

# IMAGININGS

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*Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky*

*Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people living life in peace*

*(John Lennon)*

## I. IMAGINE

In Branden Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican's challenging and provocative essay, we hear a considerably longer, more scholarly and less melodic rendition of John Lennon's catchy tune — without religion, or at least without first-order supernaturalisms (the kinds of religion we find in the world), there'd be significantly less intra-group violence.<sup>1</sup> First-order supernaturalist beliefs, as defined by Thornhill-Miller and Peter Millican (hereafter M&M), are “beliefs that claim unique authority for some particular religious tradition

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1 While it is beyond the scope of my argument, I'd like to correct the authors' misconstrual of my views. Footnote 106 implies that I think that atheism is “abnormal and somehow deficient.” However, while I argue that atheism is abnormal in the technical sense of falling outside the norm, and that it is non-natural, in the technical sense that it is neither intuitive nor does it fall out easily from our typical belief processes, I explicitly reject the inference that atheism is somehow deficient. Modern science is both abnormal and non-natural and yet one who affirms it is not deficient.

in preference to all others” (3). According to M&M, first-order supernaturalist beliefs are exclusivist, dogmatic, empirically unsupported, and irrational. Moreover, again according to M&M, we have perfectly natural explanations of the causes that underlie such beliefs (they seem to conceive of such natural explanations as debunking explanations). They then make a case for second-order supernaturalism, “which maintains that the universe in general, and the religious sensitivities of humanity in particular, have been formed by supernatural powers *working through natural processes*” (3). Second-order supernaturalism is a kind of theism, more closely akin to deism than, say, Christianity or Buddhism. It is, as such, universal (according to contemporary *psychology* of religion), empirically supported (according to *philosophy* in the form of the Fine-Tuning Argument), and beneficial (and so justified *pragmatically*). With respect to its pragmatic value, second-order supernaturalism, according to M&M, gets the good(s) of religion (cooperation, trust, etc) without its bad(s) (conflict and violence). Second-order supernaturalism is thus rational (and possibly true) and inconducive to violence. In this paper, I will examine just one small but important part of M&M’s argument: the claim that (first-order) religion is a primary motivator of violence and that its elimination would eliminate or curtail a great deal of violence in the world. Imagine, they say, no religion, too.

Janusz Salamon offers a friendly extension or clarification of M&M’s second-order theism, one that I think, with emendations, has promise. He argues that the core of first-order religions, the belief that Ultimate Reality *is* the Ultimate Good (agatheism), is rational (agreeing that their particular claims are not) and, if widely conceded and endorsed by adherents of first-order religions, would reduce conflict in the world.

While I favor the virtue of intellectual humility endorsed in both papers, I will argue contra M&M that (a) belief in first-order religion is not a primary motivator of conflict and violence (and so eliminating first-order religion won’t reduce violence). Second, partly contra Salamon, who I think is half right (but not half wrong), I will argue that (b) the religious resources for compassion can and should come from within both the particular (often exclusivist) and the universal (agatheistic) aspects of religious beliefs. Finally, I will argue that (c) both are guilty, as I am, of the philosopher’s obsession with belief.

## II. RESPONSE TO M&M

Without re-presenting their entire case, I will highlight some of M&M's more supportive and suggestive remarks:

The dark side of the exclusivity and certainty that produces in-group cohesion is the conflict with out-groups and the common tendency to vilify the 'other' that it also creates (41).

But clearly supernatural belief systems — and those that involve *certainty* and *exclusivity* in particular — constitute a significant part of the problem, especially when (beyond the examples already cited) the mere implicit contextual presence of religious symbols is shown to increase intergroup bias even among the non-religious (42).

The rise over the past century of various forms of fundamentalist-style religious belief in response to globalisation has recently crescendoed, arguably becoming a defining characteristic and source of conflict in our age (43).

Relying on insights drawn from the cognitive and evolutionary psychology of religion, M&M argue that religion's cooperative and cohesive benefits did and do draw competitive individuals into increasingly larger and more successful social groups. Yet, they go on, in-group (friend, good, trust) creates out-group (enemy, bad, fear), which, in turn, leads to dehumanization, conflict, and, ultimately, violence. They assume, I think wrongly, that the very thing that creates in-group is the very thing that creates out-group, thus engendering violence.

Brief cautionary interlude. M&M repeatedly cite recent work in cognitive psychology and its more speculative sibling, evolutionary psychology. Let me offer a caution — while some studies do show this or that, many (perhaps most) do not.<sup>2</sup> The cognitive science of religion is in its infancy and evolutionary psychology is even infanter (yes, I just invented that term). If we were to apply the epistemology of disagreement to cognitive science of religion (CSR)

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2 See Harold Pashler and Eric-Jan Wagenmakers "Editors' Introduction to the Special Section on Replicability in Psychological Science: A Crisis of Confidence?" *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 7, no. 6 (2012); Stéphane Doyen et al., "Behavioral Priming: It's All in the Mind, but Whose Mind?" *PLOS ONE* 7, no. 1 (2012); Christine R. Harris et al., "Two failures to replicate high-performance-goal priming effects", *PLOS ONE* 8, no. 8 (2013); David R. Shanks et al., "Priming Intelligent Behavior: An Elusive Phenomenon", *PLOS ONE* 8, no. 4 (2013).

(as they do to first-order religion), we should be as skeptical of CSR as M&M are of first-order religion. I don't mean to reject all of the findings of CSR; but we should approach them with caution and affirm them with humility.

Back to the main argument. With cries of "Allahu Akbar" ringing in our ears, it's easy (if you try) to think that if (first-order) religion were eliminated, there'd be no more war. But, and here's my imagine: if religion were eliminated over night, we'd wake up to exactly (or nearly exactly) the same conflicts around the world. And these conflicts would persist because the root causes of the conflict, not being religion, would remain.

Let me ease into my claim. While M&M claim that "fundamentalist-style religious belief ...[is] ... arguably becoming a defining characteristic and source of conflict in our age", one wonders where the boundaries of "our age" lie. It's only a very short memory and, I believe, confirmation bias and bigotry aimed primarily at Muslims that lead us to think that religion lies at the heart of violence. M&M concede that secular motivations are often responsible for war; they write, "A war survey carried out by the BBC even suggests that *non*-religious absolutist ideologies and forms of tribalism have been responsible for more war, death, and destruction in recorded history than purely religious motivations" (42). But they immediately return to their claim that first-order religions *clearly* constitute a significant part of the problem (42). I think it's not so clear and recent history belies the claim.

The twentieth-century (arguably, "our age") was the bloodiest in human history, with casualties vastly exceeding any previous conflict. None of the bloodiest of these conflicts was motivated by religion. Mao Zedong, for example, is responsible for 30-80 million deaths, Hitler for 12 million in death camps and 60 million as a result of World War 2, Leopold II of Belgium for 8 million deaths, Joseph Stalin's gulags and purges and starvations killed 7 million, and Hideki Tojo of Japan, 5 million. I have omitted such notables as Pol Pot, Tito, Saddam Hussein, and Kim Il Sung. Not a single one motivated by religious belief. 9-11, I believe, has so clouded clear thinking on the causes of violence that we have already forgotten the bloodiest century in human history (and the non-religious causes of its conflicts).

Let me state clearly: while I think religion is not (or is seldom) the primary motivation for violence, it is or can be a secondary or tertiary motivation and a force multiplier. That said, I think religion's motivational role is

subservient to a human being's primary motivations to violence. Indeed, I think we should focus on these primary motivational causes of violence, not on religion's secondary role.

Why, then, are humans (sometimes) violent? I reject the claim that humans are inherently violent or that the human tendency to violence is more pronounced than their tendency to cooperation. However, I do believe that humans can be powerfully and primally motivated to violence under certain conditions. Let me lay out my basic argument.

Let me start with the evolution of cooperation. It's important to begin here because it demonstrates a substantial agreement with M&M on the role of religion in securing cooperation. My argument in outline:

- (1) Humans are disposed to favor *self* and *kin*.
- (2) With the advent of agricultural societies, specialized labor (cooperative benefits) and out-group fears (competition) required cooperation beyond kin (increasingly bigger *tribes*).
- (3) People behave in prosocial, cooperative ways when they think they are being watched.
- (4) Big Gods are agents that watch everything we do and that reward the righteous and punish the wicked.
- (5) People in societies with big Gods tend to be more prosocial (from (3) and (4)).<sup>3</sup>

Groups with increased prosocial, cooperative behavior win over less cooperative groups (conflict and competition combined to facilitate belief in big Gods).<sup>4</sup> Religion then, of the Big God sort, played a central role in securing human cooperation. So far, I think M&M and I are in agreement.

But we might part company here. What primarily motivated cooperation? I suspect the desire for food, say, and shelter and mates; not, as one

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3 See Ara Norenzayan, *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict* (Princeton Univ. Press, 2013).

4 See David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003).

might think, fear of God. While God-beliefs were essential in securing in-group, they were not the primary motivator. But God-beliefs did effectively secure and expand in-group (or so it seems, with all the cautions about the current state of affairs in cognitive and evolutionary psychology duly noted).

What, then, is the source of violence? I agree with M&M that in-group creates out-group and that in-group/out-group conflict is often the source of violence. However, I don't think it cognitively or evolutionarily warranted to think of religion as *a* or *the* primary or driving force of either in-group or out-group. What, then, are the human being's primary motivations (or causes) for violence? Here, in brief, is an outline of my argument:

- (1) Violence almost always originates in threats to self, kin and tribe (people typically fight over land, kin and food).
- (2) Threats to self-kin-tribe instinctively elicit fight or flight responses.
- (3) Religion, like other tribal markers, is not a primary cause of violence.
- (4) While tribal markers make identification of in-group (family, friend) and out-group (competitor, enemy) easier, they are not the primary motive in violence.

Let me develop this a bit more. We are, one and all, most primally concerned for our own *self*. Our own struggle for survival finds expression in our deepest needs and desires for food, say, and for mates. And when faced with human threats to self — say, someone stealing one's food or encroaching on one's land (our source of food) or preventing us from mating — one find an instinctual desire to fight (or flee if one senses one cannot win). Our most primal instinct to fight, then, is in response to *threats to self*.

Inclusive fitness has moved many species from exclusive concern for self to deep care and concern for kin. In a sense, the domain of *me* expanded evolutionarily to include *me* and *mine* — that is, kin. Human beings, then, have a deep sense of attachment to and trust in kin. This is reinforced by various social urges: we take pleasure in helping our offspring and feel pain when we see them hurt. When faced with human, non-kin threats to kin — if someone takes one's family's food or one's family's land or seeks to harm one's

child — we have a corresponding urge to fight (or flee). Our second most primal instinct to fight, then, is in response to *threats to kin*.

Finally, as noted in the above argument, we have cultivated pro-social behaviors in non-kin groups — *tribes*. Again, while religion played a role in ensuring in-group cooperation, the motivation for entering into non-kin groups was to secure cooperative benefits — we hunt and farm better in groups, there are more mates in groups, we fight better in groups (especially if we share a deep, common bond), the costs of child-rearing are best shared, etc. Big Gods bound selfish individuals and kin-loving families into flourishing non-kin communities. When faced with certain sorts of human threats to *tribe* — if another group raids one's storehouse of food, ransacks one's land, or seeks to enslave the group's members — we have a corresponding urge to fight (or flee). Our third most primal instinct to fight, then, is in response to *threats to tribe*.

In summary: Natural selection has equipped human beings with a predilection for violence under certain circumstances. Human beings fight, primarily, over threats to *self* (threats to food, water, land, mates, etc). Human beings fight, secondarily, over threats to *family*. And human beings fight, third, over threats to *tribe* (city, state, nation). Human beings are especially inclined towards violence when competition for food, land, mates, etc. is high. Moreover, and I won't belabor this, natural selection also equipped us to be concerned about social status; we have an inbuilt sense of shame and honor which is not easily assuaged. Finally, young adult males seem especially vulnerable to these pressures.

Threats to self, kin and tribe during times of intense competition over often scarce resources are the primary motivators of violence. Religion tags along as a tribal marker.

If religion were to magically disappear one night, we would wake up to continued violence if the original conditions that instigated the violence were still in place. If a group of people still fears for or has lost the lives of some of their people or their land, or if they have been shamed and are seeking honor, then they will feel the urge to fight. Suppose, instead, that everyone instantaneously converts to a second-order religion; if a group of people still fears for their lives or land, or if they have been shamed and are seeking honor, then they will feel the urge to fight. Unless the deeper sources of conflict have like-

wise magically disappeared, second-order religion will not reduce intergroup conflict or the urge to fight.

### III. RESPONSE TO SALAMON

As noted in the opening, I said that I thought Salamon's Agatheism is half right. But I want to work my way up to what I think is right about his claim. This will help us see what I think needs to be added to his claim.

Salamon concedes M&M's central epistemological claim that "the contradictions between divergent religious belief systems, in conjunction with new understandings of the cognitive forces that shape their common features, persuasively challenge the rationality of *most kinds* of supernatural belief" (1). He writes: "I will grant them most of their empirically grounded arguments designed to challenge the evidential basis of the first-order religions..." (206). But this is surely to grant too much.

While in common parlance we often attribute rationality and irrationality to beliefs, more properly and philosophically speaking, rationality and irrationality are properties of persons in relation to their beliefs (given certain epistemic situations). Take the belief that the earth is flat. Is it rational or irrational? We know it to be false, of course. Given that I know it to be false, it would be irrational for me to believe that the earth is flat. But surely it was rational for many human beings throughout most of human history to believe that the earth is flat. Even in our time, surely there are people who are (non-culpably) unaware of the evidence for the sphericity of the earth; such people would rationally believe that the earth is flat. But claiming that the belief that the earth is flat is irrational (independent of persons and their epistemic situations) makes little sense. It is rational for some people to believe in some circumstances and not for others. The claim that *the belief that the earth is flat is irrational* is simply nonsense.

Are first-order religions irrational? Again, independent of any particular persons in their particular epistemic situations, the claim that *most kinds of supernatural beliefs are irrational* is a nonsense claim. Even if indexed to the present, the claim that *in this day and age, most kinds of supernatural beliefs are irrational* is a nonsense claim.



Of course, we might charitably hold that M&M are really claiming that in this day and age, with our new understandings of psychology and philosophy and science, it would be irrational for most people in most epistemic situations to hold supernatural beliefs. But why think that? In order for the relevant scientific and philosophical considerations to constitute a defeater or a debunker of one's supernatural beliefs, one would have to be aware of them, understand their import, and not have a defeater-defeater for them. But hardly anyone is in that epistemic situation. Most people are unaware of Hume's argument against miracles, the epistemology of disagreement, the cognitive and evolutionary psychology of religion and/or the Fine-Tuning argument. In what sense, then, given most people's epistemic situations, are most people's first-order religious beliefs irrational? None I can see.

So I don't think there is any obvious epistemic need to jump from first-order to second-order religious beliefs. Nor, as I argued in the previous section, is there a pragmatic need.

Indeed, I believe that both good old-time first-order religion and something like Salamon's Agatheism are pragmatically necessary in the fight against tribal violence in the contemporary world. That is, while I don't think religion is fundamentally part of the problem, I think it can and should be part of the solution. And robbing religion of its first-order power would reduce its effectiveness in combatting violence (or subduing our very natural tendencies to violence in certain threatening circumstances).

As I see it, various forms of tribalism — nationalism, patriotism, imperialism, colonialism, genocide, wars — have co-opted religion for tribalistic ends. Tribalism is the driver and it has reshaped religion to its own self-serving ends.

Salamon, then, seeks to rescue the Good from self-serving religion. And to that I say, "Amen." All major religions have coalesced on the view that God is Good, that God is on the side of the Good, and that Good hates evil (I can't make the case here but I think that even the most esoteric religions, even the so-called atheistic religions like Buddhism, have been unable to resist Agatheism; something we should expect if CSR is correct). All major religions are Agatheistic. And so, there is this shared, universal, tribe-unspecific belief in Reality as Good. Religious leaders need to do a better job making religious believers motivationally (not merely cognitively) aware of the deepest content of their beliefs.

Even if the second-order religion of M&M were more rational and less conducive to tribalism, I don't see how it has the resources to motivate principled goodness towards those outside of one's tribe. Make no mistake, religion is but one identifying feature of tribes; as I've argued it's not even one of the most important. Getting rid of first-order religion will not get rid of tribes or tribalism. Indeed, given our instincts, I believe we'll never eliminate tribalism. Tribalism, like religion, "is so intuitive and so hard to eliminate even when the effort is made" (44). So if we wish for Goodness to spread and grow, we need to find ways to tame the tribal instinct which we can never kill.

For that, first-order religion may be essential. Salamon is keenly aware that M&M's morally bereft supernaturalism ignores, "the importance of a number of fundamental aspects of religious belief, such as (a) its soteriological/eschatological perspective presupposing some formulation of "what can I hope"...; (b) its metanoetic/transformational function...; and (c) its relational/inter-subjective character associated with religious attitude of worship and love, and presupposing freedom of assent" (216). With respect to (a)-(c), Agatheism is hands-down the winner. Indeed, (a)-(c) are in the province of first-order religion.

Moreover, as Salamon notes, first-order religion could even be rational. Indeed, I think for most people in most epistemic situation, most people rationally hold their first-order beliefs (but not, as Salamon claims, because the doxastic core of their first-order religion is internally coherent; I don't think rationality is a property of beliefs and I don't think coherence is either a necessary or a sufficient condition of a person's being rational (230)).

My suggestion is that we tap into particular first-order religious beliefs not simply for their underlying agatheism but also for their very particular understandings of and motivations to compassion and peace.

Let me speak for the Abrahamic traditions, which are often considered the worst re: violence. Christians need to understand and embrace Jesus's radically inclusive kingdom, not use Christianity as a tribal identifier and justifier of, say, exploitation of other's resources, unjust war or territorial expansion. Jews need to understand that YHWH chose them to take the news of God's compassionate and just nation to the world (and not keep the news to themselves). And Muslims need to understand that Allah forbids religious

coercion (Quran 2:256), and created religious diversity so that the various religious groups could outdo one another in good (Quran 49:13).

Demanding that religious believers abandon their traditions in favor of Fine-Tuning, second-order supernaturalism would deprive us of the resources of some of a religious person's most motivational beliefs.

#### IV. THE OBSESSION WITH BELIEF

Let me conclude with a confession. I, like most philosophers, have an obsession with belief. I've sinned thusly and boldly my entire career. M&M claim that if we can get humanity to give up its irrational first-order religious beliefs and endorse their second-order supernaturalism, the world will be a better place. Salamon holds that second-order supernaturalism is existentially defective and offers agatheistic belief as a richer alternative. In both instances, they hold that ridding ourselves of exclusivistic belief and replacing them with more universalistic beliefs, we will be less tribal and, hence, less prone to violence. But I've grown increasingly aware of the impotence of (most) beliefs. As Salamon puts his argument:

[T]o the extent to which various first-order religious traditions have as its core agatheistic belief conceived in the way just outlined, they are in no way bound to be a breeding ground for irrationality or intergroup conflict. (204)

I think this a mistaken or impoverished way of understanding religion. I'll be brief and suggestive here. Since individuals flourish when bound into other-regarding communities with shared norms and values, *rituals* in which individuals "lose their selves" facilitate one's sense of belonging to a community (hence, human flourishing). While philosophers focus on binding beliefs, social scientists study complex systems involving both beliefs and practices. Recent social scientific work suggests that other aspects of religious practice are/were essential means of creating and strengthening a harmonious moral community.<sup>5</sup> Recent social scientific research suggests that humans are cognitively constituted to morally respond to rituals. The experience of participating in rituals increases in-group affiliation to a greater degree than

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5 Jesse Graham and Jonathan Haidt, "Beyond Beliefs: Religions bind individuals into moral communities", *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 14, no. 1 (2010).

group activity alone.<sup>6</sup> Groups of individuals that walk, sing or dance together synchronously show greater liking, trust, cooperation, and self-sacrifice than groups performing the same behaviors while not in synchrony.<sup>7</sup> Religious rituals, socio-historically, are powerful means of securing cooperation, solidarity and success in intergroup competition.<sup>8</sup> Finally, corporate religious rituals reinforce commitment to moralizing high gods which, in turn, suppresses selfishness and increases cooperation.<sup>9</sup> Mutually reinforcing belief-ritual complexes expand community by galvanizing solidarity (maybe as extended family) and reinforce prosocial behavior by increasing trust.<sup>10</sup>

The bottom line: eliminating exclusivist *beliefs* will not break down tribalism's barriers. Cognitive psychology suggests that *knowing who we can trust* is more important in that regard than *knowing who shares our beliefs*. Knowing who we can trust is determined not primarily by belief but by showing commitment to the group in costly and/or regular ways. We are continually scanning individuals in our group for trustworthiness and violations of trust. The human family will expand only through more expansive rituals of trust and commitment, not through elimination of exclusivist belief. By focusing on belief, we are only skimming the surface of human motivation.

## V. CONCLUSION

Philosophers are obsessed with beliefs and trade in abstract metaphysics that stands at a huge existential distance from us more ordinary believers. For most of us, our most cherished beliefs are embedded in thick and rich traditional narratives that both inform and motivate. As Salamon notes, Hume's

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6 Nicole J. Wen, Patricia A. Herrmann, and Cristine H. Legare, "Ritual increases children's affiliation with in-group members", *Evolution and Human Behavior* 37, no. 1 (2016).

7 Scott S. Wiltermuth and Chip Heath, "Synchrony and Cooperation", *Psychological science* 20, no. 1 (2009).

8 Joseph Henrich, "The Evolution of Costly Displays, Cooperation and Religion", *Evolution and Human Behavior* 30, no. 4 (2009).

9 Scott Atran and Joseph Henrich, "The Evolution of Religion: How Cognitive By-Products, Adaptive Learning Heuristics, Ritual Displays, and Group Competition Generate Deep Commitments to Prosocial Religions", *Biological Theory* 5, no. 1 (2010); Ara Norenzayan and Azim F. Shariff, "The Origin and Evolution of Religious Prosociality", *Science* 322, no. 5898 (2008).

10 Norenzayan, *Big Gods*.

severe and sterile rationalism is unlikely to connect with most folks' ways of thinking. Salamon's agatheism is a substantial improvement on M&M's bare theism. But while agatheism is an improvement, it, too, rejects as irrational many of the (to me clearly rational) particularistic beliefs of a tradition that can and should provide intellectual ground for religiously-based compassion and peace. But, more deeply, religious *ritual* not religious *belief* is essential for understanding/proving who we can trust and hence essential for expanding the human family and tribe.<sup>11</sup> This, of course, makes expanding human communities vastly more difficult. But without understanding how trust is achieved, we won't make any progress on expanding in-group; and without expanding in-group to include the former out-group (bad, competitor, etc), we cannot secure peace.

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<sup>11</sup> It is not the atheist's lack of belief, then, that makes them less trustworthy. It's that we have no rituals by which atheists have proven their trust.

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