracy. If this kind of causal component is lacking in a supposed “religion”, we may consider it a philosophy, a theory, or an ethics rather than a first-order religion.

Some religious people could be devoted, for instance, to God, who gives them ultimate life-meaning, while they have inaccuracy in their understandings of God. Even so, religious people need not be theistic in their beliefs; they can acknowledge something other than God as what gives them ultimate life-meaning, as in the case of many religious Buddhists. The characterization of religions quickly becomes complex, but it is clear that religion does not reduce to ethics, philosophy, theory, magic, or acknowledgment of the supernatural. We need not digress to complex religious differences to grasp the point at hand.

Why should we expect religious people to accept something as religiously, ontically, and causally thin as what TM&M offer in their second-order religion, particularly if the religious evidence motivating those people is not so thin? Perhaps we should not. The second-order religion offered by TM&M leaves religious people largely with *ethics* (rather than religion) coupled with a “distant and unknowable” source of creation — the “distant and unknowable” fine-tuner. Perhaps some deist philosophers would settle for this kind of second-order position, but the followers of the major monotheistic religions, among other major living religions, typically would not. The “distant and unknowable” fine-tuner on offer is functionally too thin in human lives to give ultimate life-meaning to humans. As a result, it is not a religious object for religious humans even if it is supernatural.

TM&M offer the following hope for their second-order position: “It is not obviously *unreasonable* to base one’s religious commitments on this optimistic second-order theistic view, as long as it remains unrefuted and seems to bring substantial psychological and social benefits. Perhaps by the time

human physics has settled this issue, we shall also be in a better situation to judge how well different aspects of human society can cope without religion (for better or worse)” (47). Three problems arise here. First, as suggested, an appeal to practical value, including “psychological and social benefits”, is premature when the matter of evidential support is unsettled. Our primary question about religion is epistemic, and not practical. Second, we lack evidence for proposing the fine-tuner on offer as “theistic.” A fine-tuner may be “supernatural”, but it does not follow that it is “theistic.” We have no good reason to suppose that it has the minimal moral decency required to be God (on a wide range of conceptions of God). So, the jump from the unknowable fine-tuner in question to theism is premature at best. Third, we should not suppose that “human physics” will settle the issue of either the correctness or the epistemic reasonableness of theism. A divine being could supply the needed evidence for theism without doing so through “human physics.” It would be question-begging to require that human physics be the medium for evidence that settles the question of the epistemic reasonableness of theism.

Contrary to TM&M, the diversity and opposition among religious beliefs may yield evidential support, rather than trouble, for first-order religion. Perhaps God allows these as a kind of redemptive test for humans, to identify whether they will focus on God *de re* rather than on merely *de dicto* beliefs about God. We have a hint of this from the apostle Paul: “Indeed, there have to be factions [or divisions] among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine [in relation to God]” (1 Corinthians 11:18; I use the NRSV translation here and in what follows, unless otherwise noted). This could be a divine purpose for diversity and disagreement in religions, and thus the latter need not count against evidence for theistic belief or first-order theistic religion. In addition, the diversity and disagreement in question are compatible with realist truth in a particular religion, even if it is difficult to confirm such truth. So, diversity and disagreement in religions do not call for a retreat from ontic commitment in religion to an allegedly nonontic or non-causal second-order. Instead, they call for renewed attention to the relevant evidence for a person with regard to a religious position. Answers may not come easy, but this is no reason to retreat from the reality of answers to be discovered. The same lesson holds for the sciences, where it is more readily accepted.

4. EXPERIENTIAL EVIDENCE FOR FIRST-ORDER THEISTIC RELIGION

Religious evidence comes to many humans in various ways and forms. We can get a sense of what kind of evidence can motivate first-order theistic religion by attending to an actual case of evidence for such religion. The religious evidence offered by the apostle Paul for the Jewish-Christian God will serve this purpose for us. Paul, following Jesus, thinks of God as worthy of worship and hence inherently morally perfect and thus perfectly loving toward all people, including the enemies of God. He also portrays God as being rejectable by humans; that is, humans can reject any offer from God for humans to be reconciled to God in a cooperative relationship. God, in other words, does not coerce human cooperation with God or even human acknowledgment of God's reality or goodness. Coercion in this area would preclude genuine human agency in deciding how to relate to God, and thus would put at risk the role of genuine love in human relating to God.

Paul represents God as being self-manifested or self-presented to some humans on occasion, for divine redemptive purposes aimed at the reconciliation of humans to God. For instance, Paul attributes the following statement to God, drawing from Isaiah 65:1: "I have *shown myself* (ἐμφανῆς ἐγενόμην) to those who did not ask for me" (Romans 10:20, italics added). He thinks of this self-manifestation of God as a presentation of God's moral character to receptive humans. In attracting a person's attention *de re*, this self-manifestation figures crucially in the guiding religious experience and foundational evidence for God's reality and character for that person. It supplies God's self-authentication, with regard to God's reality and character, to receptive humans. This is not the self-authentication of a propositional claim or a subjective experience. Instead, *God* as an intentional agent is doing the self-authentication of divine reality and character to some humans.

Paul remarks that "all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (Romans 8:14). If God is perfectly loving *Lord*, then God will try to *lead* people in a way that is best for them, all things considered. Morally perfect lordship seeks to provide morally significant leadership, for the good of all involved. A key issue concerns what this intended leading by God would be *toward*. That is, what would be its goal(s), given that it would be goal-directed

in virtue of being intentional or purposive? In Galatians 5:18, Paul speaks of being “led by the Spirit” of God in connection with loving others, among other “fruit” of God’s Spirit. A perfectly good God who seeks obedient “children of God” would want those children to be led by the Spirit of God toward *imitatio Dei* as central to what is best for them, all things considered.

Paul offers a needed hint of the divine goal of leading in some of his prayers for people. He prays: “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all...” (1 Thessalonians 3:12). In addition: “This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight (πάσῃ αἰσθήσει) to help you to determine what is best...” (Philippians 1:9–10). The love (*agapē*) in question, both divine and human, would include the volitional component, beyond any emotional component, of *willing* what is best for others, all things considered. It also would be a basis for human experience and recognition of God’s moral character and will. God’s redemptive purpose of *imitatio Dei* would be to promote such love by relating it to human access to the divine character and will.

Paul acknowledges the epistemic significance of experienced *agapē* in connection with a gift to cooperative humans from God: “Hope [in God] does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). Paul would say the same for faith in God: Its evidential anchor is something to be received cooperatively from God directly in human experience, and that something is integral to God’s moral character: divine *agapē*. Paul thus is denying a kind of disappointment that includes epistemic, or evidential, disappointment. Hope and faith in God do not epistemically disappoint people with such hope and faith, according to Paul, because God has supplied needed supporting evidence to them in the self-manifestation of divine *agapē* to them. God thereby self-authenticates God’s reality and character.⁴

The divine *agapē* in question is morally and volitionally robust, being *righteous* love. It thus is morally *convicting* toward unselfish love in the conscience of a receptive, cooperative human, because it clashes with a selfish human will. The experiential reality of being thus convicted is evidence of

4 For further explanation of Paul’s epistemology, see Paul K. Moser, *The Severity of God* (CUP 2013), 138–66, and Moser, *The God Relationship* (CUP, 2017), 210–27, 288–300.

God's reality, and it receives attention in John's Gospel. For instance, John 16:8 states: "When [the Spirit of God] comes, he will convict (ἐλέγξει) the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (RSV translation, using "convict" from the margin). A related idea emerges in Revelation 3:19: "As many as I love, I convict (ἐλέγχω) and instruct (παιδεύω)" (my translation).

Just as there can be convicting as challenging a person *against* sin, there also can be convicting as challenging a person *toward* righteous love. So, a person's being convicted need not be simply negative; it can have a positive moral and interpersonal goal toward which one is challenged. In addition, a person's being convicted toward loving others need not be static over time but could increase beyond self-interested goals over time. This increase would benefit one's becoming *increasingly* loving toward others, even toward one's enemies. This is central to Paul's two prayers noted above, and it agrees with the primary love commands from Jesus (Mark 12:30–31; cf. John 21:15–19).

One's being convicted and led by God toward *agapē* for all people is irreducible to a belief. A belief need not include an intrusion from volitional pressure on an agent toward *agapē* that appears not to be of the agent's own doing. Such pressure, particularly toward enemy-love, goes against one's natural tendencies and those of one's peers. It involves experience of a will, and no mere belief. The experienced will in question is an intentional power beyond belief, and its self-manifestation can give experiential evidence to a person. A belief could arise for one without one's being experientially *intruded upon* by a divine self-manifestation in the uncoercive manner suggested. So, one's being convicted by God does not reduce to a belief. The increasing or extending of being convicted to love others as God does would be crucial to one's awareness in conscience of being led by God in an *intentional* manner.

The divine conviction of a person toward loving others would not stop with one recipient of that person's love, but would extend eventually to *all* available recipients of this love. It would be an ongoing process moving a person, uncoercively, *toward a goal*, thus making it intentional and person-guided, and not haphazard or nonpersonal. In being convicted, a person thus would have evidence of an *intentional agent*, and not a mere physical process, motivating his or her being convicted toward loving others. This would take one beyond mere efficient causation to an experience of the intention or purpose of a loving agent in action. Absence of moral defect in the agent would

indicate a morally perfect agent at work, perhaps even an agent worthy of worship.⁵

The ultimate goal sought by a morally perfect God would be divine–human fellowship, or *koinonia*, for the sake of what is best for all concerned. This goal would be crucial to a lastingly flourishing community for all concerned, under divine guidance. It would include an I–Thou acquaintance with God irreducible to an I–It relationship. In this respect, the *koinonia* relationship sought by God would be *interpersonal* and hence irreducible to any relation to a nonintentional object. It thus would differ from typical scientific knowledge of an object and any merely *de dicto* knowledge that something is the case. We might think of it as filial knowing whereby a parent draws a child in to a morally robust relationship of benevolent fellowship under parental authority. Even so, God could hide divine self-manifestation from people opposed or indifferent to it, in order to avoid their being further alienated from God. A redemptive God would wait for the opportune time for such an intervention in human experience. So, God need not make evidence of God's reality publicly available to all inquirers. Many people (including, evidently, TM&M) assume otherwise, and thereby beg a key question about the divine giving of self-evidence.⁶

If one's experiential evidence of seemingly being convicted and led by God into morally robust *koinonia* faces no defeater, that evidence will underwrite well-grounded, epistemically reasonable belief in God for one. The fact that other religious people hold some beliefs in conflict with one's belief in God will not be a defeater for one, because a conflicting belief does not automatically yield evidence for one against one's belief. A defeater will arise for one only if one's evidence supports that defeater, and that typically will be a function ultimately of what one's overall experience indicates regarding what is the case. Evidence is a truth- or factuality-indicator of some sort, and mere conflicting beliefs fall short of that status. So, one cannot undermine a person's well-grounded belief in God just by an appeal to the conflicting beliefs held by some other religious people.

5 For further discussion of being convicted and led by God, in connection with human conscience, see Moser, *The God Relationship*, 313–23.

6 For relevant discussion of divine hiding, see Moser, *ibid.* 161–90.

The relevant belief in God can be *de re*, relating directly to God, with minimal *de dicto* content. This is important because it allows one to be convicted and led by God without one's having a conceptual understanding of God as God. It also allows that different people led by God could have different understandings of God and even know God by different names. This kind of diversity would not undermine or otherwise threaten the well-groundedness of belief in God. As long as the *de re* experiential base is in place, in the absence of defeaters, one's belief in God can be epistemically reasonable for one. In that case, one need not retreat to a causally thin "second-order" religion or settle for a "distant and unknowable" fine-tuner. One's theism then may be reasonable for one in being first-order and causally robust.

5. GOODNESS AND GOD

Divine *agapē* would be morally good, even morally perfect, but it does not follow that God is goodness. Being worthy of worship, morally perfect, and thus set on the redemption of people in need, God would be an intentional agent, but not all goodness is an intentional agent. The goodness of the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, is not an intentional agent, even if its author is such an agent. So, a strict identity between God and goodness will fail. Even so, goodness can figure in evidence for religious belief, and Janusz Salamon recruits this consideration in his approach to first-order religion. He offers *agatheism*, which "identifies God or the Ultimate Reality with the ultimate good (*to agathon*)", and explains:

I refer to as 'agatheism' or 'religion of the good' ('*to agathon*' in Greek), since it identifies the Ultimate Reality religiously conceived with the ultimate good which is postulated as a transcendental condition of our axiological consciousness through which we perceive and evaluate the goods at which our actions are aimed and towards which our hopes are directed. Agatheism conceives the Absolute as *Agatheos* by attributing to it first and foremost the characteristic of perfect goodness (but *not necessarily* all the other attributes of God of the Western classical theism, since 'agatheism' is a 'thinner' concept than 'theism', capturing the agathological core of a broad range of religious concepts of the Absolute).⁷

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

Given that “agatheism is a thinner concept than theism”, I recommend that we not call it *theism* at all. It does not require theism, either logically, conceptually, or metaphysically, so far as our available evidence indicates. Since *religion* likewise does not require theism, “agathoreligion” would be a less misleading term here. A Neoplatonist, for instance, could accept agatheism without accepting theism even as a basis for axiology.

Salamon represents his understanding of religious belief as follows:

The reason why science cannot either confirm or disconfirm religious belief is that religious belief — even if ‘acquired’ in the context of a religious community and drawing on the resources of a religious tradition — is *about* the aspect of reality that is essentially subjective, expressing our particular, first-person, specifically human perspective on the world. Religious belief pertains primarily to the realm of values, the realm of the ultimate good, not to the realm of facts about the physical universe... (238).

Even if mere religious belief “pertains primarily to the realm of values”, we cannot say this for *theistic* religious belief. Being worthy of worship, God would *have* value, of course, but God would not *be* a value. Instead, God would be an intentional agent with a morally perfect character. As a result, *theistic* religious belief would pertain mainly to the realm of a morally perfect agent worthy of worship, that is, to God, and not to a realm of values. In addition, it would be up to God whether God self-manifests to inquirers using scientific inquiry, and God seems not to prefer that option. Perhaps God’s redemptive aim for humans accounts for this.

Agatheism relies on a coherentist approach to epistemic justification. Salamon explains:

[T]he epistemic justification of religious belief should be conceived along the lines of the metaphor of a doxastic ladder hanging at the ceiling of the fundamental agatheistic belief in the Ultimate Reality as the ultimate good. All particular beliefs of a given religious belief system are justified against the background of their antecedent probability relative to what the fundamental agatheistic belief may be thought to entail, that is they are justified to the extent they are part of an *internally* coherent belief system which coheres with the fundamental agatheistic belief.... [N]ew beliefs have [their] *primary* justificatory ground not in the experiences themselves, since such ground would be insufficient for justification, but in the fundamental agatheistic belief. Therefore, what an epistemologist of religious belief has to concentrate on in the first place is the possibility of epistemic justification

of the fundamental agatheistic belief itself, which in turn grounds all other first-order religious beliefs... (236–37).

It is unclear how *theistic* beliefs in a religious system would “have their primary justificatory ground” in the “fundamental agatheistic belief.” In particular, it is unclear what specific kind of doxastic coherence can provide such a ground. If the fundamental agatheistic belief is neutral on theism (and it is), and the needed ground is not in experiences, then other beliefs will have to yield the needed ground. Which beliefs, however, will ground those other beliefs, if doxastic coherence must do the work? Will they be beliefs about God ungrounded in any experience? If so, what will recommend them as being epistemically different from a coherent fairy tale? Once doxastic coherence becomes the ultimate standard, the answers do not come easily.

Salamon notes part of the problem facing epistemic coherentism:

Given that variety of worldviews may be coherent with the undisputable findings of science, and given that each of them may be internally coherent, it seems there can be no other *ultimate* basis of this fateful choice between various comprehensive worldviews — differing primarily in the way they define the ultimate good and the ultimate meaning of human existence — than the agathological imagination that leads various people to choose various ‘agathological landscapes’ as agathologically optimal, or to put it differently, as conceptualising in the optimal way the potentialities for good inherent in the human reality (240).

This appeal to “agathological imagination” seems to reduce an *epistemic* issue to a *psychological* issue and hence to set aside the key epistemic matter at hand, particularly the matter of *evidential* support. Mere imagination does not generate evidence for independent factuality, even if it generates mere beliefs that fit together, perhaps in the way the parts of a fairy tale fit together. We thus need a better epistemic standard.

Perhaps practical reason can serve a purpose here. Salamon adds:

[T]he choices between various conceptions of the ultimate good take a form of a postulate of practical reason which is an object of rational belief, but the reasons for the belief are of practical nature, that is pertaining to our acts of will and our actions. As such, they cannot be settled by science, because they pertain to the question about ‘what ought to be’ or ‘what might be,’ not ‘what is’ (243).

Even if these questions cannot be settled by science, we should hesitate to let mere “acts of will” or acts of “imagination” take on a normative epistemic role, such as that of conferring epistemic justification. Acts of will or imagination can come too easy, in terms of being evidentially arbitrary as truth-indicators, to yield epistemic justification. Such justification cannot be created so readily if it figures in knowledge.

Salamon holds that the pertinent religious beliefs have their “*primary* justificatory ground not in the experiences themselves, since such ground would be insufficient for justification” (237) It is unclear, however, why an experiential ground would be insufficient for justification. Here we must not confuse one’s *having* a justification (on the basis of experience) and one’s *giving* a justification (which goes beyond experience to claims or beliefs). One’s experience can be justifying evidence for one, because it can be an undefeated indicator (if fallible and defeasible) for one of truth or factuality. In addition, it can be best explained for one, in terms of why it is as it is, by a proposition that owes its justification to it. So, abductive considerations can bear on experiential evidence, and allow for one’s assessing various claims for epistemic standing.⁸

Given that evidence is person-relative, one’s epistemic assessment will be likewise, but this is no defect in an epistemology. Instead, it is a candid acknowledgment that the domain of the epistemic is not to be confused with the domain of truth or factuality regarding claims. Given this consideration, one reasonably can avoid a retreat to second-order religion in the face of religious disagreement. I therefore suspect that first-order theistic religion is here to stay.

⁸ For details on this approach to evidence, including its bearing on skepticism, see Paul K. Moser, *Knowledge and Evidence* (CUP 1989), and Moser, *The Elusive God* (CUP, 2008).

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