СОВРЕМЕННЫЕ ДИСКУРСЫ

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On Roger Pouivet's Religious Exclusivism

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In the contemporary discussion of religious diversity, religious exclusivism is a minority theory but well defended by some leading philosophers of religion like Alvin Plantinga. Recently, in his article, The Right to Believe that Only One Religion is True, published recently in "Philosophy of Religion: Analytic Researches", Roger Pouivet has defended a version of religious exclusivism based on the assumption of theological realism. In this article, I discuss Pouivet's religious exclusivism with a dual purpose. On the one hand, accepting the premises of theological realism, I agree with Pouivet's view that religious exclusivism is not a blatant expression of arrogance about religious diversity but a plausible theory that can be justified in the light of the contemporary debate on epistemology of religious disagreement. On the other hand, I sustain that theological realism supports religious exclusivism as well as religious inclusivism, but the latter is a more consistent theory, capable of avoiding the soteriological problems raised by the first. In this perspective, I suggest that religious inclusivism is properly supported by natural theology insofar as the latter relates to divine attributes which are common to various religious traditions. Accordingly, natural theology must not be reduced, like Pouivet thinks, to a philosophical theology that assumes the immediate rationality of religious beliefs, guaranteed by the way they are formed. On the contrary, I suggest that natural and philosophical theology can work together, in their distinction, to rationally justify theistic faith and the belief that only one religion is true. In the light of the aforesaid one can believe that the issue of the correlation between philosophical theology and natural theology has sound methodological significance in various contexts of studies in philosophy of religion.

Keywords: Religious exclusivism, Religious Disagreement, True Religion, Religious Inclusivism

> However much all things may be 'so and not so', still there is a more and a less in the nature of things; for we should not say that two and three are equally even, nor is he who thinks four things are five equally wrong with him who thinks they are a thousand. If then they are not equally wrong, obviously one is less wrong and there more right. If then that which has more of any quality is nearer the norm, there must be some truth to which the more true is nearer.
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> Aristotle, *Meth.*, IV, 4, 1009a (transl. by W.D. Ross)

In the third chapter of his book *Épistémologie des croyances religieuses*[1], Roger Pouivet defends epistemological realism in theology and philosophy of religion[2]. In the final part of this chapter, he applies theological realism to the problem of religious diversity and defends religious exclusivism[3]. More recently, in the article *The Right to Believe that Only One Religion is True*[4], he has extended and clarified this defense in the light of the epistemology of religious disagreement.

In my paper I want to do three things. 1) On the basis of the two texts just mentioned, to offer a summary of Pouivet's religious exclusivism. 2) To show its plausibility in the view of the epistemology of religious disagreement. 3) To discuss some aspects of Pouivet's defense of religious exclusivism. I am quite sympathetic to the position of Pouivet, but I also think that, on this topic, there is room for a friendly discussion.

1. According to theological realism, religious diversity means above all diversity of beliefs, namely doctrinal diversity. Religions affirm as true different states of affairs. Does this diversity necessarily imply the incompatibility of religious beliefs? According to Pouivet, yes. Christianity affirms that God is personal; Buddhism denies it. Either it is true that God is personal or not. Christianity affirms that Christ is the Son of God; Islam denies it. Either it is true that Christ is the Son of God or he is not. Affirmation and denial cannot both be true, and therefore only one religion can be true, while others can only be false. The only way to avoid this exclusivistic conclusion seems to give up theological realism. Some religious experiences give a vague description of the Divine and, consequently, their religious

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[1] This paper has been presented at the first seminar on *Epistemology of Theism*, organized by P. Clavier and R. Pouivet, in Nancy (Université de Lorraine), June 18–20, 2019. I thank Roger Pouivet and P. Clavier for the invitation to this seminar and the discussion of the paper. I also thank Roberto Di Ceglie for his helpful remarks.

   R. Pouivet, *Épistémologie des croyances religieuses*, Cerf, Paris 2013.

[2] He summarizes the meaning of epistemological realism in theology and philosophy of religion by means of four thesis: "a. certaines affirmations religieuses fondamentales sono factuelles et non pas seulement expressives; b. ces affirmations sont rendues varies par des états de choses non épistémiques (la façon dont est le monde) plutôt que par des standards de 'justification idéale'; c. ce qui existe est indépendant de la connaissance et de la volonté humaines; d. nous pouvons, en principe, avoir de croyances vraies sur ce qui existe indépendamment de la connaissance et de la volonté humaines" (p. 215).

[3] See *ibid.*, cap. III, § 6, *La vraie religion e l'arrogance épistémique*, pp. 204 ss.

[4] Published in "Philosophy of Religion: Analytic Researches", 3 (2019), 2, pp. 87–96. It is the paper read by Pouivet during the last Conference of European Society for Philosophy of Religion (Prague, August 2018).

doctrines cannot be longer understood as correct descriptions, however analogical, of God's nature. This is a feasible way of assuring the compatibility of different religious experiences and doctrines[5]. The Kantian distinction between *noumenon* and *phenomenon* offers a good tool for relativizing our assertions about God's nature. For example, John Hick's religious pluralism, based on a type of Kantian antirealism, hidden under the name of "critical realism", follows this path.

However, religious exclusivism has to deal with the objection of being intolerant, that is, to favor a morally repulsive attitude. This accusation depends, in turn, on that of epistemic arrogance: an exclusivist is intolerant because he claims to be the only one to be right.

Pouivet replies to the first objection by distinguishing between doctrinal exclusivism, for which there is only one true religion and the others are false, religious exclusivism in a proper sense, for which there is only one relevant religious affiliation, and soteriological exclusivism, for which salvation depends on belonging to the true religion. Doctrinal exclusivism does not imply the other two forms of exclusivism but is compatible with religious and soteriological inclusivism. Hence, from the premise that there is only one true religion, you cannot infer the conclusion that anyone should belong to the latter, and salvation would be guaranteed who belongs to it. Since faith is a gift of God, and no one can be forced to believe, religions other than the true one must be tolerated. Moreover, salvation is decided only by God and not by those who believe in true religion.

Pouivet defends doctrinal exclusivism from the objection of intellectual arrogance through two arguments: the first argues that, at least for those who are Christian, the knowledge of true religion is given by God through revelation. Therefore, it is rather an act of intellectual humility than arrogance. Humility is also a virtue in an epistemic sense; in this case, it enables the believer to accept a truth offered by God[6]. The second argument moves from the rejection of what Pouivet calls the "Principle of Intellectual Conciliation". According to this principle, when epistemic peers disagree, confidence in the justification of one's own beliefs should be diminished or suspended to find an intellectual conciliation. Pouivet claims that this principle is just the reformulation of one of the arguments of classical skepticism (the fifth mode of Agrippa) and that it does not work in religious beliefs.

If we take the case of the belief in the Trinity, writes Pouivet, "there are (…) no neutral data, common to epistemic peers, from which the belief in the Trinity derives. The reason is that no one has a belief in the Trinity as a result of certain observations and disposition, allowing him to judge whether it is appropriate or not to believe in Trinity"[7]. In this case, as in others, religious faith implies a radical epistemic difference. Having the same cognitive abilities or the same degree of information does

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[5]   "C'est sur la base d'une description nébuleuse du divin qu'est assurée ainsi la compatibilité fondamentale des religions" (p. 206).

[6]   The virtue of humility is particularly significant for avoiding what Pouivet calls "epistemic Pelagianism". See R. Pouivet, *L'éthique intellectuelle, Une épistémologie des vertus*, Vrin, Paris, 2020, p. 288.

[7]   R. Pouivet, *The Right to Believe that Only One Religion is True*, cit., p. 92.

not reduce the epistemic diversity between the believer and the unbeliever, since "*having faith* is not about drawing a conclusion or ending from certain data or abilities"[8]. Whoever believes in the Trinity does not stop believing it because someone else does not believe it. Hence, what from the principle of intellectual conciliation appears as an act of intellectual arrogance, that is a vice, from the religious faith is an act of intellectual courage, that is a virtue.

2. Pouivet's defense of doctrinal exclusivism is quite convincing in the light of the epistemology of religious disagreement. As we know, in this field, the confrontation is between a conciliatory position and a steadfast position[9]. Pouivet supports the latter with good arguments. Sustainers of the conciliatory position incline to idealize the conditions of intellectual disagreement and overestimate the notion of epistemic parity. However, it is not easy to establish to what extent two interlocutors have equal intellectual abilities, are equally free of biases, and well informed or to what extent they have the same evidence. It is likely that, in real disagreements, epistemic asymmetry happens very often.

Even assuming that there are indeed epistemic peers, the fact that a supposed epistemic disagrees with me does not mean, as Richard Feldman thinks[10], that her disagreement offers a higher degree of evidence to suspend my belief. It might be that my interlocutor, however intelligent and well informed, makes merely a mistake because something prevents her from adequately assessing the evidence at his disposal! Moreover, the principle of intellectual conciliation is self-refuting: having acknowledged that supposed epistemic peers disagree with this principle, whoever supports it, based on the principle itself, should abandon it…

According to epistemological realism, it is coherent to accept the principle of uniqueness for which, given one's total evidence, there is a unique rational doxastic attitude that one can take to any proposition[11]. According to this principle, there is no room to think that, in certain circumstances, one can believe *p* and also not *p* or believe *p* and suspend the judgment on *p*. An objection to this principle could move from the fact that having evidence in religious matters is difficult, but it would be naive to argue that, on the contrary, it is easy to have it in science, morality, or politics. In all these areas, there are epistemic disagreements that are relevant and persistent, and yet their presence does not lead the interlocutors to abandon what they believe in. There is no reason to argue that religion should be an exception in this sense.

In the religious sphere, the principle of uniqueness legitimizes exclusivism, which is, in fact, the permanent attitude of those who have religious faith. If I am a Christian, I am not a Muslim or a Buddhist, and the mere fact that there are

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8   R. Pouivet, *The Right to Believe that Only One Religion is True*, cit., p. 93.
9   For a short introduction to this topic, see H. De Cruz, *Religious Disagreement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, 2018.
10   See R. Feldman, *Reasonable Religious Disagreements*, in L. Anthony (ed.), *Philosophers without gods*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, pp. 194–214.
11   See M. Benton, *Religious Diversity and Disagreement*, in M. Fricker, P.J. Graham, D. Henderson, N. Pedersen (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology*, Routledge, London, New York, 2019.

Muslims or Buddhists who are genuinely convinced of the truth of their religion does not give me any reason to weaken or abandon faith in the truth of mine. Only those who do not possess a religious faith can think that religious diversity represents in itself an objection to considering one religion as the only true. Religious pluralists deny exclusivism, but to justify their denial, they must either elaborate a philosophical metatheory that falls from above on religious beliefs and produces a different form of exclusivism or, if they belong to one religion, strive to make the doctrines of their religion compatible with the different ones. However, in the latter case, the price to pay is often that of an unorthodox interpretation of the religious doctrines. John Hick's religious pluralism or, more recently, the interreligious theology of Perry Schmidt-Leukel offer good examples of this[12].

In a nutshell, who considers only one religion to be true is not arrogant; she simply remains steadfast in her faith[13]. She may think of having private evidence that others do not have or epistemic luck or being worthy in the doxastic process that led her to have that faith[14]. Nor she is intolerant, because she recognizes that those who have a different religious faith, while wrong, are not necessarily guilty in this regard.

3. Now, I come to discuss two aspects of Pouivet's exclusivism. As we saw, according to theological realism, two incompatible religious doctrines cannot both be true. It seems obvious, but the incompatibility of two religious doctrines does not necessarily imply that only one religion is true being the other false. Exclusivism is a more comprehensive theory that does not simply follow from the incompatibility between two or more religious doctrines. Religions do also have compatible doctrines: for instance, Western monotheisms affirm all the existence of a unique God. If we refer to the uniqueness of God, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are not incompatible at all, but they are all true religions, that is, religions which, about this aspect, correctly describe God. More generally, the properties attributed by theists to God (omnipotence, omniscience, moral goodness, eternity, etc.) are usually shared by Christians as well as by Jews and Muslims.

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[12] For this latter author, see P. Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism & Interreligious Theology. The Gifford Lectures – An Extended Edition*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2017. Moreover, such an unorthodox interpretation gives evidence of an ironic fact observed by G. D'Costa, that is, that pluralists are "eventually intolerant towards most forms of orthodox religious belief, Christian or otherwise". See G. D'Costa, *The Impossibility of the Pluralist View of Religions*, in "Religious Studies", 32 (1996), 2, pp. 223–232, p. 229.

[13] At first glance, the coexistence between humility and dogmatism seems paradoxical. Nevertheless, there is no contradiction between being aware of the existence of the absolute truth, and being aware that our knowledge of it remains qualitatively distinct from divine wisdom. About this issue, see N. Trakakis, *The Paradox of Humility and Dogmatism*, in T. Dougherty, J.P. McBrayer (eds.), *Skeptical Theism. New Essays*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 2014, pp. 85–100, who refers to Eastern Orthodox Christian theology and in particular to Maximus the Confessor.

[14] See A. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2000, p. 457; P. Van Inwagen, *'It is Wrong, Always, Everywhere, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything, Upon Insufficient Evidence'*, in J. Jordan and D. Howard-Snyder (eds.), *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality*, Rowman and Littlefield, Hanham, MD 1996, pp. 137–154.

As Peter Geach has clarified, "the term 'God' is not a proper name but a descriptive term"[15]. Descriptions can be partially true in that they grasp only certain aspects of a specific state of affairs. Therefore, according to Geach, "we need not doubt that (…) people may succeed in relating their thoughts to the true God even though they have a partly erroneous view of his attributes"[16]. If it is true, it seems that theological realism endorses more a doctrinal inclusivism than a doctrinal exclusivism. According to doctrinal inclusivism, there is only one true religion that fully describes God's nature, but not all religions other than the true one are simply false since some refer partially correct to the true God. Using the terminology of J. Searle, one could say that the only true religion offers a fully consummated reference to God, while the others offer a more or less successful reference as well as an unsuccessful reference[17].

Nevertheless, I do not mean, as V. Solov'ev has claimed, by adopting an evolutionary view of the history of religions, that the concept of "false religion" is a "*contradictio in adjecto*"[18]. If this were true, the phenomenon of idolatry would be impossible. On the contrary, idolatry is always possible because, as Geach clarifies, "a sufficiently erroneous thought of a God will simply fail to relate to the true and living God at all"[19].

So, once admitted that ignorance of the true God is always possible and dangerous, even when it is not guilty, and that love for God and his worship are not independent of his intellectual knowledge[20], it seems that the line dividing the knowledge

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[15] P. Geach, *God and the Soul*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1969, p. 108. Not all the Christian theologians agree with this thesis, by observing that, on some occasions, you can use the term as a proper name. For example, in expressions like "the God of Jesus Christ". However, you must specify some attributes of the God you are referring to for such a use.

[16] Ibid., p. 110.

[17] See B. Irleborn, *Religionstheologischer Inklusivismus. Eine philosophische Rechtfertigung*, in "Theologie und Philosophie", 86 (2011), pp. 161–181, p. 176.

[18] I refer to his lessons about Divine-Humanity, 1877–1881. The reference is taken from the Italian Translation, *Sulla Divinoumanità e altri scritti*, Jaca Book, Milano, 2017, p. 88.

[19] P. Geach, *God and the Soul*, p. 111.

[20] I assume that there is a sameness of worship only if believers refer to the same God. Nevertheless, the question about the sameness of reference is open. T. Bogardus and U. Mallorie, in their article, *How to Tell Whether Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God* ("Faith and Philosophy", 34 (2017), pp. 176–199), based on G. Evans' theory of reference (G. Evans, *The Variates of Reference*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1982), sustain that the sameness of worship depends on the "referent shift" that the word "God" suffers in its historical use. Each name word is associated with a body of information about its referent, which is a catalogue of characteristics that is called "dossier" by Evans. Referent shift concerns the dominant source of information in the name's dossier. So, in the Christians-Muslims case, "according to Evans' theory, whether Christians and Muslims refer to the same God with their uses of divine names will depend on whether the same object is the dominant source of information associated with each name-using practice" (*How to Tell Whether Christians and Muslims Worship the Same God*, p. 187). The information added to the dossier "God" by Christians or by Muslims can be reciprocally judged as spurious; in this case, there is no more sameness of reference and, therefore, sameness of worship. In short, we can have the following possibilities: "You might think there's been a reference shift in both cases, or in one but not in the other, or in neither case. If you think there's been a reference shift in both cases, then Christians and Muslims do not refer to – and so do not worship – the same God. If you think

of the true God from his total ignorance is difficult to establish. According to Geach, "where this line is to be drawn God only knows; but then it is God, not man, who has to draw the line"[21]. In this sense, doctrinal inclusivism offers a further and better reason for the tolerant attitude of religious inclusivism than that given by Pouivet. According to Pouivet, we should be tolerant of those who belong to religions other than the true one, because faith is a gift of God, and no one can be forced to believe in true religion. Nevertheless, according to doctrinal inclusivism, tolerance towards other religions can be justified by the partial truth of their faith in God, and therefore by their relationship, at different degrees, to the true religion[22]. Perhaps it is this partial truth, that is, the partial knowledge of God existing in religions other than the true one, which allows God to save those who belong to them in a way that is not purely arbitrary or "opaque"[23].

The second aspect I would like to address has to do with the role that natural theology plays in Pouivet's religious epistemology. In a passage from his book, he speaks of a transformation of "natural theology" into "philosophical theology" where "it is no longer a matter of justifying religious beliefs starting from non-religious beliefs, but of assuming the immediate rationality of religious beliefs,

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there's been a reference shift in one case but not the other, then whether Christians and Muslims refer to and worship the same God will depend on whether you think Islam or Christianity true. If you think there's been a reference shift in neither cases, then the path is open, on your view, for Christians and Muslims to refer to, and perhaps *worship*, the same God" (ibid., pp. 197–198). From a Christian point of view, we can speak of a partial referent shift due to the information added by Muslims into the dossier "God/Allah", which is spurious. Hence, Islam is not the true religion, even if, according to the part of the dossier "God" which is not modified, it is not completely false. So, common properties attributed both to "God" and "Allah" justify the partial reference to the same object by Christians and Muslims. As Bogardus and Mallorie observe, this way of using the generic divine name "God" in an attributive way shows a line of continuity between Aquinas, the Declaration of the Second Vatican Council *Nostra Aetate* and Geach.

[21] P. Geach, *God and the Soul*, p. 111.

[22] See B. Irleborn, *Religionstheologischer Inklusivismus. Eine philosophische Rechtfertigung*, cit.: "Der Inklusivismus erlaubt die Behauptung der Superiorität der eigenen Religion in Verbindung mit der Bestätigung der Möglichkeit des Heils auch für die Andersgläubigen durch eine Hierarchisierung, die abhängig ist von der Inklusion von eigenen religiösen Wahrheitsansprüchen im System der fremdreligiösen Wahrheitsansprüche" (p. 175).

[23] In my view, doctrinal inclusivism is also able to clarify the phenomenon of dual religious belonging, that is increasing in the present time because of the reality of religious diversity, even if I think that, in some cases, dual religious belonging only shows personal trouble to deal with religious diversity. However, if we seriously consider it, it's quite clear that dual religious belonging cannot be understood correctly in the sense of religious pluralism. It is not possible to belong at the same time to two religions that have contradictory beliefs. Other strategies of negotiation, like to shift from dual religious belonging to dual religious participation or develop a personal synthesis, have no great philosophical interest. Dual religious belonging seems only to make sense if the believer, in the light of one religion considered as completely true, considers a different religion as true as well, but just in respect of those beliefs or practices that are compatible with the first. The latter is indeed included in the first, but not identified with it. The result is that someone always belongs more to one religion than to another. For more details about this issue, see C. Cornille, *Strategies of Negotiation in Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging*, in G. D'Costa-Ross Thompson (eds), *Buddhist-Christian Dual Belonging: Affirmations, Objections, Explorations*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2016, pp. 143–158.

guaranteed by the way they are formed"[24]. In general, I think that the rehabilitation of the believer's epistemic rights against modern evidentialism is a necessary task of the epistemology of theism or philosophical theology in the sense in which Pouivet understands it, but it is not enough. Showing that there are good subjective reasons for believing in God is a too modest task for the theist if she renounces to share the rationality of her evidence to those who do not think so. Defending the epistemic warrant of faith through revelation, *sensus divinitatis* or religious experience is one thing. Giving a rational justification of faith, in an objective sense, is another. It seems to me that only natural theology can carry out this task[25].

Understood as an investigation of God's nature, natural theology contributes to settling the question of true religion. I think it can do it in two ways. The first is to correct confusing or erroneous representations about God in us and others. Once again, Geach remembers that "if anybody's thoughts about God are sufficiently confused and erroneous, then he will fail to be thinking about the true and living God at all"[26]. God can be thought in many ways, but not all are rationally consistent. The Anselmian definition of God and the theology of the perfect being that some analytical philosophers of religion have elaborated on its basis it seems to me the most successful attempt in this direction[27]. This definition clarifies much of what is confused or erroneous in the concept of God. In this way, perfect being theology does not imply the faith in a particular religion but significantly reduces the diversity of the conceptions of the divine and endorses religious monotheism.

The second way natural theology contributes to settling the question of true religion is the rational defense of the core beliefs of the true religion. Christian faith in the Trinitarian God, the Incarnation of Christ, the redemption from sins is neither demonstrable nor grounded rationally since these doctrines are revealed mysteries. Nevertheless, faith in such mysteries is rationally defensible. Their rational defense, taken as a whole, gives rise to a cumulative case for the truth of Christianity that does not force anyone to believe in the latter but rationally guarantees the claim for superiority or absoluteness raised by Christians. This defense aims at showing that the core beliefs of Christianity are not contradictory or inconsistent *in themselves*, not only that they originate from doxastic processes that respect basic epistemic obligations. In conclusion, it seems that a cumulative case for the truth of one religion is entirely consistent with the realism defended by Pouivet in theology and philosophy of religion.

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[24]   R. Pouivet, *Épistémologie des croyances religieuses*, p. 67: "La these selon laquelle nous devons croire pour comprendre modifie le projet de la théologie naturelle; elle le transforme en théologie philosophique. Il ne s'agit plus de justifier les croyances religieuses à partir de croyances non religieuses, mais d'assumer la rationalité immédiate des croyances religieuses, guaranties par leur mode de formation".

[25]   In his *Qu'est-ce que croire*, Vrin, Paris 2006 Pouivet writes that natural theology "à defaut d'être absolument concluante, doit être possible" (p. 58). I agree, even if the mere possibility of natural theology seems too little.

[26]   P. Geach, *God and the Soul*, p. 113.

[27]   Among others, see Th. V. Morris, *Our Idea of God. An Introduction to Philosophical Theology*, Regent College Publishing, Vancouver, 2002.

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