

# IS THERE A DILEMMA FOR FIRST-ORDER SUPERNATURALIST BELIEF?

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The importance of seventeenth-century religious epistemology is reflected in the enduring influence of David Hume's essay "Of Miracles."<sup>1</sup> Brandon Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican continue in the tradition of nuanced praise for this icon of religious skepticism.<sup>2</sup> They vigorously object to Hume's "Maxim on miracles" as it is usually and most plausibly interpreted; nevertheless, they see in Hume's treatment of miracles the lineaments of an argument that deserves refinement. It is an argument against "first-order supernaturalism."

Janusz Salamon defends a version of first-order religious belief against the challenge set forth by Thornhill-Miller and Millican.<sup>3</sup> This version of first-order religious belief identifies what is religiously ultimate with what is fundamentally *good*. This "axiologically grounded" religious outlook he calls "agatheism." While his "agatheism" is a bona fide case of first-order religious belief, it complements the Thornhill-Miller and Millican thesis in somewhat unexpected ways.

My plan is, first, to evaluate key elements of the Thornhill-Miller and Millican challenge, and then to comment more briefly on the shape of Salamon's religious epistemology as it relates to the problem of religious diversity and the conflict between naturalism and supernaturalism.

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1 Hume's essay "Of Miracles" is Section X of David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Millican (OUP, [1748] 2007).

2 See Brandon Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican, "The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma: Revisions of Humean Thought, New Empirical Research, and the Limits of Rational Religious Belief", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7, no. 1 (2015): 1–49.

3 See Janusz Salamon, "Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse: Reply to Millican and Thornhill-Miller", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7, no. 4 (2015): 197–245.

## I. THE CHALLENGE TO FIRST-ORDER SUPERNATURALISM IN BRANDEN THORNHILL-MILLER AND PETER MILLICAN

Thornhill-Miller and Millican first draw a distinction between first-order and second-order supernaturalism.<sup>4</sup> First-order supernaturalism invokes the role of supernatural agents in accounting for the world and human religious experience; second-order supernaturalism takes natural processes to be the proximate causes of the world and human religious sensibilities. First-order religions vary in doctrinal content; second-order religion is comparatively amorphous but fairly uniform. First-order religions compete dogmatically with each other; second-order religion is tolerant and undogmatic. First-order religion is socially divisive; second-order religion is peace-making and peace-keeping. First-order religion is epistemically onerous; second-order religion is more or less epistemically innocuous.<sup>5</sup>

After a lengthy critique of Hume's Maxim on miracles,<sup>6</sup> the authors argue directly for their primary thesis: versions of first-order supernaturalism are "rationally unwarranted." They register a loud negative verdict regarding the epistemic status of first-order religious belief systems. This verdict is expressed in various ways, some stronger than others. "Rationally unwarranted" is a relatively tame expression of their sentiment. (But of course it

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4 Thornhill-Miller and Millican, "The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma", 3.

5 On this last point, the authors may disagree. But here it is easy to become entangled in a distinction between what is epistemically viable and what is pragmatically desirable (which, you might say, concerns the ethics of belief). This accounts for the emergence of a "Normal/Objective Dilemma" (NOD), where the personal and social benefits of religion stand in tension with the scientific view of the world. The tension is due to the contrasting advantages and disadvantages of each: the religious form of life, though rationally defective, produces various personal and social goods that are outside the power of science to effect (e.g., greater happiness, increased longevity, positive behavioral change, mental health, community support, sense of purpose, comfort in the face of hardship, etc.); scientific naturalism, though socially and subjectively impotent where religion is strong, is rationally exemplary. For their discussion of these themes, see *ibid.*, 37–43 and 45. (Does naturalistic belief produce the personal and social benefits so often associated with a community of supernaturalists? Can naturalism even account for the desirability of the fruit that a religious form of life so often produces? That is to say, is it right to desire these goods, given naturalism? If the naturalist is right to desire and to seek the personal and social goods mentioned by the authors, but attributed by them to the practice of religion in the world, can this have a bearing on the epistemic status of religious belief?)

6 See *ibid.*, 5–16.

does not follow that if supernaturalism is unwarranted, or if the evidence for supernaturalism is seriously “undermined”, then scientific naturalism is better warranted or better grounded evidentially.)

The argument for their basic thesis is developed late in section III of their essay.<sup>7</sup> This argument issues in a dilemma for first-order supernaturalism, a dilemma that severely undermines the evidential value of miracle reports on behalf of any first-order supernaturalism. This “Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma” (CCDD) is stated as follows:

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.<sup>8</sup>

Here we have the conjunction of two independent conclusions. First, the evidential value of miracle reports on behalf of any particular first-order supernaturalism is severely undermined. Second, in all probability, strong similarities in reportage of miracles (and kindred phenomena) across belief systems suggest that these phenomena are caused by natural mechanisms and not by some supernatural agency. Jointly, these two conclusions spell serious trouble for first-order supernaturalism.

Strictly speaking, the authors’ statement of CCDD suggests that these two conclusions express distinct lemmas that stand in tension with each other. CCDD is expressly called a dilemma. But if I understand each main part of CCDD correctly, then the dilemma does not consist in the juxtaposition of these two claims. We would have a dilemma of the first order if (a) one horn asserted that the phenomena point strongly toward supernatural agency and the second horn maintained that the phenomena most likely are caused by natural means rather than by supernatural means, and (b) both horns were more or less equally attractive on the arguments presented. But this is not reflected in the structure of CCDD.

The acronym “CCDD” reverses the order of the terms of the dilemma as stated by the authors. The second thesis makes direct reference to a “common

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<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, 15–20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

core” across versions of supernaturalism. The first thesis alludes to a form of diversity among versions of supernaturalism. The *common core* refers to the phenomena thought to count as evidence for the respective belief systems among supernaturalists, and *diversity* (I take it) pertains to differences among their belief systems. This interpretation of CCDD may be mistaken since in the authors’ statement of the diversity clause the referent of “their” in the phrase “their diversity and opposition” may (grammatically) be understood either as the religious phenomena that do the pointing or as the differences in belief (i.e., specific aspects of particular religions) across varieties of supernaturalism. The latter seems more likely, since the authors stress differences in aspects of religious systems when seeking to show that appeal to the same sort of phenomena (e.g., miracle reports) as evidence is otiose.

I suggest that CCDD embeds two claims that do not obviously stand in the relevant sort of tension to generate a significant dilemma. They may appear to because the first looks like a *diversity thesis* (D) and the second looks like a *common-core thesis* (CC). One key to identifying this confusion is that in the first statement of CCDD, the phenomena point to one sort of thing and in the second statement of CCDD the phenomena point to another sort of thing, and whatever tension there may be between these two sorts of things doesn’t seem very telling. For then the worry would be about there being a “common cause” for disparate sets of religious beliefs. That may need some explaining alright, but if that is the central difficulty captured by CCDD, it doesn’t seem very urgent, nor does it seem to track what the authors mean to be arguing in section III.

At any rate, the first thesis in CCDD does seem to express a dilemma. And it is this thesis that I wish to address in what follows.<sup>9</sup>

Thornhill-Miller and Millican say that “in so far as religious phenomena (e.g., miracle reports ...) point towards specific aspects of particular religions, their diversity and mutual opposition undermines their evidential force.” How does this statement harbor a dilemma? It does so in the following way. Believers who embrace a particular form of first-order supernaturalism

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9 The second thesis may be viewed as an explanation for first-order religious beliefs across different systems of belief where each appeals in its own way to miracle reports as evidence that what is believed is true. It is the burden of sections 4–6 of their essay to develop this point. I address this point briefly below.

cannot have it both ways. They cannot depend on the evidence of miracle reports for support of their own particular doctrinal convictions and at the same time deny the evidential value of miracle reports made on behalf of competing systems of first-order supernatural belief. One group of first-order religious believers may find it attractive to accept miracle reports and regard these as evidence for their own beliefs, and find it attractive, as well, to deny the same evidential advantage to another group of first-order religious believers who believe differently and on the basis of other miracle reports. This is their dilemma, and as a consequence the evidential value of miracle reports is undermined — thus, religious believers should not rely on miracle reports as evidence for their own particular religious beliefs.

What is the argument for this claim? One argument stressed by the authors is a “contrary religions” argument. In summary of the point, they say that the argument “highlights the difficulty of supporting any particular supernatural explanatory framework when so many conflict.”<sup>10</sup> What they mean is that a supernatural explanation for a miracle report (or for what is reported?) will not be of much service in a context where “contrary religions” are playing the same game with miracle reports.<sup>11</sup>

They consider two scenarios, one where the contest is between two or more distinct versions of first-order supernaturalism and one where the contest is between “supernaturalism as a whole” and “scientific naturalism.”<sup>12</sup> They are rather dismissive of the first sort of case, especially where it involves the claim that this or that miracle would, if it happened, be “intimately tied

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10 Ibid.

11 Here is another hint as to how the twin theses of CCDD may be thought to reflect a dilemma. The first thesis alludes to a supernatural explanation for miracle reports and the second explicitly favors a naturalistic explanation for the same. But a similar problem arises for construing CCDD as the statement of a dilemma. For the first thesis does not suggest that a supernatural explanation for miracle reports is in some context reasonable. On the contrary, it expresses the way that their evidential force is undermined.

12 See *ibid.*, 17. What they mean by “supernaturalism as a whole” is not altogether clear. Do they mean something like “a spectrum of (first-order) supernaturalisms” or are they alluding to “second-order supernaturalism”? I suspect it’s the former rather than the latter. They speak of “miracle stories available within the combined religions traditions of the world” (17), and of “the abundance of supernatural manifestations reported in diverse religious traditions” (also 17). But I won’t take the space here to chase down further exegetical clues on this point.

to the truth of the corresponding religion (and specifically to those crucial doctrines that make the religion logically contrary).<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps only an “apologist”, for example, would dream of arguing that “Jesus’ miracles prove him beyond doubt to have been the Son of God.”<sup>14</sup> But here the authors link their pejorative use of “apologist” with alleged *proof beyond doubt*, when the real point is whether a miraculous event may be *intimately tied* to a particular religious truth claim. An intimate tie need not be so intimate as to be tantamount to indubitable proof—a high degree of probability will do.

Now a “conventional” Christian will likely recognize that, should Jesus have been raised from the dead, this is some confirmation that he was specially authorized by God to reveal divine truth. And a thoughtful Christian of the conventional sort will be properly sensitive to the need for a judicious weighing of evidence for the occurrence of a miracle such as the resurrection of Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

The point is important since the authors insist that the phenomena under consideration “involve a ‘common core.’” This implies that a phenomenon like reports of the resurrection of Jesus by alleged eyewitnesses shares a common core with miracle claims associated with other religions. Now surely the authors do not mean by “common core” that *what is reported (or what is believed) to have happened* in the case of Christian belief is comparable to *what is reported (or what is believed) to have happened* in a representative range of cases among non-Christian systems of belief. For there is slender evidence indeed for affinities of precisely this sort — viz., reportage of the resurrection of a great religious figure — across major religious traditions.

So their point, presumably, is that similarity resides in the *believing* that a miracle has happened. But this won’t do. For similarity of *quality* of belief is no evidence of common *cause* of belief. In the case of the resurrection of Jesus, the first disciples of Jesus did not rest with reporting that Jesus was raised from the dead; they also reported on the reasons they had for believing that he rose from the dead. And the reasons they gave are the sorts of reasons an

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13 Ibid., 16.

14 Ibid.

15 I use the ill-advised phrase “conventional Christian” because that is the phrase used by the authors in their reference to Christians whose beliefs align with the tradition of the historic Christian church extending back to the first century.

intelligent eyewitness would require and find convincing. Indeed, the reasons they gave would be good reasons to believe that this was an actual event.

One reason why these would be good reasons is that they would be a means of filtering out the supposed nearly universal proneness to credulity among human persons, as alleged by Hume and supposed to be true by Thornhill-Miller and Millican. Explicit concern with evidence is one step toward curbing cognitive biases, whether in favor of supernaturalism or of naturalism. Acknowledging that human proneness to bias besets naturalists as well as supernaturalists, Thornhill-Miller and Millican stress the need to “systematically compensate” for the potency of bias and to remain “constantly alert to our profound and pervasive ability to deceive ourselves as well as others.”<sup>16</sup> A first-order religious believer who credits evidence of the miraculous is not inherently more cognitively biased than naturalists who are unmoved by such evidence as there is.

The evidence available to an eyewitness of some miraculous event is further strengthened when the eyewitness also has background evidence of the right sort. Suppose eyewitnesses to the resurrection had independent background evidence for the existence of God, a God who has a track record of active demonstration that he cares for human persons in sundry ways. Suppose, further, that alleged eyewitnesses had evidence of the sort that justified a reasonable expectation that God would act on a grand scale to rescue humanity from peril.<sup>17</sup>

Background evidence of this sort may “dispose” one to believe that a miracle has occurred when there is also good circumstantial evidence that a miracle has occurred. For if God exists, then miracles are possible, and because they are possible a supernatural explanation is not automatically ruled out. A supernatural explanation may even be more plausible than a naturalistic one — such as when its occurrence is recalcitrant to explanation in terms of

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16 Ibid., 36.

17 The authors register their dissatisfaction with theistic arguments without entering into a detailed discussion of them. (See *ibid.*, 47, n. 143.) While this topic goes well beyond their immediate goals, its significance is deep and urgent for a full assessment of their CCDD argument against first-order supernaturalism. Evidence for the existence of God, from whatever quarter, represents a strong potential defeater for their naturalism and for their argument.

natural laws.<sup>18</sup> In special circumstances it might even be reasonable to expect a miracle, which would, if it happened, be some confirmation that one was right to expect a miracle.<sup>19</sup>

We must also bear in mind the distinction between explaining belief that a miracle has occurred and explaining the occurrence of a miracle. Thornhill-Miller and Millican appeal to empirical research to support a wholly naturalistic explanation for supernaturalist *belief*. But suppose a miracle has occurred and a believer has plausible grounds for believing that it has. What then? The possibility of explaining the origin of such belief in terms of physical mechanisms will do nothing to vitiate the actual evidence the person has and may well be prepared to present to others. Causes are no substitute for reasons.

We should note that reductionist explanations that seek to account for the origin of religious belief, or for the character of religious experience, in terms of physical causes depend for their plausibility on such things as (1) first-person reports about internal states that match up with observations in the brain, (2) an accumulation of correlations between brain states and mental events, and (3) independent reasons to think that what is believed by the subject of an experiment is actually false. The first point denotes a persistent general problem for physicalist accounts of consciousness. The second pertains to the threat of illicit inference from correlations to causes.

The third factor is crucial to the argument that beliefs grounded in miracle reports, religious experiences, and the like are actually caused by natural mechanisms and bear no relation to the involvement of supernatural agents. Confidence that this is so derives from knowledge of cases where it is more or less obvious that what is believed is false or that the belief is induced by such factors — in other words, where credulity is strongly indicated or demonstrable. The peculiar reasons for thinking that many persons are moved to belief chiefly by aspects of their social situation and by features of their na-

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18 See R. Douglas Geivett, “The Evidential Value of Miracles”, in *In Defense of Miracles*, ed. by R. Douglas Geivett and Gary R. Habermas (InterVarsity Press, 1997), 178–195, especially 179–181. See also R. Douglas Geivett, “Miracles [Addendum]”, in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Donald M. Borchert, vol. 6 (Thomson Gale, 2006), 274–276.

19 See R. Douglas Geivett, “Hume and a Cumulative Case Argument”, in *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment*, ed. by James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis (InterVarsity Press, 2005), 297–329, especially 310–312. See also Geivett, “The Evidential Value of Miracles”, 187–194.

ture arising in our evolutionary history are not obviously exhibited in those cases where reasons and evidence are taken seriously by the believer. Even with respect to religious experience and miracle reports a subject can apply suitable tests to ensure the greater likelihood that what they believe is true.<sup>20</sup>

Arguments from “common core” that stress general features of “contrary religions”, and explanations in terms of purely naturalistic mechanisms (that, by the way, are little understood) are advanced by these authors without due consideration of specific cases. The arguments they give illustrate effectively why miracle reports must be assessed on a case-by-case basis and in light of the full range of evidence that bears on questions about the epistemic status of supernaturalist belief. And special priority must be given to the study of cases where reasons seem to matter to a believer and the reasons presented are *prima facie* plausible. In addition, similar studies should be devised for understanding the origin of *naturalist* belief, or *anti-supernaturalist* belief (which is not the same thing), and the results of studies of this kind should be no less widely disseminated.<sup>21</sup>

Suppose, finally, that we distinguish between the evidence of *first-hand experience* of a miracle and the evidence of *testimony* that a miracle once took place. Thornhill-Miller and Millican are, after all, concerned chiefly with miracle *reports* (as well as the phenomena of religious experience). Even here we must assess the grounds for belief on a case-by-case basis. And we must tease out the details of the evidence at our disposal. Here again, background evidence will be indispensable. And we must situate our account of the evidential value of miracle reports within the broader theory of testimonial evidence.

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20 See R. Douglas Geivett, “The Evidential Value of Religious Experience”, in *The Rationality of Theism*, ed. by Paul Copan and Paul K. Moser (Routledge, 2003), 175–203.

21 Thornhill-Miller and Millican acknowledge that “a similar disparaging counter-argument may now be attempted on the other side, suggesting that it is the disbeliever’s mind — rather than that of the believer — which is abnormal and somehow deficient” (38). The literature on this general point is much larger than the few items they cite. The disproportionate effort to demonstrate the scale of irrationality among believers may reflect a cognitive bias on their part. On what basis can we (or they) be sure that they have taken appropriate “compensatory” measures to ensure objectivity? How is anyone to allay suspicion that a particular supernaturalist or a particular naturalist, however intellectually sophisticated, has been suitably “alert to our profound and pervasive ability to deceive ourselves as well as others”? (36). The authors set forth an elaborate argument from “empirical research”, but it is all for naught if they do not engage the supernaturalist on the question of evidence, where rationality is properly measured.

It is beyond the scope of this brief essay to fill out the details of a cumulative case for the Christian brand of theism. Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican deserve credit for setting forth several points of reference for moving forward toward this end. But their argument for a Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma falls short as an argument against first-order supernaturalism. And their proneness to condemn the run of first-order religious believers as irrational clashes rather conspicuously with their stated intention to foster “a more cooperation- and humility-enhancing understanding of religious diversity.”<sup>22</sup>

## II. THE AGATHEISM COUNTER-PROPOSAL OF JANUSZ SALAMON

Thornhill-Miller and Millican conclude their essay with avowed openness to a second-order supernaturalism, according to which there exists “a luminous, *second-order* ultimate reality of some kind that yet lies beyond the comprehension of all our individual efforts to point to it.”<sup>23</sup> Their basic proposal is that we should “abandon the competing dogmatisms of *first-order supernaturalism* and instead fall back on 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.”<sup>24</sup>

Janusz Salamon attempts a refinement of the Thornhill-Miller/Millican hypothesis. On his reading of their essay, this is the two-part hypothesis that a second-order supernaturalism, in contrast to first-order supernaturalisms, (a) is intellectually plausible and (b) fosters a spirit of global cooperation among supernaturalists and between supernaturalists and naturalists. Thornhill-Miller and Millican do draw these conclusions. That second-order supernaturalism is intellectually acceptable, whereas first-order supernaturalism is not, is a major theme of their paper. However, it seems to me that the primary burden of their paper is to demonstrate the irrationality of first-order belief.

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22 See Thornhill-Miller and Millican, “The Common-Core/Diversity Dilemma”, 2.

23 Ibid., 49.

24 Ibid., 46. Their concession to second-order supernaturalism is cautious, as might be expected of naturalists, and it depends heavily on the fortunes of a Fine-Tuning Argument whose intellectual support is notably fluid and whose implications are as yet indeterminate (see 1, 4).

Does this clear the way for their view that second-order religion is intellectually tolerable and that a religion of this sort would be a welcome tonic for the divisive spirit that pervades our religiously pluralistic context? I suppose it does. But is this their chief concern? I'm not so sure. Their support for second-order supernaturalism is cautious and tentative. Running through their discussion is the faintly expressed hope that we may one day be able to do without religion altogether.<sup>25</sup> Second-order religion is a compromise, an interim measure, to be tolerated by the naturalist who is burdened with sharing the public sphere with religious believers. And anyway, it beats first-order religion, which is rather more of a nuisance. This is the impression I get from reading Thornhill-Miller and Millican.

Salamon sees things differently. In his view, the effort to create shared space for naturalism and supernaturalism is a dominant objective. The "main rationale" for their hypothesis is to calm restive spirits.<sup>26</sup> This accounts for Salamon's focus on conditions for "global ethical discourse" in his reply to Thornhill-Miller and Millican. Salamon echoes a legitimate concern for civility in our religiously plural context, and he does so in a way that seems altogether genuine. This is reason enough to examine his proposal closely.

His basic proposal is that religious belief of the first order is properly grounded in our axiological consciousness: "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."<sup>27</sup> Our axiological orientation is ontologically rooted in the good (*to agathon*), which is Ultimate or Absolute. The essential goodness of the Absolute is the axiological center of Salamon's supernaturalism, which he calls "agatheism." *Agatheos* is a postulate and concrete visions of the Absolute, reflected in various first-order religious traditions, are products of human religious imagination.<sup>28</sup>

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25 See, for example, *ibid.*, 47.

26 See Salamon, "Atheism and Agatheism", 200.

27 *Ibid.*, 201.

28 There are strong affinities between Salamon's proposal and John Hick's conception of "the Real", his view of what religions have in common morally, and his notion of "mythological truth." See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (YUP, 1989).

This is the core idea of Salamon's "new paradigm of the atheism/religion debate."<sup>29</sup> It ties directly to his account of global ethical discourse and it calls for an "alternative epistemological option of conceiving the nature and grounds of religious belief."<sup>30</sup> I will comment briefly on three aspects of his religious epistemology.

First, it is strongly motivated by the desire to develop a model of ethical discourse in the context of religious diversity. Stated more generally, the contours of his religious epistemology are shaped by practical aims. And here there arises the possibility of conflating the ethics of belief with standards of epistemic justification.

Salamon aims to construct an epistemology of religious *belief*. A central task of any such endeavor is to explain how religious beliefs are *epistemically grounded*. And this amounts to describing (in general terms) what makes it likely that what is believed is *true*. So religious epistemology is largely concerned with what grounds a believer's judgment that this or that proposition is true. There are many accounts of this in the philosophy of religion. Some religious believers are evidentialists while others are anti-evidentialists. Some unapologetic fideists are neither.<sup>31</sup> In any case, epistemic grounding is tied to the *epistemic aim* of believing what's true.

This means that Salamon's option in religious epistemology should be oriented toward this cognitive aim of believing what's true. However, his practical concern for satisfying our global ethical needs and desires is a significant constraint on the option he's prepared to accept. So we must ask, does this practical concern drive his analysis of meeting our cognitive aim, viz., to believe what is true? If it does, then it will not serve as a plausible option. The satisfaction of our global ethical needs and desires in the sphere of religion cannot serve as an indicator of what is true.<sup>32</sup>

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29 For details, see Salamon, "Atheism and Agatheism", §1 (198–207).

30 Salamon, "Atheism and Agatheism", 200. For details, see §II (207–223), and §IV (230–243).

31 For a collection of essays representing a range of prominent approaches, see R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman, eds., *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (OUP, 1992).

32 I have discussed the problem of religious knowledge in the current "post-secular" context in an unpublished paper titled "Neither Secular nor Religious? The Paradox of Pluralism and the Problem of Religious Knowledge" (presented at the V Congreso Mundial y Asamblea General de la COMIUCAP, Universidad de Santo Tomás, Bogotá D.C., Colombia, July 8, 2017).

Second, if our cognitive goal of believing what's true is made to subserve some practical concern (global harmony, for example), then the need for a leveling conception of God and of religious truth is liable to control the epistemic agenda. It is no surprise that agatheism is, as Salamon says, a "thinner" concept than theism of the classical sort. But we must let the evidence speak for itself. If the evidence points to the existence of a God with discernible properties, a God who has acted in history and who has revealed himself in sundry ways (including the pages of scripture, miracles, and what have you), then this will tend to specify the content of true religion in a way that worries pluralists and naturalists.<sup>33</sup>

Third, the forgoing puts us only a short step away from the view that God is cognitively inaccessible. Salamon is critical of theistic arguments precisely on the grounds that God transcends human concepts. God, as God is in himself (pardon the pronoun), is strictly unknowable. Theism in the classical sense is a "thick" concept that can have no literal referent. The being of a conceptually "thin" Absolute good, as envisioned in agatheism, is the best we can come up with, and this can only be postulated.

What, then, is the basis for believing anything in particular about "Agatheos"? This is where *imagination* plays a role, and here is a potential point of contact between Salamon and Thornhill-Miller/Millican. Particular forms of supernaturalism arise through the exercise of human imagination. First-order supernaturalisms are personal and social constructs. The difference between Salamon and Thornhill-Miller/Millican is that Salamon welcomes this result and Thornhill-Miller/Millican consider it a blight.

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33 Evidence may include, but need not be limited to, evidence that figures in traditional arguments for the existence of God and the character of religious experience. Paul Moser has described a category of evidence that is available only when a would-be believer is prepared to obey God's will, whatever it may be and whatever the cost. This is rooted in a consideration of what sort of being God is and how God would choose to reveal himself given that he is perfectly morally good. This view bears comparison with Janusz Salamon's approach since both he and Moser start with a conception of the "Ultimate" in terms of the goodness of its nature. For Moser, goodness is a perfection of God's nature as Person that makes God worship-worthy. For Salamon, the Ultimate is "good", but in an ontologically austere sense that may not entail personhood. For Moser's view, see his many writings, including *The Elusive God* (CUP, 2008), and *The Evidence for God*. (CUP, 2009).

The upshot is that first-order supernatural belief is explained *causally* in both the Thornhill-Miller/Millican account and in the Salamon account. It is doubtful that “first-order” religious believers will welcome Salamon’s proposal any more than they would Thornhill-Miller’s and Millican’s. Salamon sees in the *agathon* an intellectually permissible common core across versions of first-order supernaturalism and supposes that this will be enough to mitigate the fearsome dogmatism of individual cases of supernaturalism. This seems unlikely. Salamon suggests that first-order religious believers will turn away from the Thornhill-Miller/Millican account “because it misconstrues the nature and grounds of religious belief.”<sup>34</sup> I suspect that first-order religious believers would resist the Salamon account for much the same reason. Salamon’s proposal is indeed a refinement of Thornhill-Miller and Millican after all, and as such it must share in several of its liabilities.

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34 Salamon, “Atheism and Agatheism”, 197.

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