

## PLURALISM AND JUSTIFIED RELIGIOUS BELIEF: A RESPONSE TO GELLMAN

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I have argued previously (in this journal) that the reality of pervasive religious pluralism obligates a believer to **attempt** to establish her perspective as the correct one. In a recent response, Jerome Gellman maintains that the believer who affirms a 'religious epistemology' is under no such obligation in that she need not subject her religious beliefs to any 'rule of rationality'. In this paper I contend that there do exist **some** rules of rationality (some epistemic obligations) that must be acknowledged—and satisfied—within all epistemic systems (including all religious epistemic systems) and that for this reason Gellman's critique of my position fails.

What is the proper epistemic relationship between evidence and religious belief? **Must** justified religious belief be based on propositional evidence on some sort? Can such evidence be justifiably ignored? Or does the truth lie somewhere in between?

According to those currently labeled evidentialists, justified religious belief must be based on propositional evidence in the sense that the believer must be able to produce some sort of argument or positive reason for such belief. That is, justified religious belief **must** have epistemic credibility (warrant) conferred on it by other propositions whose epistemic status is not in question.

However, an increasing number of philosophers of religion now argue that one can justifiably hold religious beliefs without basing such beliefs on propositional evidence of any type. Alvin Plantinga, for instance, maintains that religious beliefs, for many, are justifiably acquired in a manner analogous to the way our perceptual or auditory beliefs are acquired: we simply find ourselves believing them.<sup>1</sup>

Those in this category agree that alleged counterevidence must be considered. But they maintain that for a theist to retain justified religious beliefs, she need identify no positive reason to think they are true—she need not engage in "positive apologetics." She is obligated only to defend herself against the claim that these beliefs are false.

In a previous discussion in this journal, I argued that the truth lies somewhere in between.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to deny, I maintained, the reality of pervasive religious diversity (pluralism)—the fact that individuals who appear to be equally sincere and knowledgeable often affirm differ-



ent and sometimes incompatible religious beliefs. However, we also know from experience, I pointed out, that belief conflicts (including religious belief conflicts) **at times** exist simply because those involved have failed to consider all the relevant data to which they have access. And accordingly, I concluded, if the goal of a theist is to **maximize 'truth' and minimize 'error'**, the reality of pervasive religious pluralism prohibits her from justifiably choosing to retain a purely defensive posture. She is rather under a *prima facie* obligation "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 beliefs can be made."<sup>3</sup>

In a recent article in this journal, Jerome Gellman has challenged this contention.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, much of what he argues is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of my position. After noting correctly that I believe that the reality of pervasive pluralism requires the knowledgeable theist to attempt to resolve this conflict, he concludes that I therefore also believe that unresolved religious diversity renders "religious belief epistemically defective."<sup>5</sup> Specifically, as he sees it, I do not believe only that a theist must enter the arena of positive apologetics, I also believe that if a theist cannot find "discriminational evidence" favoring her position, her position is not epistemically legitimate.<sup>6</sup>

But this is something I do **not** hold. After making my case for **attempted** conflict resolution in my original essay, I went on to note that "this raises two distinct, but related questions. Can the pluralistic challenge be resolved? That is, can we determine which set of formed religious beliefs is true or most worthy of affirmation? And either way, **can a theist justifiably continue to maintain . . . such beliefs without possessing positive reasons for believing they are true?**"<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, with respect to this latter question, I concluded that for the "theist who can find no compelling public or private evidential basis for holding . . . that her specific beliefs alone are true," there is a "nonevidential manner in which she can resolve the pluralistic challenge for herself" and thus continue to "maintain justifiably that her formed beliefs are" true. Specifically, I argued that "if a theist who has comparatively analyzed the various competing sets of religious (and nonreligious) truth claims in an attempt to resolve the pluralistic challenge has not uncovered any compelling evidential basis for affirming hers," then "she is justified in resolving the conflict in her favor by an appeal to personal preference—a feeling (itself a basic, formed belief) that the set of basic religious truth claims she has found formed in her better organizes and explains the relevant components of reality than any other."<sup>8</sup>

In short, I explicitly meant to deny that which Gellman claims I affirm. He correctly notes that I believe that the reality of religious diversity places the sincere, knowledgeable theist under a *prima facie* obligation to attempt to resolve this conflict. But he is wrong to maintain that I also believe that the theist who cannot produce evidence that **actually** resolves the conflict in her favor should for this reason be considered to hold beliefs that are epistemically defective in some way.

And this misunderstanding undermines some of his criticism of my

position. For example, after noting that there exists as much unresolved diversity (epistemic conflict that cannot be resolved by evidential considerations) on moral and socio-political issues as on religious issues, he argues that, **since I believe that religious belief is rendered epistemically defective by such diversity**, I must also make the extremely counterintuitive acknowledgement that our moral and socio-political beliefs are rendered defective for the same reason.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, after noting that unresolved diversity does not exist just within theistic systems but also between theists and nontheists, he argues that, **since I believe that religious belief is rendered epistemically defective by such diversity**, I must acknowledge that "no one [can] form any epistemically justified beliefs about any religious matter."<sup>10</sup>

However, as just noted, I do not contend that **religious belief is rendered epistemically defective by unresolved diversity**. Thus, although I do agree that epistemic conflicts that cannot be resolved by evidential considerations arise in relation to almost all significant moral, social, and/or religious issues, I am under no epistemic obligation to acknowledge that no one can consequently hold justified beliefs about these matters.

Gellman does, though, raise one objection that is **in part** relevant to my actual position and thus deserving of a response. As he sees it, I am a rule epistemologist. That is, I believe that epistemology is solely a matter of finding the right rules—universally quantified propositions "which [state] 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 obligation with regard to one's given epistemic situation"—and then applying these rules correctly to specific beliefs.

Specifically, according to Gellman, I affirm the following three rules:

"(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."<sup>11</sup>

Gellman does not deny that a religious believer can justifiably affirm a rule epistemology. But he does deny that any believer need do so and offers as an legitimate alternative what he labels a 'religious epistemology'.

While rule epistemologists believe that justified religious beliefs acquire their warrant in some sense from other, more basic propositions, religious epistemologists consider many of their religious beliefs to be "**epistemically rock-bottom**," which is to say that they are **not** "derived from any other proposition." They are just accepted as true; they possess "epistemic unconditionality." Moreover, while rule epistemologists believe that their 'rules of rationality' must be identified prior to and independently of any decision that religious belief is justified, religious

epistemologists believe their rock bottom religious beliefs to be **strongly prior**. That is, unlike rule epistemologists, they believe that "religious belief is *prior* to the consideration of rules of rationality" in the sense that their "rules of rationality are not applied to [their] rock-bottom religious beliefs." Rather, their "religious beliefs become the very **rock-bottom** of [their] epistemological apparatus." Such beliefs are "no longer vulnerable to assessment," but are instead "the starting points of assessment" in the sense that the epistemic status of other beliefs depends upon their compatibility with this basic religious epistemic foundation.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, Gellman argues, there exists no set of neutral, nonquestion-begging epistemic criteria in relation to which it can be demonstrated that rock-bottom, strongly prior religious belief is not epistemically justified—that is, it cannot be shown that a religious epistemology is in any sense less epistemically legitimate than is a rule epistemology. And, accordingly, he concludes, it is clearly not true that to retain justified religious belief a believer need satisfy any rule of rationality that I have—or could—set forth. Specifically, a believer need not attempt to produce positive reasons for her position when faced with diversity of belief. If she chooses to be a religious epistemologist, she can simply believe justifiably that she is right. Her beliefs become "acceptable for [her] on account of being the propositions that they are."<sup>13</sup>

Part of Gellman's argument is again based on his misunderstanding of my position. As noted, I do not (and did not in the article in question) maintain that "epistemic parity obligates one to find discriminational evidence for one side or the other" or that "it is not rational to believe without evidence or without relying on one's natural faculties."

However, I am a rule epistemologist in the sense that I do believe that for religious belief to be justified certain epistemic criteria must be satisfied. Specifically, I do claim that the sincere, knowledgeable theist must in the face of pluralism **attempt** to resolve this epistemic stalemate if she is to retain rationality. Thus, if Gellman is correct in his contention that a religious epistemologist need not attempt to satisfy **any** rule of rationality, he has indeed presented a valid challenge to my position.

But as I explicitly state in my initial article, I am interested in the epistemic status of those who wish to maximize truth and avoid error. And while I agree with Gellman that a believer need not consider herself subject to all (or even many) of the rules of rationality that epistemologists have proposed, and also that she need not acknowledge any rules of rationality that are external to and totally independent of her religious belief system, I continue to deny that **any** believer concerned with truth can justifiably contend that she is exempt from all rules of rationality. That is, I **do** continue to maintain that there exist some rules of rationality (some epistemic obligations) that must be acknowledged—and satisfied—within all epistemic systems (including all religious epistemic systems) in which an acknowledged goal is to maximize truth and avoid error.

For instance, while there may have been (or may be) some individuals who have actually believed (actually believe) that their religious beliefs need not be self-consistent, I deny that anyone who wishes to maximize truth and avoid error—who wishes to maintain that her beliefs are more

likely true than not—**could** actually affirm this position.

Likewise, I believe it is equally self-stultifying, and thus just as epistemically illegitimate, for any individual **who claims to be interested in maximizing truth** to acknowledge significant epistemic peer conflict—to acknowledge that a significant number of seemingly sincere, knowledgeable individuals hold differing perspectives on a given issue—and yet maintain that she is under no *prima facie* epistemic obligation to even attempt to resolve this conflict. And it is on the basis of this general ‘rule of rationality’ that I continue to contend that a person who acknowledges unresolved religious diversity—who acknowledges that knowledgeable, sincere individuals continue to arrive at different religious conclusions—cannot claim to be interested in maximizing truth and avoiding error and yet refuse to **attempt** to resolve this conflict in her favor.

If I am correct, then Gellman’s criticism of my actual position is at the very least inadequate. But am I correct in assuming that a believer must commit herself to the maximization of truth, and if so, that she must acknowledge some internal ‘rules of rationality’ with which all of her beliefs must be consistent, and if so, that she must include among these rules the obligation to attempt to resolve disputes among epistemic peers in her favor?

It seems to me that to be a religious believer requires a commitment to the maximization of truth. But even if I am wrong, I do not believe it can be denied that the vast majority of believers (including those Gellman labels religious epistemologists) would gladly admit that they are, at least in principle, committed to the maximization of truth. Moreover, and most importantly, while I believe Gellman is absolutely correct to argue that believers are not required to test their beliefs by many of the ‘rules of rationality’ that have been proposed by epistemologists—for example, by the ‘rule’ that “it is not rational to believe without evidence”—I do not see how he can deny (if in fact he really does) that the justified beliefs of any truth-seeking believer must satisfy **some** ‘rules of rationality’. I do not see, for instance, how Gellman (or anyone) could argue convincingly that a truth-seeking believer is not required to avoid the simultaneous affirmation of beliefs acknowledged to be inconsistent.<sup>14</sup>

Now, of course, whether the specific epistemic obligation in question—that truth-seekers ought to attempt to resolve epistemic peer conflict—ought to be included in this set of mandatory epistemic guidelines **is**, I acknowledge, a debatable issue. But since I do not believe that it can be denied that truth-seekers must acknowledge **some** fundamental rules of rationality, I do not consider Gellman’s claim that justified, rock-bottom religious beliefs need not satisfy **any** rule of rationality to be defensible and thus a valid challenge to my position.

Accordingly, I remain unrepentant. A believer need not actually resolve epistemic conflicts in her favor to retain justified belief. But negative apologetics alone—solely defending one’s beliefs from external attack—I continue to maintain is not enough. The reality of pluralism does place the knowledgeable believer under at least the *prima facie*

obligation to enter the arena of positive apologetics.

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#### NOTES

1. Alvin Plantinga, "Justification and Theism," *Faith and Philosophy* 4 (October, 1987).
2. David Basinger, "Plantinga, Pluralism and Justified Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy* 8 (1991): 67-80.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
4. Jerome Gellman, "Religious Diversity and the Epistemic Justification of Religious Belief," *Faith and Philosophy* 10 (July, 1993): 345-364. (Intertwined in his critique of my position is also a critique of Stephen Wykstra's discussion of this issue in "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.)
5. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 354.
7. Basinger, p. 75.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
9. Gellman, pp. 350-51.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 352.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 354.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 355-57.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 356-57.
14. This is not to say that some theists do not acknowledge simultaneously certain beliefs that they maintain are incompatible from our human perspective. But even these individuals are careful to point out that the beliefs in question are not **really** contradictory. See, for instance, my "Biblical Paradox: Does Revelation Challenge Logic?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (June, 1987): 205-13.