

# IN DEFENCE OF AGATHEISM: CLARIFYING A GOOD-CENTRED INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Two years ago, responding to B. Thornhill-Miller's and P. Millican's (later TMM) Humean-style critique of 'first-order religious belief' (i.e., adherence to any particular religious tradition) as unavoidably irrational in the face of religious diversity and deliverances of empirical sciences,<sup>1</sup> I enunciated a new *pluralistic* interpretation of *first-order* religious belief capable of accommodating the epistemological challenge of religious diversity and also immune to falsification by any future science, since grounded in the human axiological consciousness.<sup>2</sup> I termed such axiologically grounded religious belief 'agatheism', since I stipulated that agatheistic belief identifies God, the Absolute or the ultimate reality religiously conceived with the ultimate good that must be postulated — as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Kant *et al.* agree — as the ultimate end of all human agency and thus an explanation of its irreducibly teleological character and a source of its meaning. My reply to TMM's concern about irrationality of doxastic commitment to a particular religious tradition boiled down to a suggestion that to the extent the fundamental agatheistic religious belief is presupposed in such tradition as its doxastic core, its belief system — if internally coherent and aligned with a

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1 Branden Thornhill-Miller, 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*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (2015), 1–49.

2 Janusz Salamon, "Atheism and Agatheism in the Global Ethical Discourse: Reply to Millikan and Thornhill-Miller", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 4 (2015), 226.

worldview that is consistent with undisputed scientific findings — may be considered rational, despite there being a plurality of such belief systems.

Since a number of noted philosophers of religion responded to my proposal graciously but critically, I wish to clarify further what agatheism is supposed to entail in order to delineate the areas of genuine disagreement from the areas of possible misunderstanding. It will be convenient to start with highlighting what agatheism has to offer in the face of the epistemic challenge of religious diversity, because this, I suggest, is one area in which agatheism has clear advantage over the epistemological positions occupied by the theistic critics of agatheism to whom I want to reply. All things considered, I fail to see how my theistic critics can explain the facts about religious diversity without recourse to exclusivism and falling into the trap of the TMM's 'Common Core/Diversity Dilemma.' Any pretence at being 'inclusivist' will not do, since on a closer look it will turn out that in the face of the epistemic challenge of religious diversity, there is no middle ground, only stronger or weaker versions of either exclusivism (presupposing that only one religious tradition may be 'right') or pluralism (presupposing that more than one religious tradition may be 'right').

## II. AGATHEISM AS A PLURALISTIC INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION

Agatheism identifies God, the Absolute or the ultimate reality (*theós* or *to theion* in Greek) with the ultimate good (*to agathon* in Greek) as the ultimate end of all human pursuits and posits that maximal realisation of human potentialities for good (*agatheia*) is possible only in proper alignment with the ultimate reality so conceived (*Agatheos*).

Agatheism can be construed as an agathological interpretation of religion, since it theorizes that various religious belief systems are ultimately products of human *agathological imagination* and human reflection on the deliverances of agathological imagination.<sup>3</sup> Agathological imagination is taken to

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3 The term 'agathological imagination' is consciously adopted in this context (in preference to 'agatheistic imagination') to make clear that we are talking not about some special 'religious sense' (like Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*) but about a faculty of practical reason which is employed in all instances of normative thinking, in ethics, politics, etc. While postulating that religious

be this dimension of the faculty of practical reason which is intentionally directed — of no choice of ours — towards the ultimate human good and guides our mental activity leading to value judgments by imagining and comparing agathological alternatives as more or less optimal, relative to our sense of the good as a transcendental limetic concept.<sup>4</sup> Since our directedness towards the

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belief is grounded in agathological imagination as a dimension of *practical* reason and playing down the importance of more ‘theoretical’ reasons for religious belief (such as Design Arguments) one inevitably invites associations with Kant and his philosophy of religion. This is unfortunate, because assuming that the epistemology of religious belief presupposed by agatheism is identical with that of Kant is bound to result in serious misreading of agatheism. Agatheism does *not* presuppose Kantian transcendental idealism, since if it did, it would inevitably lead to an interpretation of religion espoused by John Hick, while agatheism was originally conceived primarily as an alternative to Hick’s theory of religious pluralism which faces an insurmountable ‘problem of emptiness’ by being unable to formulate any substantive claims about the ultimate reality which might make it relevant to religious concerns. (For a discussion of the ‘problem of emptiness’ faced by Hick, see: Mikael Stenmark, “Religious Pluralism and the Some-Are-Equally-Right View”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* Vol. 1, no. 2 (2009), 21–35). Moreover, speaking about agatheism being grounded in axiology, I do *not* imply that it is Kant’s ‘moral argument’ that provides the main rational ground for agatheism. Unlike Kant, I do not presuppose that we need to postulate God’s existence in order to make sense of morality. On the contrary, I assume that there are satisfactory ways to make sense of our moral obligations towards other sentient beings without recourse to God. Agatheism answers a different set of questions than that about the foundation of morality, namely questions about the ultimate meaning of our finite existence as perceived through the lenses of our axiological consciousness which directs our thoughts and hopes towards some ultimate good which does not seem to be realisable in the physical universe. Thus the fundamental philosophical intuition behind agatheism has much more in common with Plato’s idealism than with Kant’s. For this reason I insist that the term ‘agathological’ (as a subterm of ‘axiological’) rather than ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’ should be used in connection with agatheism, since it points more accurately in the direction of the concerns from which agatheistic religious belief arises, and diverts attention from misleading associations with the Kantian ‘moral argument’ for the existence of God.

4 I take the concept of ‘the good’ (*‘to agathon’*) to be a transcendental concept in the Kantian sense as a form of our thought prior to experience of things which we perceive as having a property of goodness, and thus a concept that is primarily related to rational subject of perception, rather than intrinsically related to being. Following G. E. Moore, as well as the Medieval theorists of transcendentals, I take it to be a primitive, simple, first-known, and self-evident concept that cannot be analysed by taking recourse to a still higher genus. At the same time I take the concept of the ‘good’ (in the sense of the ‘ultimate good’) to be a ‘limetic concept’ (from Latin *limes* — limit, frontier) by metaphorising the concept of a *limes* of a mathematical function as indicating a point towards which something tends in an asymptotic manner without ever reaching it. The concept of God or the Absolute as ‘*Agatheos*’ is also a limetic concept. I stipulate that both in the case of the concept of the ‘ultimate good’ and the concept of ‘*Agatheos*’, the user of the concept presupposes that the reality to which the concept refers is only pointed to as the

good appears to be the fundamental phenomenologically given ‘fact’ about our axiological consciousness, it requires postulation of a *telos* without which the irreducibly teleological character of our axiological consciousness would be unexplainable, making an analysis of human agency by reference to an agents’ reasons impossible. The ultimate good is thus postulated as a transcendental condition of our axiological consciousness.

Agatheism posits that religious worldviews result from the fundamental choice of an option to make sense of our axiological consciousness by conceiving the ultimate human good in religious rather than in naturalistic terms. Since it is agathological imagination that plays the decisive role in choosing among the fundamental agathological options and agathological imagination is a dimension of practical reason, it will not be possible to establish by way of theoretical argument which option is rationally superior. Yet taking a stance regarding this all-important matter may be a psychological necessity, as well as a condition of living an ‘examined life’, therefore opting for a religious conceptualisation of the ultimate human good that identifies the ultimate good towards which our axiological consciousness is directed with the ultimate reality religiously conceived, may be as good a choice as any.

An important implication of such axiological construal of the grounds of religious belief is that the domain of religious thinking and religious practice is no longer seen as *sui generis*, but (*pace* Kierkegaard) is an extension of agathological thinking in the ethical realm (and perhaps also in the realm of aesthetics *kalokagatologically* conceived). Therefore religious believers do not engage in an activity that is entirely foreign to the non-believers, but rather are devoted in a different way to the same central human task of exploration into the realm of the human good that takes place in connection with every human activity aimed at conceptualisation and realisation of some human (or non-human) good.

Agatheism is centrally a *pluralistic* interpretation of religion, since it theorizes that the fundamental agatheistic belief is presupposed by all or nearly all post-axial religious traditions and explains the fact of religious diversity (i.e.,

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ultimate horizon that is of its nature unreachable, although present as the background against which we perceive values that make their claim on us and are yet to be realised, as horizon is always ‘present’ when we perceive distant points on a trail that are yet to be reached.

plurality of internally diverse and constantly evolving religious traditions) by reference to unavoidably plural, diverse and revisable deliverances of agathological imagination as its source. When exercised in the realm of religion, agathological imagination guided by the fundamental agatheistic belief identifying the Absolute with the ultimate good, searches for the optimal conceptualisation of the nature of the Absolute and its relation to the human world, attempting to approximate the human view of the matter to the 'God's eye view'. While individual believers exercise agathological imagination when assenting to particular religious truth-claims and aligning themselves in an existential manner to the Absolute as the ultimate good, typically religious beliefs systems are products of agathological imagination exercised over long periods of time in the context of religious traditions as traditions of interpretation by many individuals, especially prominent representatives of the relevant traditions. Thus diverse religious belief systems may be conceived as a range of 'agathological landscapes' — conceived throughout human history by geniuses of agathological imagination, such as founders of new religious traditions, saints, mystics and great religious thinkers — which agathological imagination of 'ordinary' believers takes as a reliable source of inspiration and the point of departure in their own religious search and spiritual journey.

An agatheistic account of religion takes seriously the practical orientation that religious believers typically exhibit and it sees religious belief systems as never divorced from religious practice understood as *living out* the proper alignment with the ultimate reality as the ultimate good. While various religious belief systems do contain visions of what their adherents consider to be the optimal ways of conceiving the Absolute as 'the ultimate good *simpliciter*', the beliefs about the Absolute and their eventual veridicality are important for religious believers not for purely cognitive reasons, but because they entail optimal ways of conceiving *human potentialities for good* vis-à-vis the ultimate reality as 'the ultimate good *for us*' towards which their existence is directed. So whatever the religious rhetoric may be, it is more plausible to think that human beings hold religious beliefs and follow religious practices not because — to put it in theistic terms — God needs them to worship him, but because they sense they need God to achieve their own fulfillment by realising their own creaturely potentialities for good. For this reason religious believers (with the exception of theologians and perhaps also religious leaders

who may see religious doctrines as defining the borders of their communities and thus the limits of their power) tend to concern themselves with religious *orthopraxis* more than with religious orthodoxy and therefore associate being an exemplary believer not so much with just ‘believing in something’ (holding certain beliefs), but with ‘doing something’, ‘adopting certain attitude towards God’ (‘believing God’ vs. ‘believing in God’), also ‘undergoing something’ (undergoing spiritual transformation or moral conversion) and ‘hoping for something’. To be able to do all that believers have to hold some particular religious beliefs, including beliefs about the nature of the Absolute and its relation to the human world, but it is the more practical dimensions of the religious attitude that tend to occupy the attention of adherents of religious traditions, because it is they — rather than solely an intellectual assent to some set of religious doctrines — that appear to be relevant to the achievement of the religious *telos*, which is not different from the human *telos*, namely realisation of the ultimate human good. Among such ‘practical’ aspects of religious belief — all expressing the proper alignment with the Absolute as the ultimate good — are (a) its soteriological/eschatological perspective presupposing some formulation of the nature of the human predicament and of “what can I hope”, to use Kant’s phrase; (b) its metanoetic/transformational function presupposing some paradigm of spirituality; and (c) its relational/inter-subjective character associated with religious attitudes of devotion and love, usually manifested also in solidaristic attitudes towards other members of one’s religious community.

Perhaps the most central of them all is spiritual development or *metanoetic transformation*. The Greek noun ‘*metanoia*’ — signifying a change of mind — in the biblical vocabulary acquires more specific meaning of ‘conversion’ as turning towards God, so in the context of agatheism metanoetic transformation is synonymous with agathological transformation as adoption of the fundamental orientation towards the good. John Hick identified it as *the* aspect of religious belief that is universal across all religious traditions and defined it as ‘transformation from self-centredness to other-centredness’. The universality of the metanoetic dimension of religious belief is crucial to the possibility of a *pluralistic* interpretation of religion and at this junction agatheism does not depart from the age-old intuitions expressed poetically by the Sufi mystic Rumi in the saying that “the lamps are many, but the Light is one”, and turned

into the central insight of religious pluralism by John Hick. To the extent a rational hope may be entertained that a given religious tradition constitutes a reliable path to the achievement of human fulfillment in accordance with the vision of the ultimate human good conceived in that tradition, it is rational to be committed to the belief system and religious practice of that tradition despite the fact that there are many such paths defined by different religious belief systems, which gives rise to a legitimate suspicion that it is unlikely that only one of them — and therefore unlikely that *any* of them — express fully and infallibly the truth of the nature of the Absolute. There is no good reason to think that while being cognitively and morally limited human beings could not reach the ultimate destination of their journey while having only limited and therefore fallible and revisable insight into the nature of the ultimate good as the end of the journey. One piece of equipment on such journey appears to be absolutely necessary: the agatheistic belief, or better the agatheistic faith that our human unquenchable thirst for the good, which manifests itself in the good-directedness of our axiological consciousness that shapes our entire attitude towards reality, does not mislead us, but rather leads us towards the fulfillment of the promise it carries.

With such a turn of mind an agatheist — whether a Christian or Jewish or Hindu agatheist — will not be troubled by religious diversity, since his agathological imagination, serving as a kind of agathological conscience, will assure him — in a manner reminiscent of Socrates' *daimon* — that one cannot go wrong going in the direction of the good, following the path that leads towards the horizon of the ultimate good. An agatheist will treat the stories about the nature of the ultimate good told by the fellow pilgrims as necessarily only verisimilitudinous, but capable of serving as reliable directions on the path towards the ultimate goal, if they pass the test of agathological verification. Since in the realm of values the nature of the subject matter confines us to the first-person perspective and admits no possibility of an objectively verifiable and therefore conclusive evidence being available, an agatheist will be satisfied with a kind of moral certainty, or — better to say — *agathological certainty*. Agathological certainty as a state of mind has a certain phenomenal quality which is a source of subjective reassurance, and can be captured by the adjective 'agatonic', created by conjunction of '*agathon*' and 'the tonic' — a musical term referring to the central tone of a scale that is perceived subjectively by a

listener as the point of ‘departure’ and ‘arrival’ of a musical narrative, and thus as a kind of *telos* and the point of psychological *rest*. Thus the word ‘agatonic’, metaphorising the musical ‘tonic’, takes on a meaning of ‘rest of the mind in the good’, or ‘rest of the mind in the confidence of reaching the good, realising the good, or being directed towards the good’. This agatonic sense of ‘the rest of the mind in the good’ that accompanies our mental states of certainty in the sphere of moral and agathological beliefs is analogical to the sense of ‘rest of the mind in truth’, which accompanies our states of certainty in the realm of beliefs about existentially irrelevant facts of the matter, but unlike in the case of certainty about factual beliefs, certainty about moral and agathological beliefs carries with it a sense of fulfilled obligation and hence a peculiar kind of satisfaction that we associate with the state of happiness.

Since it is obvious that such state of subjective certainty accompanies the religious attitude of the adherents of diverse religious traditions, his agathological conscience will warn an agatheist against his inclination to see himself in a cognitively and soteriologically privileged position *vis-à-vis* adherents of other religious traditions and will present to him as agathologically unacceptable exclusivist theories of religious diversity as postulating serious limitation of the chances of actualisation of the potentialities for good of the majority of human beings, while a more generous interpretation of the facts about religious diversity — envisaging the possibility of realisation of much greater human good than if religious exclusivism would be true — is available.

As I argued elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> a *theist* — who usually more often than a non-theist finds religious pluralism disturbing — can accept a pluralistic interpretation of religious diversity consistent with agatheism without losing epistemic confidence in the foundations of his *theistic* worldview, spiritual practice or moral commitments, namely by adopting a strategy akin to the strategy of ‘sceptical theism’. According to such ‘sceptical pluralism’, as I called it, we should be sceptical of our ability to discern the full truth about the possible ways through which God can lead various individuals to the ultimate fulfilment of their creaturely potential. In particular, a sceptical pluralist of the

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5 Janusz Salamon, “Theodicy of Justice as Fairness and Sceptical Pluralism”, in S. Kołodziejczyk and J. Salamon, *Knowledge, Action, Pluralism: Contemporary Perspectives in Philosophy of Religion*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang Press, 2013, 249–278.



kind I envisage will argue that we should be sceptical that our epistemic confidence in our understanding of God's purposes with respect to us individually and our co-religionists somehow limits God in achieving the purpose of leading other people — especially religious aliens — to the maximal fulfilment of their human (God-given) potential in ways that are beyond our intellectual grasp. Moreover, a sceptical pluralist will propose that we should grant that our inability to think of a good reason for allowing religious diversity to persist and indeed to flourish is indicative of whether or not God might have a good reason for allowing it. If there is a God, he knows much more than we do about the relevant facts regarding the diversity of religious beliefs and practices and regarding their soteriological, spiritual or moral efficacy in allowing various individuals to fulfil their human potential, and thus it would not be surprising at all if God had reasons for allowing religious diversity to persist and flourish that we cannot fathom.

### III. ADVANTAGES OF AGATHEISM: REPLYING TO THE THEISTIC CRITICS

While questioning the plausibility of exclusivist interpretations of religious diversity, agatheism envisages the possibility of rational justification of unconditional and agathologically efficacious religious commitment within the context of plural and diverse religious traditions. Therefore agatheism is meant to be as much an epistemology of religious belief, as a theory of religious diversity.

R. D. Geivett and P. Moser, as evidentialists with regard to justification of religious belief, found it difficult to see how a first-order agatheistic belief could constitute a basis of an *epistemology* of religious belief given that I have granted TMM most of their *empirically* grounded arguments designed to challenge the evidential basis of the first-order religious traditions. Geivett thinks that my practical aim to encourage adherents of diverse religious traditions to accept such interpretation of religious diversity which would facilitate their constructive involvement in the global ethical discourse conflicts with my aim to construct an epistemology of religious belief that should be oriented towards the cognitive aim of believing what is true, and this puts me in danger of conflating the ethics of belief with standards of epistemic justification.

He writes:

Stated more generally, the contours of his religious epistemology are shaped by practical aims. (...) However, his practical concern for satisfying our global ethical needs and desires is a significant constraint on the option he is prepared to accept. (...) 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>6</sup>

In a footnote Geivett adds that such 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”<sup>7</sup>, and in another place reminds the reader that in addition to evidentialism there are also anti-evidentialist and fideist epistemologies, apparently implying that all of them have sufficient resources to ground epistemically religious beliefs of the adherents of first-order religious traditions, which “amounts to describing (in general terms) what makes it likely that what is believed is *true*.”<sup>8</sup> Geivett fails to see such epistemological grounding in agatheism. Concluding his assessment of agatheism, he asks: “What, then, is the basis for believing anything in particular about Agatheos? This is where *imagination* plays a role ... Particular forms of supernaturalism arise through the exercise of human imagination. First order supernaturalisms are personal and social constructs.”<sup>9</sup>

Moser echoes Geivett’s criticism:

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

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6 R. Douglas Geivett, “Is There a Dilemma for First-Order Supernaturalist Belief?”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 9, no. 3, 12–13.

7 Ibid, 13.

8 Ibid, 12.

9 Ibid, 13.

*extent they are part of an internally coherent belief system which coheres with the fundamental agatheistic belief.* (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? . . . Mere imagination does 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.<sup>10</sup>

Like Geivett, Moser insists that first-order religious beliefs must and can be epistemically grounded in something evidentially more secure than human axiological consciousness, and he sees a possibility of experiential grounding of such beliefs. He writes:

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. . . . 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. . . . 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. . . . 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.<sup>11</sup>

The crux of my response to Geivett and Moser will be to suggest that their own epistemological stance looks much weaker when confronted with the challenge of inter-religious and intra-religious diversity, than it would if the

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10 Paul K. Moser, “First-Order Theistic Religion: Intentional Power Beyond Belief”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 9, no. 3, 45–46.

11 *Ibid.*, 40.

only contender they had to face would be a naturalistic critic. It is somewhat ironic that while the present-day practitioners of philosophical apologetics tend to construe their arguments with the naturalistic colleagues in mind, it is the persistent diversity of *religious* belief that calls into question the plausibility of their exclusivist accounts of religious belief. Indeed, one may argue that what gives plausibility to the agatheistic account of religion more than anything else is the recognition that all three dominant strands of contemporary epistemology of religion pointed out by Geivett (evidentialist, anti-evidentialist and fideist) fair much better when it comes to establishing the possibility of rational religious commitment in the face of the naturalist challenge, than to defending rationality of assenting to the truth of only one particular, clearly defined, religious belief system (as opposed to more generic 'religious belief' or 'theistic belief'), since the arguments one will be employing almost always may also be employed by adherents of other religious traditions to establish in an analogous way rationality of their doxastic commitment.

For example, Plantinga's anti-evidentialist epistemology of warranted Christian belief is hard to challenge by a naturalist (perhaps only by characterising it as ultimately a form of epistemologically sophisticated fideism), but it suffices to suggest that one can easily imagine how one could go about establishing a possibility of a warranted Muslim or a warranted Hindu belief in order to diminish significantly the epistemic appeal of Plantinga's proposal.

Many of Swinburne's probabilistic arguments in favour of the rationality of Christian theism may be easily adapted to support rationality of a Jewish or a Muslim belief system and defending a coherence of such alternative religious belief system will also be far from difficult. After all, if it is possible to establish a high probability of the Incarnation of God, is it not going to be possible to produce at least equally strong argument that it is very unlikely that God could become man? Moreover, if the only thing that a Swinburnian evidentialist will be capable of establishing is high probability of existence of a theistic God, but he will not be able to show that the probability of veridicality of the *more specific* doctrines of his religious tradition is *significantly higher* than that of the alternative religious views, he will be clinging to one's own religious tradition for reasons other than the evidentialist arguments, presumably some 'internal evidences' of adequacy of once religious stance emerging from within one's religious practice. But adherents of other religious traditions will have similar

and equally good reasons to stick to their religious beliefs and practices, in which case Swinburnian evidentialism may be wedded to religious exclusivism only at the price of effectively collapsing into fideism.

Needless to say, a Kierkegaardian unapologetic fideist or a scriptural fundamentalist will have nothing to say regarding the question of epistemic superiority of Christian fideism over Muslim fideism, or how the claims of (some) Jews concerning the authority of the Tanakh are related to the claims (some) Christians make about the Bible as an infallible source of religious truth.

One of the most interesting projects in recent epistemology of religion — W. P. Alston's *Perceiving God* — can be saved, as I argued elsewhere, only when it is given a pluralistic reading, so that instead of individuating plurality of mystical doxastic practices, only one of which (e.g., Christian mystical practice) might be reliable, rationality of one mystical doxastic practice *reliable across plurality of mystical traditions* will be defended.<sup>12</sup>

All these strands of religious epistemology are also seriously undermined by intra-religious (i.e., denominational) diversity, because there are good reasons to resist a temptation to make one's epistemic job easier by defining religious belief system very loosely — e.g., 'mere Christianity', 'the great truths of the Gospel' or even 'classical theism', because this would amount to watering down what first-order religious traditions are about while our debate concerns rationality of first-order religious belief. Delineating the religious belief system under discussion in an arbitrary way, instead of linking it to some historically and communally defined religious tradition, may always be challenged by asking: why not to define the belief system under consideration in a more inclusive way and, for example, instead of defending the rationality of doxastic commitment to Presbyterianism rather than to Russian Orthodoxy defend rationality of some mainstream Christian belief, or instead of debating rationality of Western classical theism defend theism maximally broadly conceived to include Madhva's clearly theistic Dvaita Vedanta and perhaps even Ramanuja's semi-pantheistic theism? But by doing so we would be gradually departing from an exclusivist stance, because we would be effectively justifying at once commitment to more than one religious tradition

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12 Janusz Salamon, "Light Out of Plenitude: Towards Epistemology of Mystical Inclusivism", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (2010), 141–175.

covered by the category defined in such an inclusivist way. Thus if our task is to defend the rationality of commitment to one religious belief system *exclusivistically conceived*, we have to be attentive to even minor doxastic disagreements which differentiate between various religious belief systems, so that, for example, within Judaism or Hinduism or Protestant Christianity there will be multitude of religious belief systems in need of rational justification. However, grounding epistemologically religious belief systems so narrowly defined and exclusivistically conceived will be very difficult and I point out this vulnerability of the dominant religious epistemologies in the face of religious diversity, because I fail to see how the theistic critics of agatheism — including Geivett and Moser — can do better than Plantinga or Swinburne without retreating ultimately — at least to some degree — to fideism of one kind or another, in which case their claim to being able to ground first-order religious beliefs in accordance with much better epistemic standards than does agatheism may turn out to be dubious. In short, if both evidentialists and anti-evidentialists when faced with the challenge of religious diversity will end up with no choice but to resort to some kind of fideistic leap of faith to justify their commitment to a particular religious belief system conceived in an exclusivist manner, then it may turn out that agatheism with its fragile epistemic foundations, but foundations which will not be shaken by religious diversity, has after all something to offer — something *epistemological*, not merely ethical. After all, I do not consider the agatheistic interpretation of religious diversity to be some kind of epistemological golden bullet, but simply suggest to assess the *relative rationality* of various interpretations of the facts about religious diversity, and I'm inclined to believe that agatheism is an improvement on other pluralistic theories of religious diversity, while exclusivist religious mentality is arguably on the decline in many parts of the world.

Attending to details of Geivett's and Moser's critique of agatheism, one might assert that to the extent agatheism takes religious beliefs as deliverances of agathological imagination to be "personal and social constructs", as Geivett puts it, they should not be considered any more *arbitrary* than will be a belief in the divine designer of the universe held by Geivett's evidentialist religious believer, or a belief in God self-manifesting himself to Moser's evidentialist religious believer, or a 'properly basic belief' held by Plantinga's anti-evidentialist believer that God is just speaking to me in the voice

of my moral conscience, or a belief of a adherent to some religious tradition — say, a Greek Orthodox or a Roman Catholic — that God has revealed a fuller truth about himself in Christ and in Christ has reconciled the world to himself, since his church teaches that the Christian Bible is the infallible source of religious truth and the Christian Bible teaches just that. In all such cases the assent of the belief-holder will not be entirely arbitrary, because it will not be entirely voluntary, but rather will take place in a manner that could be best analysed in externalist terms, i.e., the believer — sometimes after considering the matter and more often than not in an ‘implicit’ (as J. H. Newman would say), almost unconscious way — will just find herself believing something as true and believing it firmly. As I have already mentioned, this assent, when pertaining to the realm of values, the realm of what ought to be or might be, rather than what is — being an expression of the state of mind which can be described as agathological certainty, is accompanied by an inner *experience* I called the ‘agatonic’ feeling, which serves as a kind of agathological conscience and an epistemic compass in that particular doxastic realm. Perhaps the easiest way to assure the reader that speaking about the exercise of agathological imagination, agathological certainty and the accompanying agatonic feeling I do not have in mind some unusual phenomena and experiences that ordinary believer would be unfamiliar with, is to point to the experience of the inner moral imperative manifesting itself in what has traditionally been rendered as “a voice of conscience”. J. N. Newman based his entire religious epistemology on a phenomenology of conscience, suggesting that the awareness of the formal aspect of conscience (that is its very activity, not what it prescribes, but *that* it prescribes, carrying with it an *external* sanction) is the main source of the human inclination to believe in a higher *moral* power which is, according to him, the beginning of all religious faith.<sup>13</sup> When speaking about the exercise of agathological imagination I have something analogical in mind. So now the question arises: would evidentialists, like Moser and Geivett, allow such phenomena to count as *experiences* which might serve as an empirical evidence that could ground epistemologically any religious beliefs? If the answer is ‘yes’, then we do have

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13 Cf. John H. Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, red. I. Ker, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985: V.1.

at least a groundwork of agatheistic epistemology of religious belief in view, and describing religious beliefs as being “personal or social constructs” will not amount to an objection, since they will be human constructs in more or less the same way as any religious doctrine of any religious tradition is likely to be, namely shaped throughout the ages by various individuals and groups of individuals coming to consciousness of what appears to them to be true about the Absolute and its relation to the human world.

If the answer is ‘no’, then it is hard to see why experiences of self-manifestation of God which Moser takes to be paradigmatic, *if interpreted in an exclusivist manner*, deserve a superior epistemic status given the awareness of the facts about religious diversity. When explaining the crucial importance of *de re* versus *de dicto* distinction for his epistemology of religious belief, Moser writes:

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.<sup>14</sup>

In another place he writes:

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.<sup>15</sup>

What is fascinating about Moser’s position is that I have a sense that 80% of what he writes is fully compatible with agatheism as a *pluralistic* interpretation of religion, but then he chooses to make an exclusivist turn and I end up thinking that his exclusivism is as difficult to defend as any other mentioned above, and moreover it is difficult to grasp in what sense the religious belief he is referring to is a *first-order* belief. Presumably the minimum necessary for qualifying a belief as *first-order* is that the concept of God or the ultimate

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14 Moser, „First-Order Theistic Religion”, 44.

15 Ibid., 38.



reality to which one is relating (as “a causal meaning-giving reality beyond a belief”, as Moser puts it) has to be to some minimal degree *differentiated* from other views of God or the ultimate reality. Clearly, when TMM argue against the possibility of a rational first-order religious belief, they mean: a Christian belief (or perhaps a Catholic Christian belief) and a Muslim Shia belief, and so on. But if Moser postulates that the *de dicto* content of the religious belief can be so “minimal”, that it “allows that different people led by God could have different understandings of God and even know God by different names” and he allows that “that reality [beyond belief] is described in a way that falls short of full accuracy”, why would such belief have to be conceived as a first-order belief? How minimal may the *de dicto* content be to allow to call “that reality beyond belief” *God*? Does Moser mean to suggest that the Pauline “self-manifestation of God” as the experience that can ensure “well-groundedness of belief in God” leaves the believer to whom God manifested himself without doubt that God is a *person*? But that would be insufficient for grounding even a ‘Western classical theistic’ belief (which would not be really first-order), since Hindu Vishnavites report such experiences, and indeed religious life of many Bhakti Vishnavites centres on devotional (loving) attitude towards Ishvara *as a personal God*. But at the same time most of such believers will hold a belief that *ultimately* the Absolute is strictly speaking *not* a person, but is beyond all descriptions and conceptualisations, referred to as Para Brahman (in Vaishnavism and Shaivism) or Nirguna Brahman (in Advaita Vedanta). So it is hard to see how the Pauline experience Moser is referring to — unless understood on an analogy to Paul’s own “experience” on the road to Damascus that was arguably unique rather than paradigmatic — could epistemically ground a *first-order* religious belief, settling the matter of the nature of the Absolute that is encountered. In particular, it is difficult to understand how any experience might ground a belief in the moral *perfection* or in omnibenevolence of the Absolute encountered in the experience, or indeed how one might form on the ground of such experience a belief that one has encountered God or the Absolute in the first place. It seems more plausible to think — as agatheism recommends — that religious experiences on their own cannot ground such belief, unless considered in connection with the *pre-existing* agatheistic belief which can *not* be based

on the evidence of religious experiences or any other instances of perceived supernatural agency.

Moser has one more, somewhat baffling, objection, namely to the appropriateness of my use of the term 'agatheism' itself. He writes:

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.<sup>16</sup>

The first reply which comes to mind immediately is that pantheism, panentheism or henotheism are also not species of Western classical theism and nobody seem to protest against the use of such terms, although one might complain that a term like 'pantheism' might mislead a newcomer to philosophy, suggesting that it a belief that all reality is identical with God as God is understood in classical theism. The terms '*theós*' and '*to theion*' were used by Plato and a host of other ancient thinkers, including Plotinus, in variety of contexts and more often than not ascribing to it significantly different meaning than that presupposed by the contemporary Western users of the term 'theism'. Interestingly enough, another of my theistic critics, V. Shokhin, being a noted expert on Indian philosophy of religion, thinks that agatheism may be entirely unproblematic *only* on a theistic interpretation of the Absolute, although he believes so for reasons that I find to a degree problematic, because he takes 'Agatheos' to be an equivalent of 'a Deity' and since according to some Asian conceptions a Deity can contain, manifest or produce both good and evil, he thinks agatheism cannot be applied to Asian religions.<sup>17</sup> However, firstly, the ultimate reality or the Absolute in the Asian context should arguably *not* be identified with some Deity, because a Deity will in most cases in the Asian context will not be properly referred to as the ultimate reality. Perhaps even more importantly, since agatheism is purposely defined in a maximally broad and inclusive way as the belief which identifies the ultimate reality with the ultimate good as the ultimate end of all human pursuits and posits that maxi-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Shokhin, "Why Atheism Has Not Become a Subject of Philosophy of Religion", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 9, no. 3, 65.

mal realisation of human potentialities for good (*agatheia*) is possible only in proper alignment with the ultimate reality so conceived (*Agatheos*), it is not immediately obvious that the conceptions which construe the Absolute as in some sense not perfectly good or *not yet* maximally good (such as proposed by Boehme, Schelling, Berdyaev or Whitehead) should be excluded from consideration. After all, one should keep in mind that the point of departure of the agatheistic thinking is the teleological nature (good-directedness) of the human axiological consciousness and *Agatheos* is postulated as the ultimate good to explain this phenomenon, but for this it suffices to postulate the ultimate good *for us*, that is the reality which grounds the hope of the maximal realisation of the creaturely potentialities for good. It seems that the above mentioned 'philosophical' conceptions of the Absolute, from Boehme to Whitehead, as well as the Asian conceptions of the ultimate reality (or at least most of them) can fulfil this 'function' and thus fall under the definition of *Agatheos*.

D. Łukasiewicz offers a very different and very interesting kind of criticism which could be describe as external, because instead of looking for inconsistencies in the way agatheism is defined and presented, he takes it to be a genuinely new idea and then asks whether agatheism is compatible with Christian orthodoxy. He concludes his analysis with a resounding 'no'. If such verdict would be justified, it would be a serious blow to the project, since while being a pluralistic interpretation of religion which does include (moderately) progressive and (mildly) revisionist elements, agatheism at the same time acknowledges the importance of the context of tradition conceived not as a combination of changeless beliefs, rigid rules and oppressive institutions, but as a treasury of inspiring agathological insights and models of religious practice which may greatly enrich and supplement, rather than suppress free exercise of agathological imagination which will be guiding both one's doxastic and orthopractical progress towards greater realisation of one's agathological potential. So while being, so to speak, a non-denominational agatheist seems in principle possible (although the person is still likely to draw inspiration from representatives of some tradition or traditions), general incompatibility of agatheism with first-order religious traditions would be hardly a desirable outcome.

Łukasiewicz sees agatheism in this manner:

Salamon proposes a new religion or, more accurately, a new spiritual world-view deeply rooted in the Platonist philosophical tradition. But his proposal is rather an alternative to first-order religions — just like Thornhill-Miller's and Millican's second-order religion is an alternative to them.<sup>18</sup>

His own reading of the situation is as follows:

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 recorded past events, divine revelations, written texts, social and religious institutions, traditions, etc. As grounded in the past that authority is in a sense necessary and closed to any revision or falsification.<sup>19</sup>

These seem to me both too radical conclusions, so at least on some occasions Łukasiewicz must have got me wrong.

The first clearly false step of Łukasiewicz to be corrected is his understanding of agathological imagination. He makes a distinction (which I have not made) between 'ordinary believers', 'reflective believers' and 'hyper-reflective believers' and then writes:

On Salamon's view, hyper-reflective believers have a very special epistemic instrument at their disposal called 'agathological imagination', which allows them to evaluate the rationality of first-order religions. Agathological imagination — one may also call it axiological intuition — allows to evaluate whether and to what extent the Ultimate Reality (the Divine) or simply God of a given first-order religion is perfect or truly good.<sup>20</sup>

This would be a serious misreading of the role of agathological imagination.

Firstly, agathological imagination, despite somewhat unfamiliar label, is an imaginative dimension of the practical reason exercised by *everybody* and constantly, and not just in the realm of religion, but in connection with all mental activity that leads to value-judgments. Agathological imagination is not employed in rare instances by special individuals "to evaluate the rationality of first-order religions"; but is active on every occasion a person assents to normative truth-claims, which happens all the time. Agathological imagination

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18 Dariusz Łukasiewicz, "Agathological Rationalism and First-Order Religions", *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 9, no. 2, 228.

19 Ibid., 227.

20 Ibid., 225.

is thus employed not only by hyper-reflective believers who for some reason began to ask themselves whether Tibetan Buddhism is not more rational than Roman Catholicism, but it is active on every occasion an ordinary believer renews and confirms her religious commitment and that may take place every day at a daily prayer. The crucial point that Łukasiewicz missed is then that agathological imagination guides one's assent (or withholding of the assent) not only when the question 'what to believe' arises, but much more often when the question 'whether to believe' what is recommended to the person by others. Agatheism is a theory of religious belief which is supposed to explain the content of their beliefs (i.e., how they came to believe *what* they believe), but also explain *why* people believe what they believe, irrespectively of whether their beliefs were recommended to them by others — which is much more often than not the case — or whether they happen to change their beliefs on reflection and perhaps even formed some of their beliefs themselves. So Łukasiewicz may be right that many religious believers never assess the rationality of their beliefs *vis-à-vis* possible doxastic alternatives, but it still may be true — as I believe it is — that the answer to the question *why* such believers believe what they believe is: because of the 'agathological certainty' accompanying the activity of agathological imagination — activity which is typically implicit, tacit, unconscious, better to be accounted in an externalist fashion — that *it is good* to believe it (and this sense of the 'good' is related to the good-directedness of our axiological consciousness identified already by Socrates and Plato).

Now having put the record straight regarding the relevance of agathological imagination for religious belief (and all other beliefs which are axiologically grounded) we should be able to answer two inter-related questions put forward by Łukasiewicz, both pertaining to the ability to settle the matter of rationality of one or more religious traditions. Łukasiewicz suspects that I wish to stipulate that on agatheism *all* religions may be rational (in the agathological sense of rationality), but asks for clarification what on agatheism might be the justification for excluding the possibility that *all* religions may be irrational. A more sophisticated question formulated by Łukasiewicz and motivated by the awareness that in the future one's agathological imagination may deliver a different verdict regarding the agathological rationality of one's beliefs. As a consequence such person will find himself in an epistemic situation in which he will hold that (a) his 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* (b) other first-order religions may, conceivably, be assessed in the future as more rational than his/her own religion. Łukasiewicz sets the problem as follows:

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 true. He/she 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/she 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 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 agatheistic 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 recorded past events, divine revelations, written texts, social and religious institutions, traditions, etc. As grounded in the past that authority is in a sense necessary and closed to any revision or falsification.<sup>21</sup>

The simplest answer to this uneasy question would be that postulating agatheism as a an explanatory hypothesis regarding how and why people believe in the sphere of religion does not change anything in the epistemic situation of a believer. The only thing that changes when one adopts the agatheistic understanding of religion is that the *reason* for potential change of belief is formulated differently (in terms of 'being good', 'better', 'contributing to the greater good', etc., instead of 'being false'). So it is not the case that acceptance of agatheism somehow undermines the confidence of a Christian agatheist or requires Łukasiewicz's hyper-reflective believer to cultivate in himself doxastic uncertainty. There is *no* difference whatsoever between a Christian agatheist and a Christian who never heard about agatheism and agathologi-

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21 Ibid., 228.

cal imagination and who while fully committed to his faith may on occasions have moments of doubt about the truthfulness of some beliefs that he held for decades because they were recommended to him when he was a child. The situation of both of them will be analogous to the situation of someone who is currently totally committed to the marital relationship and cannot *imagine* (sic!) the breakup of the marriage and yet purely theoretically is aware that there exist such option that he will fall in love with someone else. It is obvious that such theoretical possibility must not undermine in any way the stability of the present commitment. The same goes for belief in the divinity of Christ. When one is a deeply devout Christian, one's agathological imagination will simply present this believe as a great good and this will be accompanied by the agathological certainty (or the agatonic feeling, i.e., the feeling of 'the rest of the mind in the good'). She will perceive the possibility of changing religious belief and religious affiliation as purely theoretical and equally unlikely as will a happy husband see a possibility of divorcing his wife.

As to whether "all first-order religions can be irrational, etc.," this is simply a wrongly put question. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a rational or irrational religion or religious tradition. Rationality is person-specific. There can be only individuals for whom it is rational or irrational to hold certain beliefs given their epistemic situation. Agatheism as a pluralistic interpretation of religion envisages possibility that in the context of plural and diverse (rather than just one and homogenous) religious traditions people may enter into proper alignment with God, the Absolute or the ultimate reality as a condition of the maximal fulfillment of their potentialities for good. So on agatheism it is highly unlikely that *any* great religion will be abandoned by its adherents as irrational. Of course, we know that theoretically a 'death' of a religion is possible and here agatheism shows its explanatory potential: it can provide an answer why the ancient Greek and Roman religions have been replaced by Christianity — an answer which goes beyond purely socio-political concerns — namely: Christianity triumphed because it was considered agathologically more attractive (offering a greater good). The same was true about the expansion of Buddhism and Islam in the early stages of their existence. But again, rationality is person-specific, so what appears as rational to some people at some times and places, must not necessarily be rational for other people at other times and places.

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