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AGATHEISM AS A GLOBAL PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

ABSTRACT. The fact of pervasive pluralism of religious traditions and of the belief systems associated with these traditions is today - in the era of an easy access to information about the religious beliefs and practices of 'religious aliens' - the main epistemic challenge to the rationality of religious belief. Each way of responding to these challenge that has been tried over the last few decades (including the responses of A. Plantinga, R. Swinburne, K. Rahner, J. Hick et al.) provoke further philosophical and theological critiques. In a widely discussed article published two years ago in the 'European Journal for Philosophy of Religion', Peter Millican, a philosophy professor at Oxford University, utilizing the data provided by an Oxford empirical psychologist, Branden Thornhill-Miller, argues that "contradictions between different religious belief systems, in conjunction with the host of defeaters based on empirical research concerning alleged sources of evidence for 'perceived supernatural agency', render all 'first-order', that is actual, religious traditions positively irrational...". A number of eminent philosophers of religion responded to Millican, but none of these responses seems to be convincing.

This state of the debate in the epistemology of religious belief provides the point of departure of my own comprehensive proposal to ground the defense of rationality of religious belief on a different basis than it has been traditionally done (by reference to 'theistic arguments', as done by R. Swinburne, to 'religious sense' or 'sensus divinitatis', as done by A. Plantinga, to religious experience, as done by W. P. Alston, or to the 'tradition' and/or the religious authority, as done by L. Zagzebski). I hold that it is possible to defend rationality of religious belief under the condition of religious pluralism by attending to an axiologically grounded religious belief that I refer to as 'agatheism' or 'religion of the *good* ('*to agathon*' in Greek), since it identifies the Ultimate Reality religiously conceived with the ultimate good which is postulated as a transcendental condition of our axiological consciousness through which we perceive and evaluate the goods at which our actions are aimed and towards which our hopes are directed. Agatheism conceives the Absolute as *Agatheos* by attributing to it first and foremost the characteristic of perfect goodness (but *not necessarily* all the other attributes of God of the Western classical theism, since 'agatheism' it is a 'thinner' concept than 'theism', capturing the agathological core of a broad range of religious concepts of the Absolute). Most importantly, agatheism ascribes to the Ultimate Reality the function of being the ultimate ground and ultimate end (*telos*) of all that is good, thus making sense of the teleological and value-laden nature of our selfconsciousness, of our thinking about our existence as of self-conscious, rational and free persons whose actions are explained by reference to value-laden reasons, not merely to efficient physical causes. Thus agatheistic religious belief is grounded primarily in the considerations of the 'facts' about our own value-laden self-consciousness, and only secondarily in the considerations of the facts about the physical universe. As such, it locates itself in the proximity of the line of thinking about the Absolute represented by Plato, Augustine, Kant and Newman, but some of its distinctive features

are shaped by the new awareness of the significance of pluralism of religious beliefs and value systems as a major challenge to a peaceful and solidary human coexistence in the global age.

Arguably, agatheistic religious belief so conceived is explicitly or implicitly presupposed in most first-order religious traditions as their doxastic core. As I will argue, such belief can be shown to be at least "not obviously unreasonable", while it can in turn ground other, more specific, beliefs of a given religious tradition, making its belief system – if internally coherent

- rationally grounded. The fact of diversity of religious belief systems will be explained by postulating that religion is a space of the exercise of *agathological imagination*, i.e., this dimension of the faculty of practical reason which is intentionally directed towards the ultimate good (of no choice of ours) and guides our mental activity leading to value judgments by imagining and comparing alternatives as more or less optimal, relative to our sense of the good as a transcendental limetic concept) are thus taken to be the expressions of various visions of what their adherents consider to be the optimal ways of conceiving human potentialities vis-a-vis the Ultimate Reality as the ultimate good towards which their existence is directed. To put it differently, on an agatheistic account of religion, various religious belief systems are products of human agathological imagination, which guided by the fundamental religious belief identifying the Absolute with the ultimate good, searches for the optimal conceptualisation of the nature of the Absolute and its relation to the world and humanity, attempting to approximate the human view of the matter to the 'God's eye view'. As such, agathological imagination, as an imaginative dimension of reason, when active in the realm of religious belief, follows the logic of perfect being philosophy, especially the principle *Deus semper melior* – 'God is always better' [than we can imagine], imagining what kind of God or the Ultimate Reality would be greater, in the sense of 'more good', and what kind of relation between such God and the world would be consistent with the nature of God so conceived. What can make such a mode of deliberation something more than a purely fideistic exercise in utopian thinking, is linking it to the question of the teleological character of our axiological consciousness that is always directed towards some 'good', towards 'what ought to be', towards something that always transcends the facts about the physical universe ('what is'), and therefore cannot be explained by these facts alone, because it is not possible to derive values solely from the facts about the physical universe. Thus in order to make sense of the value-laden way we perceive reality as the world-for-us, and to give our existence some ultimate meaning, it may be necessary to postulate there being some ultimate good which is the ultimate source and the ultimate end of all that is good, and explains the teleological good-orientedness of our consciousness.