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RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY AND THE EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

Jerome Gellman

There exists a diversity of "evidence-free" religions, contradicting one another. There will be an epistemic problem for a religious devotee either because evidence-free belief is *in general* not epistemically justified in the face of diversity, or because of a *special* problem in the religious case. I argue that in general evidence-free belief is epistemically justified in the face of diversity. Then I argue that recent arguments of Wykstra and Basinger fail to show that there is a special problem in the religious case. Finally, I give reasons why religious belief is epistemically justified in the face of diversity.

Humankind knows a diversity of "religions" or "religious traditions," by which I shall mean sets of religious beliefs with associated religious practises. We shall assume that no devotees of a religion R, can show, by means which do not already make assumptions peculiar to R, that R is true or "more true" than other religions. Accordingly, let us call the religious beliefs in R *evidence-free relative to other religions* (or simply, *evidence-free*), in the sense that either they are not based on evidence at all, or if based on evidence, one could not show that the evidence was adequate without making some of the assumptions of R itself.

Let us call the state of affairs so far described, *religious diversity*. I wish to discuss whether religious diversity renders religious belief epistemically defective or unacceptable within the family of human doxastic practises. If it does, and if a religious devotee became aware of the defectiveness of his belief on that account, his belief would be irrational.

Now it may be that the believer cannot help but believe. But there may be steps he could take in an attempt to dislodge adherence to religious belief. He could at least adopt an attitude toward religion that reflects an acknowledgement of its irrationality. And this would surely have an impact on the manner in which he applied his religion to daily life, and on his relations with adherents of other religions.¹

I

In what follows I wish to focus on one feature of religious diversity: the fact that many beliefs, including the most central ones, of one religious tradition

are inconsistent with those, including the most central ones, of other religious traditions.

For example, S believes in the existence of an infinite God, creator of heaven and earth, while S1 believes in a God who is subject to eternal laws of reality. Or, S believes the Messiah has already come, whereas S1 believes the Messiah is yet to come, or denies, in the name of S1's tradition, that there is an earthly Messiah. Or: S believes that what survives this life to a next life is an essential self, or Atman, identical to Brahman, whereas S1 believes that what survives "this life" is only a nexus of "conditioning" that causally gives rise to a new constellation of body and mind, structurally similar to, while numerically distinct from, one in a previous existence.

There seem to be two possible ways in which contradictions between traditions may generate an epistemic problem for the religious devotee: Because:

- (1) Any instance of contradictions between evidence-free beliefs epistemically delegitimizes those beliefs.

or

- (2) In the religious case in particular contradictions between evidence-free beliefs delegitimize those beliefs.

Let us consider (1) and (2) in turn.

That (1) has little force is shown by examples of some of our most cherished beliefs that are evidence-free and contradict beliefs in other doxastic traditions, while being, surely, epistemically adequate. Take our widely shared belief that democratic government is superior to other extant forms of government, past and present. And consider the contradictory belief, still held at least in China, that communist dictatorship surpasses democracy as a superior form of government.

Now *perhaps* an argument could be mounted for democracy that would not beg any relevant questions in its favor. Perhaps we could agree with our opponents on certain values or goods that we all want to see exhibited in society, and then convince them that our democratic position would best enhance the realization of those values or goods.

But suppose our belief in democracy expressed for us a cluster of fundamental political and ethical values, and that the other side's communism expressed for them a most basic cluster of values. Or, supposing agreement on some values, imagine that these different traditions disagreed fundamentally on the relative weights to be given to each value. We could argue, let us imagine, that democracy enhanced individual freedoms and protection from arbitrary arrest, much better than does communism, but find that the values we were building on were not recognized by the other side, or were recognized as values of a lesser sort. In either case, we would find no way

to argue without begging the question at issue in favor of the values, and their weights, which are peculiarly part of the democratic tradition.

If such were the case, our belief in democracy would be evidence-free, in the above defined sense. But it seems quite obvious that we would be perfectly entitled to believe in democracy, even if evidence-free, and even if contradicted by the beliefs of others.

The fact is that many of our most cherished beliefs are shared only by those who share our cultural, geographical, ethnic or educational background. And often these beliefs are both evidence-free as well as contradicted by other orientations.

Cherished beliefs of this sort are not limited to morals and politics, and religion. Consider an example involving an existence claim, that is an evidence-free belief, and which we recognize as epistemically proper. Some mathematicians think of sets as mere constructs useful for the mathematical life. They do not posit their existence. Other mathematicians believe that sets *exist*, and their whole way of doing mathematics is accordingly affected. They do so without a non question-begging argument that shows them to be right and their opponents wrong, although they can give *themselves* various reasons for their belief. It would appear that their belief is not irrational in the least.

Hence, if there is a problem from religious diversity on account of contradictions between the beliefs of one tradition and another, it does not come from being an instance of doxastic diversity in general.

Let us now consider:

- (2) In the religious case in particular contradictions between evidence-free beliefs delegitimize those beliefs.

A most serious challenge to the epistemic acceptability of religious belief on account of features of *religious* diversity, in particular, has been made by Stephen J. Wykstra.² A similar argument has been put forward by David Basinger, and is intimated in the writings of John Hick.³ Here we will concentrate on the arguments of Wykstra and Basinger, respectively.

Wykstra argues that religious belief is what he calls "evidence essential," meaning that unless evidence for the belief is available to the community of believers, the belief is epistemically defective.⁴ In so saying, Wykstra does not mean that each believer must know or be aware of the evidence, but that the evidence must be known within the believer's community. This is a "communitarian" sense of "having evidence." For example, each of us needn't know or even be capable of understanding the scientific evidence for the belief that electrons exist in order for the latter to be epistemically acceptable for each of us. It is enough that the experts have that evidence.

If it should turn out, however, that even for the scientists there was no evidence for our belief in electrons, our belief would be epistemically defec-

tive, whether we knew it or not. Were we to become aware of the lack of evidence, and were then to continue believing in electrons, we would be irrational in doing so. The belief in electrons is thus evidence-essential, for Wykstra. And he argues that so is religious belief.

Wykstra's argument for the latter conclusion begins by following Thomas Reid, in maintaining that we are endowed with what Wykstra calls "basic faculties," such as the senses, memory, credulity, and logical intuition, through whose use we form beliefs.⁵ Beliefs formed via these natural faculties are not *inferentially* accessed. Rather, we naturally and unreflectively accept them in the course of employing these faculties. For example, I do not accept a law of logic because of an inference to the effect that it seems logically intuitive and what seems logically intuitive is most likely true. Instead I simply believe the law, via the faculty of logical intuition.

Reid and Wykstra insist we are perfectly within our epistemic rights to rely on our basic faculties. We need not *infer* that there is a tree in front of us, or that $2+2=4$, or that we were once in Paris. We are epistemically justified in believing these things straightaway, upon the functioning of the appropriate faculty.

When our basic faculties present conflicting results, however, we face what Wykstra calls "ostensible epistemic parity."⁶ In ostensible epistemic parity we become obligated according to Wykstra to find evidence of an *inferential* type which will allow us to *discriminate* between the belief, formed by our natural faculties, that's to be trusted, and that belief formed by our natural faculties that's to be rejected. Epistemic parity "blocks the flow," in Wykstra's words, of our natural disposition to accept what we believe via our faculties. *Discriminational evidence* frees up that blockage, by either confirming one side, or disconfirming one side. In either case, the result is an unblocking of the natural flow of credulity toward the remaining belief-candidate.⁷

To illustrate, consider our disposition to trust the testimony of others, a basic faculty for Reid and Wykstra. Suppose my father tells me one thing, and my mother something inconsistent with that. This creates ostensible epistemic parity, blocking the natural disposition and the epistemic right to trust the testimonies of my mother and father. What is needed to restore the epistemic right to believe one or another of the testimonies is *evidence* for or against one of the parental assertions. Initially, testimony could be believed in the absence of evidence, because of the basic faculty of forming beliefs based on the testimony of others. But now without evidence I would remain in ostensible epistemic parity.

To summarize, epistemic parity makes evidence essentially a condition of epistemic propriety.

Wykstra embraces the view that religious belief initially requires no evidence of the derivational kind to be epistemically upright. That is because

human beings have a basic faculty for belief-formation, we might call the "religious faculty." In appropriate circumstances, this faculty gives non-derivational religious beliefs in an epistemically acceptable way. One need not *derive*, say, the existence of God from an experience of Him, any more than one *derives* the existence of the tree from seeing it. In both cases one simply believes on having the appropriate experiences.

When we consider religious diversity, however, the situation changes. According to Wykstra, religious diversity epistemically resembles conflict in testimony, demanding discriminational evidence for the favoring of one religion over others, so as to eliminate blockage of the natural reliance upon the religious faculty.⁸ Wykstra concludes that "insofar as such parity problems are pervasive, there is reason to regard experiential religious beliefs as needing evidence of (at least) the *discriminational* kind."⁹ So, because of religious diversity religious belief is *evidence essential*, meaning that (discriminational) evidence for that belief must be available to the community of believers. Hence, on our assumption that religious beliefs are evidence-free, religious beliefs are epistemically defective.

An argument somewhat similar to Wykstra's has been put forward by David Basinger. Basinger attacks what he calls the "General Reliability Argument," (GRA), in light of religious diversity. (GRA) is characterized as follows:

We as humans are naturally endowed with a considerable number of belief-forming faculties.... The assumed reliability of such faculties serves as the basis for some of our most non-controversial examples of 'knowledge.' So our basic stance toward such faculties—including our religious faculties—should be to assume they are 'innocent until proven guilty.'¹⁰

Basinger wishes to disallow the GRA when it comes to the faculty of forming religious beliefs:

Pervasive religious diversity brings into serious question whether we ought consider religious faculties to be analogous to other belief-forming faculties in the way GRA suggests. ...since the reason we do not question the reliability of most of our faculties is that such faculties consistently generate similar beliefs in most individuals, the fact that religious faculties do not, in general, produce similar beliefs in similar contexts does make it much more difficult to assume they possess the same sort of reliability status.¹¹

Basinger calls into question the very *reliability* of the religious faculty, whereas Wykstra focused on the epistemic obligation to determine by evidence which of the contradictory religious beliefs deserves credence. The more local and uncommon the phenomenon of epistemic parity for a particular faculty, the more is the problem one of selecting one of the contradictory beliefs for credence. The more pervasive and unresisting cases of epistemic parity for a particular faculty, the more reason we would have to doubt its very reliability. Religious epistemic parity might well display a pervasiveness

and entrenchment which would qualify it as a candidate for the second type of problem.

Basinger believes that religious diversity also defeats a principle he calls the Negative Apologetical Thesis (NAT), which goes as follows:

For a theist to be in a position to maintain justifiably that her basic formed beliefs are true even though she has no "positive reason" to think they are true, she is only obligated to defend herself against the claim that her religious faculties are not functioning properly.¹²

Basinger, in opposition to NAT, claims that "religious diversity does challenge the assumption that a theist need only defend her formed beliefs and the reliability of the faculties which have produced them," in order to continue to believe without positive evidence.¹³ He writes:

The knowledgeable theist is obligated to attempt to resolve the pluralistic conflict—enter the arena of positive apologetics—*before* any 'final' decision concerning the epistemic status of her formed religious belief can be made.¹⁴

For both Wykstra and Basinger, therefore, it is religious diversity that would make religious belief epistemically defective if evidence-free.

I now want to argue that the position of Wykstra, and of Basinger, is unacceptable, for three major reasons:

1. Their position has unwanted epistemological consequences.
2. The religious faculty does not generally function in the way they suppose.
3. Their conception of epistemology is too narrow.

1. If we accept that there are faculties for forming religious beliefs, beliefs of logic, and sense beliefs, we should acknowledge a faculty, as well, by means of which we form moral and value beliefs. After all, we form moral and value beliefs just as naturally and unreflectively as some form religious beliefs. And we are just as familiar with the notion of a "moral intuition" as we are with the notion of a religious experience or a logical intuition. I conclude that we ought to recognize a faculty for forming moral or value beliefs, if we recognize other natural faculties.

Consider now, our belief in democracy. Most of us who hold this belief do so non-inferentially, via the natural faculty for forming value beliefs. Similarly, those who believe in a non-democratic system may plausibly be said to be exercising the very same faculty. Conceding this, and noting the pervasiveness and entrenched nature of the contradiction between champions of democracy and their opponents, Basinger ought to call into question the reliability of the faculty for forming value beliefs.

At the least we should get *epistemic parity* with regard to our value faculty. And then our belief in democracy should be judged epistemically defective,

unless there were available to the community of believers in democracy non-question begging discriminational evidence in their favor.

This consequence seems deeply counter-intuitive. If true, then if it should turn out that no one, not even our best political theorists, had any evidence (in the sense appropriate to value inquiry) favoring democracy, that did not draw exclusively from the cluster of values that only a believer in democracy would recognize or give similar weight to in the first place, then our belief in democracy would be epistemically defective. And knowing this, we would be epistemically irrational to continue believing in democracy. That this is not true seems to me obvious. Our belief in democracy would not be evidence-essential, even if evidence-free under conditions of epistemic parity.

Similar implausible conclusions follow from considering any number of beliefs which figure in debate over public policy. On the view we are considering, no one would be epistemically entitled to endorse a pro-or con-abortion point of view, or a belief for or against capital punishment. Presumably, sophisticated holders of any of these positions could justify it with a whole cluster of beliefs about humanity, justice, and the value of life. But their opponents could invoke against them an equally ramified cluster of values. Neither side, it seems, can produce a non question-begging argument. These beliefs are thus evidence-free relative to the opposition, and thus allegedly epistemically defective.

An additional problem with the approach of Wykstra and Basinger regards the nature of the religious faculty. If I understand Wykstra and Basinger correctly, one who formed an *atheistic* or an *agnostic* belief in a natural, unreflective way, would not be considered to have employed a *religious* faculty in so doing. This is indicated by the fact that in their discussions of the beliefs formed via the religious faculty, both Wykstra and Basinger confine themselves exclusively to conflicts between religious beliefs. This suggests that in their view the forming of an atheistic or agnostic belief is not the product of the religious faculty.

Why should a belief that God exists be the product of one faculty, and the belief that God does not exist a product of a different faculty?

Perhaps the idea is that the formation of beliefs via a religious faculty is the result of *religious experience*, and not merely an intuition or conviction formed via an appropriate belief-forming mechanism. The formation of atheistic and agnostic beliefs is not based on religious experiences at all. So different faculties must be acknowledged.

However, the difference between a Christian experience of God, for example, and a Buddhist experience of nothingness, is not impressively less than the difference between the Christian experience and an experience, say, of looking at the starry heavens and, impressed by the sheer meaninglessness of it all, declaring there is no God. It is arbitrary to assign the Christian and

Buddhist experiences to one faculty, and the above atheistic experience to another. More plausibly, all three experiences are varying forms of a single faculty for forming beliefs on spiritual matters, on the basis of our experiences of the world.

It might be objected, though, that atheistic (and agnostic) beliefs are rarely the result of experiences of the sort described above. They are mostly the result of other belief-forming faculties or are the result of inferences, correct or not, from other beliefs.

This objection would be completed by the claim that normally, religious belief *is* the result of religious experience, and *not* of some other belief-forming mechanism, nor the result of an inference from other beliefs. And that is why a distinct religious faculty must be recognized.

This claim about the manner in which religious belief is normally formed will be rejected below. It should be noted now, however, that atheistic and agnostic belief can issue from *some* natural faculty or other, even if not the *same* faculty for religious belief. Beliefs of this kind are at least sometimes formed in that unreflective and immediate way which indicates that a basic faculty is at work. But once this is acknowledged, the arguments of Wykstra and Basinger would have the quite implausible consequence that because of religious/agnostic/atheistic diversity, *no* belief about the existence or non-existence of God could be held in an epistemically justified way. And that would be because of epistemic parity between the results of *different* faculties, and the ensuing threat to the reliability of each of the faculties involved. After all, parity between faculties should be a no less potent epistemic threat than parity that arises within the confines of the employment of a single faculty. If our sense of sight and sense of touch were seriously and regularly at odds in their testimony to us, the problems raised by Wykstra and Basinger would surely arise there, if they arose anywhere.

If the line of argument being scrutinized were correct, no one could form any epistemically justified beliefs about any religious matter about which there existed a diversity of belief, without running afoul of the prohibition upon relying on a faculty, when faced with epistemic parity.

Furthermore, neither could judgement be suspended, for the reason that a *faculty* is involved in judging that belief should be suspended. This would be the faculty of forming epistemic judgements or perhaps the faculty of reasoning. And this faculty must be weighed against the faculty that says that God exists, and against the faculty that says God does not exist. So the very faculty employed to decide that judgement should be suspended, would itself be a party to epistemic parity (Wykstra) or be threatened by the loss of its reliability (Basinger).

To my mind, these results count strongly against the epistemological assumptions of Wykstra and Basinger.

2. The religious faculty does not widely function in the way implied by

Wykstra and Basinger. We should here distinguish between: (A) the initial formulation of religious belief in a believer, and (B) the ongoing creation of religious beliefs in the life of a believer.

(A) pertains to the way in which a believer comes to have religious beliefs in the first place (early on in life, say). These may be beliefs held by a general population, such as that God has revealed His Law to His people. Or they may be of a more personal and specific nature, held solely by a single believer or together with those close to her, such as that God loved Uncle Randolph, or that God “wants me to go to sleep now.”

(B) pertains to the ongoing creation of religious beliefs as the religious life is lived, and may include the adding on of generally held beliefs, but more typically will pertain to the personal type of belief, such as that God “wants me now to act in a certain way.”

With regard to (A), it seems quite apparent that the vast majority of religious believers in the world’s religious traditions do not *come* to their beliefs via a religious faculty. Rather, they are born and raised within a religious tradition with which they simply go along. They are led by their elders and teachers to act and speak in certain ways, and they just go along with it. This is also the way they get their beliefs about geography, history, literature, music, science, and much else. They then continue along with their beliefs once they have them. If anything, a faculty of credulity in *testimony* of others lies at the beginning of their religiosity. At that beginning, in any case, often lies an intricate network of dogma and doctrine which it is quite implausible to suppose believers come to via a religious faculty. They believe what they are taught by their elders.

With regard to (B), later beliefs, again it seems quite apparent that these religious beliefs are not generally formed in a fashion suggesting the operation of a religious faculty. Rather, believers typically are drawing conclusions from the religious framework they have been taught, applying it to the circumstances in which they find themselves.

This procedure is quite unlike the formation of sense-beliefs. For while individuals do see objects with the obvious aid of an acculturated practise, yet in doing so they normally do not draw any *conclusions* from previously acquired sense-beliefs. Their formation of sense-beliefs when confronted by physical objects is direct and spontaneous. With religion, however, it seems that after the initial period of acculturation, believers are typically only drawing upon the beliefs within their tradition to form *inferences* concerning their present life situations.

There may be exceptions to this in some religious traditions, but these are not *typical* of the way the world’s religions work for their adherents in general. In particular, talk of a religious faculty as the source of religious beliefs, rather than the faculties of credulity in testimony and of reasoning, seems largely inappropriate to contemporary Jewish religious belief. Religious belief has

much more to do with living within a tradition and drawing inferences within it, than with forming unreflective beliefs via a uniquely religious faculty.

3. My major objection to Wykstra and Basinger is that their epistemology is too narrow to correctly reflect the epistemology of religion.

The implicit conception of epistemology shared by these two thinkers is that one's epistemology consists exclusively in the discovery and accurate formulation of *rules* governing beliefs. That is to say, on this view epistemology is solely a matter of finding the right rules and applying them correctly to specific beliefs.

By a *rule* I mean a(n implicitly or explicitly) universally quantified proposition which states under what conditions one is justified in taking a proposition as true, or in believing it, or in taking it to be rational to believe it; or which sets out one's epistemic obligations with regard to one's given epistemic situation.

To illustrate, Wykstra and Basinger employ the following epistemic rules in their discussions:

- (1) One is justified in believing the testimony of one's natural faculties unless one has reason not to.
- (2) When there is epistemic parity one is obligated to find discriminational evidence for one side or the other.
- (3) It is not rational to believe without evidence or without relying on one's natural faculties.

The history of epistemology has largely been the history of such rules. Here are some favorites of various philosophers, past and present:

- (4) If a proposition appears to one to be self-evident, then one is justified in believing it.
- (5) It is irrational to believe in a contradiction.
- (6) One has an obligation never to believe without evidence.
- (7) One has an obligation to form one's judgements on the basis of one's total evidence.

These rules (and others like them) are offered as *rock-bottom* governors of our epistemic lives: they determine the acceptability of belief candidates, while themselves not subject to deeper epistemic justification. In the event that an epistemic rule *is* derived, and not itself *rock-bottom*, typically what appears at the rock-bottom level of the derivation is only other rules. Let us call any epistemology which recognizes *only* rules as ultimate in judging propositions a "rule-epistemology."

By a "religious epistemology," I shall mean an epistemological point of view used to govern one's religious beliefs. And what I want to claim is that typically a religious epistemology is not a rule-epistemology.

However one has formed a religious belief, at some point along the way it acquires epistemic unconditionality. One's religious beliefs become the very *rock-bottom* of one's epistemological apparatus. The epistemic acceptability of other beliefs is then judged by their lights. The grounds of religious belief, if any, fall away, leaving a religious belief whose epistemic acceptability is underived for the believer.

It is in the nature of the religious life, I contend, that religious belief typically serves the believer not as what is justified, but only as justifying. Consider the belief that God exists. Whether belief-candidates are acceptable or not is judged, in part, in light of whether they are consistent with God's existence. And this is done not *because* one is or means to be following a rule, about, say, relying on beliefs for which one has evidence, or because one is or means to be following a rule about, say, being justified in relying on natural faculties which deliver beliefs. Rather, belief in God, being rock-bottom, plays the role for the believer of a test for other beliefs, in precisely the way purported for (1)-(7).

Generally, (1)-(7), are accepted as starting points of one's epistemology. And so, typically, I contend, belief in God belongs with the starting points of the epistemology of the religious believer, at the same level of epistemological significance for her as any of the rock-bottom rules of philosophers for them.¹⁵

Now one may object that religious belief as I understand it can be given the form of a rule. For example, "God exists" as a rock-bottom justifying proposition, can be cast as follows:

(G) Any proposition which contradicts God's existence is to be rejected.

But if so, the epistemology of religious belief has not been shown to diverge in any way from rule-epistemology.

But this objection is easily answered. For the proposed rule, (G) is not itself rock-bottom in the believer's epistemology. For (G) derives from the non-rule belief that God exists. What is significant about the religious case is that the specific proposition that God exists (as well as other specific religious propositions) plays an exclusively *grounding* or *judging* role in one's epistemology. Whether or not one *originally* grounded one's belief in God, subsequently that belief does not function as a grounded belief but only as a grounding one. Traditional epistemology has reserved this role for rules alone.

Alternatively, we may concede that (G) functions for the believer in the rock-bottom way that rules (1)-(7) do for epistemologists. Then I need only revise my position by saying that rule (G) is to be found in the rock-bottom of the typical believer's epistemology. My point would then be that in the believer's epistemology are to be found *rules* not found in the epistemology of non-believers, for example (G). In what follows I will prefer the first reply though: that (G) is not rock-bottom, but derived from the belief that God exists, which is rock-bottom.¹⁶

A second point about a typical believer's epistemology depends on the notion of a *hierarchy* of rock-bottom propositions. Propositions are epistemically rock-bottom in virtue of not being derived from any other proposition.¹⁷ There can still be a hierarchy of such propositions in one's epistemology, though. A rock-bottom proposition, *p*, will be said to be *hierarchically higher* in a hierarchy, *H*, than is rock-bottom *q* in *H*, when *p* is allowed more weight than *q* in one's epistemic deliberations. And *p* is allowed more weight than *q* when the results of applying *p* are preferred to the results of applying *q*. Finally let us say that *p* is *hierarchically prior* to *q* in *H*, when the result of applying *p* is accepted irregardless of what the results are of applying *q*, that is, when the application of *q* is not allowed to change the result yielded by the application of *p*.

Generally, the rule that tells us to trust our senses, (*S*), is *hierarchically higher* than the rule that tells us to trust the testimony of others, (*T*); but (*S*) is not *prior* to (*T*). The rule that we not believe in an explicit contradiction is *prior* to both (*S*) and (*T*).

For most of us, (*S*) is both *higher* and *prior* in our hierarchy of epistemic rock-bottom propositions than the rule that we are justified in believing what seems true as the conclusion of a sound logical deduction. For that reason, we do not allow Zeno-like arguments to influence in the least the degree to which we believe in motion.

Typically, I wish to maintain, religious belief, or at least some substantial core thereof, which is rock-bottom, is *prior* in the believer's epistemic hierarchy to many of the rules favored by epistemologists. In particular religious belief is *prior* to consideration of rules of rationality. Let us say, then, that religious belief is possessed of *strong priority* in a religious epistemology.

Issues of rationality, I wish to claim, against Wykstra's and Basinger's approach, find a place in a religious epistemology, if at all, *posterior* to the acceptance of religious belief. Only already armed with rock-bottom religious beliefs as judging-propositions does the believer ever raise questions of the rationality of other beliefs. In particular, the believer's rules of rationality are not applied to her rock-bottom religious beliefs. The latter are prior to the former for her, in the way that our belief in motion is prior for us to our acceptance of the conclusions of Zeno's arguments.

It should be noted that a religious epistemology which includes rock-bottom religious beliefs with strong epistemic priority is not a fideism, for the following reasons:

First, fideism asserts that one may believe "on faith," without support from "reason." So fideism involves an epistemological *rule*. However, a believer for whom belief in God is rock-bottom and possessed of strong hierarchical priority is simply a Christian, or a Shaivite, with no epistemological rule justifying her belief, and with no rule that states the conditions of justification

of religious beliefs in general (whether hers or someone else's). She simply believes *her religion* straight-away, evaluating other beliefs directly in terms of the *specific religious beliefs* she holds. That's it.

Secondly, fideism includes a view about how believers come to hold their religious beliefs. They do so on faith. The thesis I am presenting recognizes that believers *come* to their beliefs in various ways, though I have claimed that most are simply raised in a religious atmosphere and go along with it. My claim is that as religious belief typically functions, the grounds, if any, for belief fall away, as it were, and religious beliefs become rock-bottom epistemic propositions, no longer vulnerable to assessment, but instead the starting points of assessment.¹⁸

Likewise, we should not conclude that an epistemology of rock-bottom strongly-prior religious beliefs requires a unique conception of "rationality" on the part of the believer. For the believer may not have any conception of rationality whatsoever. In particular, if my description of a typical religious epistemology is correct, the believer does not accept his religious beliefs because he thinks they are *rational*. They are epistemically proper for him not because of satisfying a rule of rationality for him. They are acceptable for him on account of *being the propositions that they are*.

I conclude that typical religious epistemology differs markedly from the picture presented in the arguments of Wykstra and Basinger.¹⁹

II

I have argued that a typical religious epistemology regards religious beliefs, or at least a core thereof, as epistemically rock-bottom and strongly prior in the hierarchy of epistemically rock-bottom propositions.

In this section I argue that such an epistemology is quite proper, and that no epistemic problem need arise for the believer on account of religious diversity. I begin by considering two objections to the position given in section I. Then I consider the status of such an epistemology when faced with opposing epistemological viewpoints.

The first objection is that a religious epistemology of the sort described violates the notion of "epistemic justification." The second objection is that if such an epistemology were approved, then "anyone could believe anything they wanted."

The first objection begins by asserting an intrinsic connection between "epistemic justification" and "truth." Laurence Bonjour has put the point about the connection in the following way:

The distinguishing characteristic of epistemic justification is thus its essential or internal relation to the cognitive role of truth. It follows that one's cognitive endeavors are epistemically justified only if and to the extent that they are aimed at this goal, which means very roughly that one accepts all and only those beliefs which one has good reason to think are true. To accept a

belief in the absence of such a reason...is to neglect the pursuit of truth; such acceptance is, one might say, *epistemically irresponsible*. [So] any degree of epistemic justification, however small, must increase to a commensurate degree the chances that the belief in question is true...for otherwise it cannot qualify as epistemic justification at all.²⁰

Bonjour seems to be endorsing the following principle:

- (B) S is epistemically justified in believing a proposition, p, if and only if S has good reason to think that p is true.

Contrary to (B), however, there are beliefs epistemically justified in the absence of reasons for thinking the belief true. It seems most rational, everything else being equal, to continue believing what one already believes, until one has a reason to abandon that belief, even if presently there is no reason for thinking the belief true.²¹ This is true even when the belief in question is challenged by counter-beliefs. This is sometimes called the principle of "methodological conservatism." So we see that epistemic justification does not depend on having reasons to think true.²²

It may be argued, though, that even so methodological conservatism is epistemically justified in *reference* to truth, even if not *indicative* of the truth of propositions, because the pursuit of truth is best served *in the long run* by adoption of the principle. If people were to follow the rule of methodological conservatism, they would be more motivated to attempt to find evidence for the propositions they held than they would if they merely entertained those propositions without believing them. The increased effort to try to establish the truth of propositions serves the cause of truth in the long run.²³ And so, the argument concludes, the principle of methodological conservatism is justified, at least, with "respect" to truth: while it may not serve to *indicate* truth, it helps *yield* truth, in the long run.

Allowing this reply to stand, let us change (B) accordingly:

- (B1) S is epistemically justified in believing a proposition, p, if and only if either S has good reason to think that p is true, or S has good reason to think that believing p will serve the pursuit of truth in the long run.

Accepting (B1), however, does not require rejecting a non-rule religious epistemology. To see this, consider that (B1) will entail this only if read as:

- (B2) S is epistemically justified in believing a proposition, p, if and only if either S has good reason to think that p is true *in virtue of having tested p in accordance with epistemically valid rules*, or S has good reason *independent of thinking that p is true* to think that believing p will serve the pursuit of truth in the long run.

But one can accept (B1), with its disjunctive link between epistemic justification and truth, without endorsing (B2), by adopting a non-rule epistemology. In a non-rule epistemology, S's having good reason to think that p is

true, is not equivalent to S's having a good reason to think that *p* is true *in virtue of having tested p by epistemically valid rules*. And in a non rule-epistemology that S has good reason to think that believing *p* serves truth in the long run, is not equivalent to S having good reason *independent of thinking that p is true* to think that believing *p* serves truth in the long run.

A non rule-epistemology does require the rejection of (B2), but not the rejection of (B1). A non rule-epistemologist can embrace (B1) with enthusiasm. If there *is* a link between epistemic justification and truth it is purely *formal*, and does not entail a substantive claim about what *are* good reasons for thinking that *p* is true or for thinking that believing *p* will serve truth in the long run. The non-rule epistemologist is free, as far as (B1) is concerned, to think of the *reasons* for thinking *p* true or for thinking the belief in *p* as conducive to truth, as internal to the act of accepting *p*.

Let me illustrate the point with the belief that God exists, as rock-bottom and possessed of strong priority.

As for the link between epistemic justification and *having a good reason for thinking that God exists is true*, the believer who believes that God exists and who holds this belief in a rock-bottom way might well be prepared to insist that he holds it because it is true. If asked what his reason is for thinking that it is true, he could well answer that the reason he thinks it is true is just because it *is* true. He neither derives this belief from any other belief of his nor recognizes an epistemic duty to justify the truth of this belief by means of rules which pass upon its acceptability.

The situation of the believer would thus not be dissimilar to that of the epistemologist who accepts the rule listed earlier:

- (4) If a proposition appears to one to be self-evident, then one is justified in believing it.

The epistemologist would no doubt claim that his reason for thinking that (4) true is that it *seems* true. But suppose we wished him to make explicit his reason for thinking that if (4) *seems* true, then it *is* true.²⁴ Plausibly, our epistemologist would answer that:

- (4a) If a proposition *seems* true, that's a good reason to think it *is* true.

But then if we ask what reason he has for thinking (4a) true, he cannot reply that he thinks that *it* is true is because it *seems* to be true, without begging the question at issue. The only real recourse the epistemologist seems to have is to say that the reason he thinks (4a) true is just that it *is* true. His reason for accepting the truth of (4a) is thus internal to his acceptance of (4a). He is nonetheless epistemically justified in accepting (4a).²⁵ The belief that God exists would be similar for the believer to the belief in (4) or (4a) for the epistemologist. The reason for thinking that each is true belongs internally to the acceptance of the proposition in question.

Next, regarding epistemic justification and *the serving of truth in the long run*, a believer can readily proclaim that the holding of his belief furthers the cause of truth in the long run. This will be because he attests that *God exists* is true, so judging other beliefs by whether they contradict that belief will serve the cause of truth in the long run. To suppose that such a procedure violates (B1) is to smuggle into (B1) substantive epistemological doctrines not justified on the *mere grounds* of a conceptual link between epistemic justification and truth.

The point is that accepting (B1) does not require that the *reason* for thinking that what one believes is true or serves the cause of truth must be decided independently of and prior to the acceptance of the belief itself. (B1) does not entail (B2). It follows that ceding the disjunctive link between epistemic justification and truth does not disqualify a religious epistemology which is not a rule-epistemology.

The second objection to religious epistemology as I have presented it that I wish to consider is this: If religious belief, epistemically rock-bottom and strongly prior, were recognized as epistemically proper, then couldn't just *any* belief claim the same right? Wouldn't the door be open for out and out irrationality?

This objection parallels an objection considered by Alvin Plantinga to his thesis that religious belief is *properly basic*.²⁶ I paraphrase Plantinga's voicing of the objection, substituting "rock-bottom and has strong epistemic priority" for each occurrence of "properly basic:"

If belief in God is rock-bottom and has strong epistemic priority, why cannot just *any* belief be rock-bottom and have strong epistemic priority? Could we not say the same for any bizarre aberration we can think of? What about voodoo or astrology? What about the belief that the Great Pumpkin returns every Halloween? Could I properly take *that* as rock-bottom and as having strong epistemic priority?²⁷

The first thing to be said in response is that this issue need not arise for a *religious* epistemology. And that is because a religious epistemology need not have any rule to the effect that *any* belief can be rock-bottom and strongly prior. A religious epistemology may explicitly reject such a rule, recognizing only particular religious beliefs as rock-bottom and strongly prior. Neither, from the point of view of such an epistemology, is a rule required to distinguish the favored religious beliefs from other possible candidates for proper rock-bottom strong priority. And that is because the religious beliefs are rock-bottom and strongly prior epistemically, thus not dependent upon passing the test of any rule. The religious beliefs may securely be in place before, as it were, the rationality of voodoo and astrology are ever considered. So from the point of view of a religious epistemology there need be no problem created by the asking of the above questions.

The above questions only arise from the point of view of a rule-epistemology,

which grants epistemic respectability only to beliefs that pass the test of epistemic rules. And the question asked from that point of view is: by what *rule* are rock-bottom strongly prior religious beliefs to be epistemically justified? The rule that *any* belief of that sort can be epistemically justified is obviously unacceptable. But what could distinguish the religious case from others?

A possible suggestion emerges from considering Plantinga's choice of belief in the "Great Pumpkin," as an example of a paradigmatically unacceptable belief. Now the fact is that a belief in the Great Pumpkin who returns every Halloween bears a striking similarity to beliefs current in the world's great religions. In some sects of Buddhism, for example, Buddha figures are said to appear and reappear to the inner eye of the devotee. Devout Jews believe that the prophet Elijah returns to their homes every Passover, and attends every Jewish circumcision. And Christianity has taught that a man who died and was buried long ago reappears regularly in substance upon the partaking of wine and wafer under proper circumstances.

Of course each of these beliefs is embedded within a larger theological context. But couldn't we imagine the same for belief in the Great Pumpkin? I don't see why not. So what, *indeed*, makes the Great Pumpkin, but not Transubstantiation or Elijah's annual visits, a fine example of an obviously unacceptable belief?

I suggest that a felt difference between the religious cases and the Great Pumpkin example is that the former and not the latter are accepted and lived by within a wide community of believers. That is why, aside from questions of politeness, the Great Pumpkin is felt to be a good example of an absurd belief, while the others are not. And the reason why community embedding is felt to make an epistemic difference is that it is in our communities that we discover our epistemic frames of reference, and live our doxastic lives. So I suggest that the belief that a man long ago dead regularly returns in substance is epistemically permissible because embedded in a wide community of believers, while the Great Pumpkin has no such following. For the same reason belief in democracy is epistemically justified, even if evidence-free.

There are no precise rules to determine how widely a belief must be believed in and lived by in order to be epistemically proper, when rock-bottom. I dare suggest that epistemological rules regarding what is epistemically acceptable are themselves community-embedded, most typically in communities of philosophers. And the community's own sense of itself, and its purposes, shapes its attitude on these matters. Thus variations will be expected on views as to the extent to which a belief must be widely held in order to be considered epistemically acceptable.

Well, then, what of voodoo and astrology. Are *they* not widely held and lived by? Certainly. So are they too epistemically respectable? The predilection to answer in the negative lies in the fact, I believe, that what we object

to in these practises is their making empirical predictions contradicted by the senses and science. Given the epistemologies of most of us, this makes them unacceptable. And it is this feature which makes them so readily available as *obvious* examples of improper beliefs. And the same may be said of belief in the Great Pumpkin if taken as out and out empirical. Of course the same may be said of religious teachings with empirical import at odds with the senses and science, from the point of view, at least, of a non-religious epistemology. The fact is, though, that neither the Buddha's appearances, nor Elijah's visits, nor the transubstantiation are empirical in nature.

Hence, our rejection of voodoo and astrology does not count as a counter-example to the epistemic respectability of widely held beliefs. We merely need require that widely held beliefs not be admitted if they contradict the evidence of the senses or scientific truths.

Thus I see no reason to think that if religious epistemology were recognized as acceptable, then just *any* belief could be acceptable, no matter how little believed and no matter how much it went against our sense judgements and well established scientific truths.

We have now considered, and attempted to turn back, two reasons why a religious epistemology, as I have described it, might be rejected as epistemically defective. The first was from considerations of a link between truth and epistemic justification, and the second was from the fear that if religious epistemology were granted epistemic respectability, just any belief would have to be similarly regarded.

But suppose, despite my best efforts, the epistemic respectability of religious epistemology, as here presented, was rejected in the name of a rule-epistemology. What would then be the epistemic situation for one who embraced a religious epistemology? Anyone holding a rule-epistemology would be perfectly within his rights to require religious belief to answer to the requirements of *his* epistemology. What needs to be stressed, though, is that the holding of a rock-bottom religious belief takes place *on the same epistemological level* as the holding of a rule-epistemology. To put the point differently, just as the rule-epistemologist may think that rule-epistemology has the right to judge religion, the religious believer may equally believe that religion has the right to judge rule-epistemology.

What is impermissible, I suggest, is for the rule-epistemologist to assume that her epistemological stance is somehow of a more fundamental order than is another's religious stance.

In fact, the situation between a religious epistemology and a rule-epistemology is *exactly analogous* to the situation that obtains between one religion and another within religious diversity. Thus a rule-epistemologist could not very well cling to her own epistemological orientation, discounting all others, while denying the same right of one religious orientation to discount all the

others. She couldn't very well do that, that is, unless she preferred her own rule-epistemology without having made it pass any rule.

And so, to conclude the argument of this study, while I have not *established* that rock-bottom strongly prior religious belief is epistemically justified, I hope to have said enough to show that there is no good reason to think it is not.^{28, 29}

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NOTES

1. Our discussion will be limited to religious belief, and exclude considerations of the rationality of religious practise. The relationship between religious belief and practise is a complicated one, and we ought not assume that conditions of rationality for the one are identical to those for the other.

2. Stephen J. Wykstra, "Toward a Sensible Evidentialism: On the Notion of 'Needing Evidence,'" in William L. Rowe and William J. Wainwright, eds., *Philosophy of Religion, Selected Readings*, Second Edition (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1989), pp. 426-37.

3. See, David Basinger, "Plantinga, Pluralism, and Justified Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy*, 8 (1991), 67-80. References in the text will be to this article. See also, Basinger, "Hick's Religious Pluralism and 'Reformed Epistemology,'" *Faith and Philosophy*, 5 (1988), 421-32. See, John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), and, "Religious Pluralism and Salvation," *Faith and Philosophy*, 5 (1988), 365-77.

4. Wykstra, pp. 430-31.

5. Wykstra, p. 434f.

6. Wykstra, p. 435.

7. Where the two beliefs are logically contradictory to one another, the confirmation of one will be the disconfirmation of the other. But the two may be so related that they cannot both be true, though they can both be false. So, the disconfirmation of one need not be tantamount to the confirmation of the other. When the one is disconfirmed, therefore, the other will be carried by the natural faculty which presented it in the first place.

8. Wykstra, p. 436.

9. Wykstra, p. 437.

10. Basinger, p. 70.

11. Basinger, p. 71.

12. Basinger, p. 69, abridged.

13. Basinger, p. 75.

14. Basinger, p. 75.

15. The rock-bottomness of religious belief, as I intend it, precludes religious belief from being ultimately justified by being "grounded" in experience. To suppose otherwise would be to subject religious belief to an epistemic rule which justified it *because* grounded in experience. This, though, leaves open the possibility of an internal *religious* practise of appealing to experiential grounds.

16. A view of religion bearing some similarity to the one presented here can be found in, John H. Whittaker, *Matters of Faith and Matters of Principle, Religious Truth Claims and Their Logic* (San Antonio; Trinity University Press, 1981). Undoubtedly the content of the last few paragraphs reminds readers of Wittgenstein and epistemological views attributed to him by some of his proclaimed followers. I confess to a debt to Wittgenstein, but wish to isolate the view presented here from various theses often associated with Wittgenstein concerning meaning, truth, and the meaning of "God," which I would not be interested in endorsing.

17. In addition they are not "grounded." See note 15.

18. This is not to say that there aren't believers of a different sort from those I am describing, but these are relatively few, and tend to be philosophers, anyway.

19. My criticism of Wykstra and Basinger applies as well to Plantinga's view that religious belief is *properly basic*. (See, Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous*, 15 (1981), reprinted in *Rowe and Wainwright*, pp. 417-26. That is because Plantinga seems to maintain that properly basic religious belief is *grounded* in experience, in a way that suggests the typical functioning of a natural faculty, or something very much like it, for forming such beliefs. In addition, Plantinga seems eager to show the justification of religious belief in a rule-epistemological way, by implicitly appealing to a rule to the effect that it is rational to form beliefs on the basis of our experiences. This makes religious belief hierarchically posterior to rules of rationality. For similar reasons, my view differs from that of William Alston in "Religious Diversity and Perceptual Knowledge of God," *Faith and Philosophy*, 5 (1988), 433-48.

20. Laurence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 8.

21. See, Gary Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1985), p. 100.

22. Methodological conservatism, please note, would not help justify religious belief in the face of religious diversity, for it could not justify the firmness and tenacity with which religious belief is so often held. Even the most ardent supporters of the principle would no doubt recognize its validity only in the context of open and ongoing inquiry.

23. See, Gutting, pp. 101-2.

24. I do not mean to imply that his being justified in believing (4) necessarily depends upon his ability to answer this question. We would expect an epistemologist, however, to have thought about the issue.

25. The same conclusion would follow were the epistemologist to say that the reason for his thinking that (4) is true is that it seems self-evident to him.

26. See, Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" *Nous*, 15 (1981). Reprinted in *Rowe and Wainwright*, pp. 417-26.

27. *Rowe and Wainwright*, p. 423.

28. I wish to thank David Wideker for his helpful comments and suggestions.

29. This study was written, in the main, while the author was a fellow at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, in the summer of 1991.