

## Religious exclusivism unlimited

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**Abstract:** Like David Silver before them, Erik Baldwin and Michael Thune argue that the facts of religious pluralism present an insurmountable challenge to the rationality of basic exclusive religious belief as construed by Reformed Epistemology. I will show that their argument is unsuccessful. First, their claim that the facts of religious pluralism make it necessary for the religious exclusivist to support his exclusive beliefs with significant reasons is one that the reformed epistemologist has the resources to reject. Secondly, they fail to demonstrate that it is impossible for basic exclusive religious beliefs to return to their properly basic state after defeaters against them have been defeated. Finally, I consider whether there is perhaps a similar but better argument in the neighbourhood and conclude in the negative. Reformed Epistemology's defence of exclusivism thus remains undefeated.

### Introduction

A religious exclusivist maintains that her own religion is superior to other religions in the sense of it being the only *true* religion.<sup>1</sup> According to Reformed Epistemology (RE), an exclusivist's religious beliefs can be rational or warranted in the manner of properly basic beliefs, i.e., without being based on reasons or arguments. Erik Baldwin and Michael Thune

(2008) criticize this claim and argue that an exclusivist who has become (fully) aware of the facts of religious pluralism can no longer be rational in holding her religious beliefs in the basic way.<sup>2</sup> The facts of pluralism give her a defeater that can only be defeated by acquiring and retaining ‘epistemically significant reasons’ to support her religious beliefs.

I will argue that Baldwin and Thune’s argument fails for two reasons. First, the champion of RE need not concede the necessity of epistemically significant reasons to defeat the defeater that pluralism gives her. Secondly, even if she were to concede that reasons are necessary, it remains possible—in spite of Baldwin and Thune’s claim to the contrary—that these reasons can be discarded once the defeater of pluralism has been defeated so that the exclusivist’s religious beliefs return to their former proper basicity. After that, I will consider whether there is perhaps a better argument against exclusivism in the vicinity, but conclude in the negative.

### **Baldwin and Thune on religious pluralism and defeat**

Full awareness of religious pluralism provides an exclusivist with trustworthy testimony, the content of which conflicts with her own religious beliefs. Testimony is a source of basic beliefs.<sup>3</sup> So upon appreciating the facts of pluralism the exclusivist acquires basic beliefs that conflict with her own basic religious beliefs. Since, for all the exclusivist can tell, there is complete internal epistemic parity between her and adherents of other (incompatible) religions, these conflicting beliefs will act as a defeater for her own religious beliefs.

Moreover, pluralism also acts as a defeater for any belief of hers to the effect that she has access to a special source of religious knowledge such as a *sensus divinitatis* or the internal instigation of the Holy Spirit (IIHS), as in Alvin Plantinga’s (2000) extended Aquinas/Calvin (A/C) model for warranted Christian belief. In other words, the exclusivist cannot simply

appeal to her having such access in order to defeat the defeater that pluralism gives her. That is because adherents of other religions might make analogous appeals to such special sources of religious knowledge and testify that these sources produce in them *their* specific religious beliefs, which are incompatible with those of the exclusivist. This calls into question the reliability of the exclusivist's special source of religious knowledge.

In order for the exclusivist's religious beliefs to become rational<sup>4</sup> again, say Baldwin and Thune, she needs 'epistemically significant reasons' (2008, 451), i.e., 'at a minimum, *some* argumentation, evidence, or inference to other beliefs' (*ibid.*, 453), which will either support her own beliefs directly or indirectly, by giving her reasons to discount incompatible religious beliefs. In other words:

*Necessity of Reasons* (NR) Rationality requires that the religious exclusivist who is fully aware of the facts of religious pluralism have epistemically significant reasons to support her religious beliefs.

By acquiring support from such reasons, however, the exclusivist's religious beliefs cease to be basic. Hence, Baldwin and Thune's conclusion: those who are aware of pluralism cannot hold their religious beliefs rationally in the manner of properly basic beliefs.

But there is one possible escape to this line of reasoning, as Baldwin and Thune rightly point out. Perhaps epistemically significant reasons are needed only to discard the defeater but can be disposed of once that has been accomplished. Imagine that you look at a table in normal daylight and form the belief that it is red. Then your friend John comes along and tells you that the table is really white but is currently illuminated by red light. This gives you a defeater for your original belief. Five minutes later, however, John tells you that he was only joking. This defeats your defeater. You can forget about John's earlier testimony and your

original belief goes back to being a properly basic perceptual belief again. (See Plantinga (1993, 185) for a structurally similar case.) If something analogous is possible for religious belief that threatens to be defeated by pluralism, the exclusivist's belief could return to its original state of proper basicity after all.

To block this escape, Baldwin and Thune (2008, 453) distinguish between Drain-O and table-leg defeater-defeaters. A Drain-O defeater effectively flushes itself out along with the defeater it defeats, so that the original belief can remain rational in exactly the way it was. It adds nothing to the original support for your belief, but only serves to discard the defeater. The red table case above is an example. In contrast, a table-leg defeater-defeater must be retained for the original belief to remain rational because it defeats a defeater by supplementing or even replacing the support for the original belief. Suppose your friend Bob tells you that Alice was at the party. You then learn that Bob had a few drinks too much and can't remember clearly who was and was not present at the party. This gives you a defeater for your belief that Alice was at the party. The next day you run into Alice, who confirms that she was at the party. This defeats your defeater and at the same time supplements (or replaces) the support for your belief that Alice was at the party. In order for your belief to remain rational, you must retain this defeater-defeater. Baldwin and Thune boldly assert that the epistemically significant reasons required to defeat the defeater presented by pluralism will always be table-legs (*ibid.*, 453). Hence:

*Retainment of Reasons* (RR) The epistemically significant reasons referred to in NR are always such that they must be retained in order for an exclusivist's religious beliefs to remain rational.

In the next section, I will show that the reformed epistemologist need not accept NR. In the section after that, I will argue that even if NR is accepted, RR can still be denied as its only plausible defence leads to unattractive fairly widespread scepticism.

### **Are reasons necessary?**

The fundamentally sound intuition behind NR is that defeater-defeat requires something extra beyond the initial belief and its support. You cannot defeat a defeater for a belief by means of that very belief itself or the support you already have for it. Attempting to defend a belief merely by, as it were, stomping one's feet and holding onto it falls short of what rationality requires.

Baldwin and Thune immediately go on to limit the admissible kinds of additional support to just one, namely reasons. For someone who sympathizes with RE that is a crucial mistake. For why could additional support not come from something else than reasons, such as perception, memory, or further testimony? This happens in many everyday cases of defeater-defeat. Recall the red table case from above but now suppose that John hadn't told you he was joking. Could you not have defeated your defeater by further perception, i.e., by taking a closer look at the table, perhaps checking for the presence of nearby red lamps? Or take a case of memory belief. You remember having eaten a grapefruit for breakfast yesterday, when your partner tells you that she is convinced that it was an orange. You consult your memory again and vividly remember the look, smell, and taste of yesterday's grapefruit. By doing so, you defeat the defeater you acquired through your partner's testimony. For the case of religious belief this would mean—in terms of Plantinga's extended A/C model—that a renewed and more powerful working of your *sensus divinitatis* and/or a more powerful IHS

could serve to defeat the defeater you acquired through becoming aware of the facts of religious pluralism.

Indeed, this is exactly what Plantinga himself seems to have in mind. Consider first the following passage, also quoted by Baldwin and Thune:

Perhaps you have always believed it deeply wrong for a counselor to use his position of trust to seduce a client. Perhaps you discover that others disagree; they think it more like a minor peccadillo, like running a red light when there's no traffic; and you realize that possibly these people have the same internal markers for their beliefs that you have for yours. You think the matter over more fully, imaginatively re-create and rehearse such situations, become more aware of just what is involved in such a situation (the breach of trust, the injustice and unfairness, the nasty irony of a situation in which someone comes to a counselor seeking help but receives only hurt), and come to believe even more firmly that such an action is wrong. (Plantinga 2000, 457)

Baldwin and Thune interpret this passage as affirming NR. Thinking the matter over more fully, they believe, gives you reasons to support your belief that it is wrong for a counsellor to use his position of trust to seduce a client. These reasons then form an indispensable supplement to the support your moral belief had before from, presumably, moral intuition. Without them, your contested moral belief could not be held rationally anymore.

In view of Plantinga's insistence on the possibility of rational *basic* religious belief, even for intellectually sophisticated exclusivists who are well aware of pluralism, such an interpretation is markedly uncongenial, if not plain wrong. So instead of interpreting this passage as affirming NR, we would do better by interpreting it along the lines of my earlier suggestion. The idea would then be that your thinking carefully about the situation occasions

a renewed and more powerful working of your moral intuition, which defeats the defeater you acquired upon learning that others disagree. The case of moral beliefs is particularly well-suited to illustrate this possibility, since there is a respectable strand in the literature on moral realism that defends moral intuitionism; the idea that we grasp moral truths through a cognitive faculty of moral intuition (Moore 1903, Ross 1930, Audi 2004, Huemer 2005). These intuitionists hold that belief in moral truths is not rational in virtue of being based on reasons, but in a non-inferential way. Nonetheless, thinking carefully about the facts involved in morally significant situations is necessary to intuit the moral truth of the matter correctly. Not because it provides us with reasons necessary to support our moral beliefs, but because it occasions correct functioning of our intuition.

Something analogous may well apply to the case of religious beliefs. Thinking carefully about the facts of religious pluralism could facilitate a renewed and more powerful working of your *sensus divinitatis* and/or the IHS—the same cognitive processes by which your religious beliefs originally arose. To make this more vivid: imagine that you ponder over your Christian beliefs and rehearse some of the relevant facts about Christian theism, while also keeping in mind that other thoughtful and intelligent people hold incompatible religious beliefs. Your pondering occasions a powerful working of the Holy Spirit which reproduces your Christian theistic belief with great force and internal compellingness. Although you find the epistemic situation very complex, you cannot help but feel strongly convinced again that your religious beliefs are true, even though you admittedly have nothing to offer by way of independent evidence or arguments that will move those who hold incompatible religious beliefs even the slightest bit.

To drive home the point that this is indeed what Plantinga has in mind, the following passage should suffice:<sup>5</sup>

A fresh or heightened awareness of the facts of religious pluralism could bring about a reappraisal of one's religious life, a reawakening, a new or renewed and deepened grasp and apprehension of (1) and (2). From the perspective of the extended A/C model, *it could serve as an occasion for a renewed and more powerful working of the belief-producing processes by which we come to apprehend (1) and (2)*. In this way knowledge of the facts of pluralism could initially serve as a defeater; in the long run, however, it can have precisely the opposite effect. The facts of religious pluralism, therefore, (...) do not or need not constitute a defeater for Christian belief. (Plantinga 2000, 457, my italics)

If all of this is correct, then NR is false. An exclusivist who is aware of the facts of pluralism does not necessarily need reasons to support her religious beliefs after all.<sup>6</sup>

Even if what I have said so far is successful as an exercise in Plantinga-exegesis, we should still ask whether the suggested procedure for defeater-defeat has any plausibility. This is not the occasion for a full evaluation, but I can reply to four worries.

First, religious pluralism also provided the exclusivist with a defeater for any belief to the effect that the exclusivist possesses a special source of religious knowledge, so how can it be legitimate to rely on this very source to defeat the defeater? The answer to this lies in the realisation that RE promotes a strongly externalist account of rationality, on which rationality is determined almost exclusively by the *de facto* proper functioning of the subject's cognitive faculties and emphatically not by her having access to higher-order information about the epistemic pedigree or status of her beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, rationality does not require a subject first to have good reasons to believe a cognitive faculty to be reliable (or any other higher-order beliefs) before she can rationally believe the outputs of that faculty. Rather, it can go the other way around: when called for, a subject can infer higher-order beliefs from first-order beliefs that have been formed by *de facto* properly functioning cognitive processes.<sup>8</sup>



This idea can then be extended to defeater-defeat. Applied to the problem at hand, a new and powerful working of the *sensus divinitatis* or further IHS—*de facto* properly functioning faculties—will provide the additional support required for the exclusivist's (first-order) religious beliefs to become rational again. Finding herself with a strengthened conviction that her beliefs are true, the exclusivist will by implication (1) take incompatible religious beliefs held by adherents of other religions to be false and (2) take others who claim to have had incompatible religious experiences to be somehow epistemically less fortunate and their testimony therefore of reduced value.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, she defeats both the direct defeater for her first-order religious beliefs and the defeater for the higher-order belief that she has access to a special source of religious knowledge.

For those who remain sceptical, I should emphasize that this procedure for defeater-defeat is nothing more than a straightforward reapplication of RE's basic externalist conception of rationality. Recall that, according to RE, a subject can have rational beliefs while the fact that she has them, as well as other details of her epistemic status are (almost) completely opaque to her. In particular, she need not (1) have access to the grounds for her beliefs, (2) believe that her cognitive faculties are functioning properly or be able to offer arguments to that effect, and (3) believe—let alone be rational or warranted in believing or know—that her beliefs are rational. To the extent that you are willing to accept this as a basic conception of rationality, you should have no real problem also accepting the procedure for defeater-defeat under consideration, because that procedure merely reapplies the basic conception to defeater-defeat. Defeaters for a belief can be defeated when that belief is reproduced (with greater strength) by cognitive faculties which are assumed to be *de facto* functioning properly. Just as before, the belief's being produced by *de facto* properly functioning cognitive faculties is what makes it rational again. By implication, defeaters for this belief are defeated.

Secondly, what I have been saying entails that an exclusivist can rationally hold religious beliefs in the basic way without having anything by way of a reason or argument to defeat the defeater of religious pluralism. The exclusivist would simply have to find herself with a firm conviction that her beliefs really are right, in spite of counter-testimony from seemingly trustworthy sources. Perhaps someone will want to object to this on the grounds that it ‘allows exclusive religious beliefs to be effectively immune from defeat, and reduces epistemology to dogged psychological prejudices’ (Baldwin and Thune 2008, 451).<sup>10</sup>

In reply, I would urge that it is incorrect that on the current proposal defeater-defeat requires nothing more than a ‘dogged prejudice’ to hold on to one’s beliefs. Defeating the defeater of religious pluralism does require additional support. The point is that this support need not necessarily come from reasons. It can also come from the same non-inferential cognitive processes that originally produced the beliefs. It is also incorrect that religious beliefs become ‘immune from defeat’. An exclusivist may fail—temporarily or indefinitely—to secure the additional support required, in which case her belief remains defeated. Nothing guarantees proper functioning of the *sensus divinitatis* or a renewed IHS.

Thirdly, someone may propose that adherents of other religions can appeal to an analogous procedure for defeater-defeat. They, too, might report that their religious beliefs have been powerfully reproduced in them so that they now strongly believe they are right again. Wouldn’t this constitute yet another defeater for the exclusivist’s religious beliefs? And isn’t it implausible to reply that this defeater, too, could be defeated by yet another powerful working of the *sensus divinitatis* and/or renewed IHS? Doesn’t that lead to a possibly infinite succession of defeaters and defeater-defeaters?

Two things in reply. (1) The reformed epistemologist need not concede that this scenario gives the exclusivist a new defeater. Once an exclusivist has defeated the defeater of pluralism by means of the above procedure, further testimony by adherents of other religions

no longer constitutes a defeater relative to her overall noetic structure.<sup>11</sup> For that structure now includes a belief that adherents of other religions are epistemically less fortunate than she is; this belief being inferred from her reproduced properly basic first-order religious beliefs. As a result, their testimony can be dismissed. Or if the exclusivist's noetic structure doesn't include such an explicit belief, it will at least include an awareness that others may hold their religious beliefs with equal sincerity and conviction. Given this awareness, however, further testimony adds nothing new to the exclusivist's epistemic situation and hence doesn't give her a new defeater. (2) But even if the reformed epistemologist were to admit that further testimony does give the exclusivist a new defeater, I don't see why there would be anything wrong—given RE's epistemological outlook—in holding that this new defeater could be defeated by yet another working of the *sensus divinitatis* or IHS. If the procedure was defensible the first time around, it is also defensible the second time in an exactly analogous way. This indeed leads to an exclusivism that vacillates, but it may be recalled that we now only see through a glass, darkly, in religious matters.

Fourthly, although I am convinced that Plantinga's suggestion is fundamentally sound, I admit that the situation Plantinga envisages for a pluralism-aware exclusivist is indeed epistemically unattractive. Consider how her situation looks from her own perspective. She is firmly convinced of the truth of her religious beliefs. However, she need not know (nor even believe) that she is rational in believing as she does. When pressed, she might have to admit that nothing she can say will convince adherents of other religions of the truth of her own beliefs. Although she takes adherents of other religions to be epistemically less well-off, she can offer nothing to substantiate this, besides her own conviction that she is right. Obviously, such a situation is unattractive, at least in so far as rationality has anything to do with discussing and justifying one's own ideas in a dialectical situation.<sup>12</sup> It exemplifies a kind of epistemic isolation that it would be preferable not to be in.

However, it does not follow that the exclusivist is irrational in sticking to her beliefs. There are lots of states one can be in that are epistemically unattractive, but that do not make one any less rational. For instance, believing falsehoods on the basis of misleading evidence or not believing important truths because one has not been properly exposed to them. A defender of RE can readily admit that the exclusivist's situation is unfortunate, but insist that it is sometimes the best one can do. Surely it would be epistemically preferable if we could always justify our true beliefs with publicly available and objective evidence that convinces those who demur, but such is not our privilege. This does not prove that rational exclusive religious belief is impossible.

### **Must reasons be retained?**

Suppose the argument of the previous section fails and that NR is correct after all. Have Baldwin and Thune then succeeded in showing that rational religious belief cannot be basic for an exclusivist who is aware of pluralism? No, I will argue. RR, too, is false because defeater-defeaters for religious pluralism may well be of the Drain-O variety. The reason is that excluding this possibility requires an independence constraint on admissible defeater-defeaters that leads to fairly widespread scepticism and is therefore unattractive.

Although Baldwin and Thune assert that defeater-defeaters for religious pluralism will always be table-legs, they do not provide an argument to back up their claim. Let us first consider what a Drain-O defeater might look like for the case at hand. Suppose an exclusivist comes to believe—through reading a book on apologetics, say—that adherents of other religions are deceived by Satan into believing they have veridical religious experiences of a deity. God allows this because He is intent on testing the faith of his elect by exposing them to misleading testimony. This story would constitute a Drain-O defeater-defeater, for it

provides the exclusivist with a reason not to take the testimony of adherents of other religions seriously while it adds nothing new to support the exclusivist's own religious beliefs. It is like learning that your friend John was joking when he testified to the whiteness of the table in my earlier example. Having acquired such a defeater-defeater, you can forget about the whole affair and your belief goes back to its original proper basicity.

Apparently, then, Baldwin and Thune think all defeater-defeaters of this kind are ruled out. The most plausible explanation for this is that they implicitly take for granted some kind of independence constraint on admissible defeater-defeaters, which attempts to rule out defeater-defeaters that somehow depend for their rationality on the rationality of the original (threatened) belief.<sup>13</sup> Without some such constraint, there is no reason to think that Drain-O defeaters are impossible and hence no reason to believe RR. Perhaps Baldwin and Thune believe something like David Silver's version of such a constraint is correct:

Z cannot neutralize X as a potential defeater for Y if Z is evidentially dependent on Y  
(Silver 2001, 9),

where

belief Z is *evidentially dependent* on belief Y for agent S just in case it is rational for S to believe that the warrant for Z is derivative of the warrant for Y. Otherwise Z is *evidentially independent* of Y for agent S. (*ibid.*, 8)

Presumably, this constraint would rule out the above story as a defeater-defeater, because the rationality of believing that story is derivative of the rationality of the exclusivist's original

religious beliefs (although perhaps only indirectly so through being derivative of the rationality of the apologetics book's author's religious beliefs).<sup>14</sup>

I want to suggest that Baldwin and Thune would do well *not* to embrace any such unqualified independence constraints, as they engender fairly widespread scepticism, not only for religious matters, but also for many philosophical, political and moral matters. Such scepticism, moreover, undermines their own conclusion.

To see why this is so, notice that the independence constraint above in effect demands that one has a non-question-begging argument or other source of epistemic support to back up one's belief. While this is usually feasible for beliefs about mundane matters such as the colour of tables and your friend's party attendance, it is far from obvious that this standard can be met for religious, ethical, political, and philosophical beliefs (Van Inwagen 1996, 2010, Elga 2010, Kelly 2010). In philosophical controversy, for instance, both parties can often marshal impressive arguments for their beliefs, as well as weighty objections to the other party's beliefs, clever responses to defuse these objections, and so on. Although there is no room to argue the point here, I am convinced that ultimately one's evaluation of the successfulness of the arguments, objections, and responses comes down to basic philosophical intuitions, which cannot themselves be defended by further non-question-begging arguments. Any attempt to defeat defeaters for one's philosophical beliefs, then, must sooner or later presuppose the truth of such basic intuitions. However, one's philosophical beliefs also depend on the same intuitions for their ultimate support. So we have a scenario in which, ultimately, basic intuitions are supposed to defeat defeaters for beliefs, the rationality of which is derivative of the rationality of those very same intuitions. This violates the independence constraint. As a result, many philosophical beliefs will be beset by undefeated defeaters and must therefore be given up. The same holds for controversial—which is to say many—moral, political, and religious beliefs.<sup>15</sup>

The point can also be brought out by considering Baldwin and Thune's discussion of Vogelstein's case of a moral realist who receives testimony from a sociopath to the effect that there are no moral truths (Vogelstein 2004, 189).<sup>16</sup> Baldwin and Thune say the moral realist can easily defeat the defeater presented by the sociopath's testimony. The relevant defeater-defeater 'involves the conjunction of (1) the fact that there are good arguments for moral realism and (2) the fact that one person's testimony against moral realism is, given (1), of little epistemic value' (Baldwin and Thune 2008, 449). The arguments they have in mind are those available in the philosophical literature.

Now suppose that we exchange the sociopath for a competent philosopher, who is a passionate defender of moral antirealism.<sup>17</sup> This philosopher is able to offer objections to any epistemically significant reason for moral realism the realist can muster. If what I said above about philosophical arguments—to wit, that their evaluation is ultimately a matter of basic philosophical intuitions—is roughly correct, then the moral realist will violate an independence constraint if she sticks to her belief. She must appeal to reasons that depend crucially on her basic realist intuitions for their ultimate support. Hence, the rational thing to do—for both the realist and the antirealist—would be to give up their respective beliefs and become agnostic.

Given that this case is structurally similar to many controversies in religion, ethics, politics, and philosophy, anyone who embraces an independence constraint of the kind we have been considering in effect embraces widespread scepticism in these areas. For Baldwin and Thune specifically this entails that they ought to give up their conclusion that an exclusivist who is aware of pluralism cannot hold religious beliefs in a properly basic way, since that conclusion itself is confronted with counter-arguments from other philosophers and the only way to defend it may well be by arguments that ultimately beg the question against

the epistemological externalism RE promotes—that is what I take my four remarks at the end of the previous section to hint at.

In sum, then, independence constraints of the sort we have been looking at are unattractive and therefore we have no reason to believe RR is correct. If RR is false, however, it remains possible for an exclusivist to obtain a Drain-O defeater-defeater, in which case her religious beliefs could go back to being rational in the manner of properly basic beliefs.

### **A better argument against exclusivism?**

Baldwin and Thune's argument fails. But perhaps there is a better argument for the conclusion that exclusivism cannot be rational in the manner of properly basic beliefs lurking nearby.

Like most epistemologies, RE is fallibilist; at least in the sense that it allows for rationally held but false beliefs. The facts of religious pluralism show that people who, for all appearances, are equally intellectually, morally, and spiritually virtuous hold religious beliefs that are incompatible with the exclusivist's beliefs and perhaps also that they do so, partly, because they claim to have access to a special source of religious knowledge that others lack. This makes the possibility that the exclusivist's own religious beliefs are false and her special source unreliable salient. Upon appreciating this possibility, the exclusivist should acquire a higher-order belief that her religious beliefs may well be wrong and that she may well lack access to a special source of religious knowledge. This belief isn't a defeater of the kind we considered above as it isn't incompatible with anything the exclusivist believes. Nonetheless, it seems that this higher-order belief ought to have a downward effect on the exclusivist's first-order religious beliefs and lead her to reduce her confidence or even suspend judgement



on contested religious matters.<sup>18</sup> Not doing so surely exhibits some kind of epistemic defect or negligence.

This line of thinking receives further support from a comparison with other sources of basic beliefs. Suppose you and a friend both look out a window and see a car. Your friend says it's a model A whereas you see it to be a model B. From what the both of you can tell, your beliefs are formed in normally favourable circumstances, there are no obstacles in your respective lines of sight, you both have equally good eyesight, are equally knowledgeable about cars, aren't confused in any relevant way, etc. Taking another look doesn't resolve your disagreement. Wouldn't the rational thing to do be to suspend judgement? Or take memory beliefs. Your friend and you both try to remember what colour shirt Bob was wearing yesterday. Again, for all you can tell, you are both equally well-poised to remember correctly, there are no confusions, etc. Yet your friend says Bob's shirt was green and you remember it was blue. Careful reconsideration and exchange of information doesn't resolve your disagreement. Shouldn't the both of you give up your beliefs and suspend judgement?

This seems to me to be the strongest case from religious pluralism against exclusivism that doesn't beg any questions against RE's externalism. But I don't think it is conclusive. I will consider three things that can be said on behalf of RE. First of all, the reformed epistemologist can readily admit that awareness of religious pluralism calls for reduced confidence. An exclusivist who is properly sensitive to the deeply ambiguous epistemic situation in which she and others form religious beliefs, will hold her beliefs with epistemic humility. However, it doesn't follow that suspension of judgement is rationally required. Pluralism might decrease one's confidence, but not necessarily below the threshold for rational (or warranted) belief.

This might seem a little feeble in the absence of an explanation for how the warrant for the exclusivist's religious beliefs manages to stay above the threshold. That brings me to a second point. The defender of RE can once more insist on a thoroughly externalist understanding of

rationality. If, even while being fully and vividly aware of every relevant fact of religious pluralism, it strongly seems to the exclusivist that her religious beliefs are correct, then *if this strong seeming is in fact brought about by a properly functioning sensus divinitatis and/or a renewed IHS*, her first-order religious beliefs will be rational, no matter what additional higher-order beliefs about the possibility of being wrong she may simultaneously entertain. She can even infer counterbalancing higher-order beliefs (e.g., that even though she may be wrong, it strongly seems to her that she is in fact right) from her renewed first-order beliefs.<sup>19</sup>

To put this in perspective, it is important to see that what is being claimed here is not that everyone, regardless of their favoured notion of rationality, must admit that the above scenario restores the rationality of exclusivism. The point is that exclusivism is rendered rational *in the specific externalist sense endorsed by RE*. Furthermore, the reformed epistemologist can grant that exclusivist adherents of other religions (who, we can safely assume, may feel just as strongly about the seeming truth of their religious beliefs) may also be rational in the qualified sense of *internal* rationality, although—assuming Christian theism to be true—they fall short of full rationality because they are not *externally* rational (see note 4 for this distinction). Given the input to their cognitive faculties, there is nothing wrong with their belief formation, but—again assuming Christian theism—their input itself (‘upstream from experience’) is not what it ought to be. Finally, it may help to consider what the alternatives are. Suppose it is accepted that withholding judgement is the rational response, at least until one gathers further support for the truth of one’s beliefs from other sources. As we saw in the previous section, this easily leads down a path to widespread scepticism, not only in religious matters, but also in philosophy, politics, and ethics. While some may find this acceptable or even appropriate, I take such an outcome to show that one’s construal of rationality has gone astray.

Thirdly and finally, in view of the analogy with perceptual and memory beliefs the defender of RE could develop her notion of rationality to allow for a differential treatment of different kinds of beliefs.<sup>20</sup> There are at least two features of the perception and memory cases above that account for the intuitive rightness of suspension of belief. First, in real-life versions of such cases, there usually is an easy method available to settle the disagreement. You walk closer to the car or look the model up on the internet. You ask Bob about his shirt. It is therefore inappropriate to just hold on to your beliefs and not employ such a method of verification. Secondly, persistent disagreement hardly ever occurs in real-life cases of this kind. So if it does, something exceptional or weird must be going on. In consequence, all bets are off and you should withhold judgement. These two features are perspicuously absent in the case of religious belief (and also in many typical cases of philosophical, moral, and political beliefs). There are no (independent) methods of verification available and persistent disagreement is ubiquitous. Because of that, it is not at all clear that it is rationally inappropriate to stick to these kinds of beliefs if they strongly seem true to you, even while you are fully aware of persistent disagreements and the impossibility of their resolution. The defender of RE can therefore reply that the above analogy is beside the point, because rationality gives different prescriptions for perceptual and memorial beliefs than it does for religious beliefs.

## **Conclusion**

Baldwin and Thune's attack on RE's defence of exclusivism fails. The reformed epistemologist need not accept NR, while RR can only be made plausible with the help of an independence constraint that leads to unattractive fairly widespread scepticism. An argument similar to Baldwin and Thune's which doesn't rely on NR or RR also fails to establish the desired conclusion. As far as I can see, this exhausts the resources for arguing from pluralism

against RE's defence of exclusivism. I therefore conclude that RE's defence of the possibility of rationally holding religious beliefs in the basic way, even for an exclusivist who is aware of the facts of religious pluralism, remains as plausible as it ever was.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I choose not to follow Baldwin and Thune (2008) in speaking about ‘exclusive beliefs’. That expression strikes me as inaccurate since any belief is exclusive in the sense that, if one holds it, one holds incompatible beliefs to be untrue. Hence, exclusivism is not so much a property of beliefs as it is a position or attitude of a person holding certain beliefs, to wit that of continuing to hold that one is right and others wrong while not having a knock-down argument for one’s own beliefs (cf. Plantinga (2000, 440) a definition of exclusivism along these lines).

<sup>2</sup> Their paper builds on earlier work by David Silver (2001) and replies to Eric Vogelstein’s (2004) criticisms of Silver.

<sup>3</sup> This ‘principle of testimony’ is accepted by everyone in the debate, cf. Plantinga (1993, 77–82), Silver (2001, 5), and Baldwin and Thune (2008, 446).

<sup>4</sup> Here and throughout, ‘rationality’ should be understood in RE’s characteristic sense of having properly functioning cognitive faculties. Full rationality in this sense requires both what Plantinga (2000, 110–113) calls *internal* and *external* rationality. Internal rationality consists in proper function ‘downstream from experience’: forming the right beliefs in response to one’s cognitive input of sensuous imagery and doxastic experience, having coherent beliefs, drawing the right inferences, making the right decisions given one’s beliefs, and fulfilling one’s epistemic duties. External rationality consists in proper function ‘upstream from experience’: forming the right kind of cognitive input, i.e., sensuous imagery and doxastic experience.

<sup>5</sup> The passage is directly below the one quoted by Baldwin and Thune. In it, (1) and (2) stand for the following two religious claims:

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(1) The world was created by God, an almighty, all-knowing and perfectly good personal being (the sort of being who holds beliefs, has aims and intentions, and can act to accomplish these aims); and (2) Human beings require salvation, and God has provided a unique way of salvation through the incarnation, life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of his divine son. (Plantinga 2000, 438).

<sup>6</sup> Note that my interpretation of Plantinga differs from the *Principle of Testimonial Evidence* (PTE) that Vogelstein endorses to defend Plantinga:

If I believe a proposition P in the basic way, then if I hear testimony that  $\sim$ P and have no further defeater for P or  $\sim$ P, I ought to weigh the strength of my inclination to believe that P against the strength of my inclination to believe that  $\sim$ P (based on that testimony) in order to determine whether to believe P,  $\sim$ P, or neither P nor  $\sim$ P. (Vogelstein 2004, 190)

*Pace* Vogelstein, I concede to Baldwin and Thune that simply weighing the strengths of your inclinations to believe is not enough. In the face of pluralism, one really needs additional support for one's religious beliefs. However, *pace* Baldwin and Thune I am urging that this support may come from the same quasi-perceptual and testimonial sources that originally produced the beliefs and need not stem from (independent) reasons.

<sup>7</sup> Pryor (2001) provides a helpful overview of the many different versions of externalism. Here I take externalism as the denial of the theses that rationality requires that one have special access to (1) the grounds for one's beliefs and (2) the epistemic status of one's beliefs (e.g., their rationality or the adequacy of the grounds on which they are based). This is RE's brand of externalism.

<sup>8</sup> Vogel (2000, 2008) objects to exactly this feature of externalist epistemologies, arguing that it allows for illegitimate bootstrapping. Cohen (2002, 2005), Van Cleve (2003), and Weisberg

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(forthcoming), however, argue that the problem generalizes to internalist epistemologies and is independent of the internalism/externalism controversy.

<sup>9</sup> As Plantinga (2000, 453) says about the exclusivist in such a situation:

She must think that there is an important epistemic difference: she thinks that somehow the other person has made a mistake, or has a blind spot, or hasn't been wholly attentive, or hasn't received some grace she has, or is blinded by ambition or pride or mother love or something else; she must think that she has access to a source of warranted belief the other lacks.

<sup>10</sup> Although the quote is part of an objection levelled to Vogelstein's PTE, the worry it expresses can also be raised for what I have been saying.

<sup>11</sup> See Plantinga (2000, 360–363) for the point that defeaters are always relative to a person's total noetic structure.

<sup>12</sup> Alston (1988, 273) suggests that the notion of justification derives from the idea of dialectically justifying one's beliefs.

<sup>13</sup> One could read their endorsement of what Vogelstein calls the *Principle of Testimonial Defeat* (PTD) in this vein (Baldwin and Thune 2008, 447–451). This principle, which Vogelstein ends up rejecting, reads as follows:

If I believe proposition P in the basic way, then if I hear testimony that  $\sim P$ , I ought to believe neither P nor  $\sim P$  (or equivalently, P and  $\sim P$  act as defeaters for each other) unless I have a defeater for  $\sim P$  other than P (in which case I ought to believe P), or a defeater for P other than  $\sim P$  (in which case I ought to believe  $\sim P$ ). (Vogelstein 2004, 189)



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<sup>14</sup> Such indirect dependence introduces complications for the formulation of any plausible independency constraint that neither Silver nor Baldwin and Thune address, but that is not my concern here.

<sup>15</sup> Here I disagree with Silver (2001, 12–15) who thinks the ensuing scepticism can mostly be warded off or, where it cannot, is warranted.

<sup>16</sup> It is unfortunate that Vogelstein sets up his case around a sociopath, for someone's being a sociopath is already sufficient reason not to take his or her testimony on moral and social matters seriously. (We don't take testimony of a colour-blind on colours seriously either.) Baldwin and Thune rightly exploit this weakness in their reply.

<sup>17</sup> If someone wants to object that the testimony of one antirealist is not enough to be taken seriously, you can bring in whatever number of antirealists is deemed sufficient.

<sup>18</sup> Kelly (2010, 158ff.) calls this 'downward epistemic push'.

<sup>19</sup> Kelly (2010, 159) labels this 'upward epistemic push'. Cf. also note 8 above for worries about bootstrapping.

<sup>20</sup> I'm not aware of any attempts to try this for Plantinga's form of RE, but Alston's (1991) doxastic practice approach is sensitive to the fact that rationality may amount to slightly different things for different kinds of belief-forming practices.

<sup>21</sup> I am grateful to Martijn Blaauw, Ian Church, Rik Peels, Herman Philipse, and René van Woudenberg for helpful comments on an earlier version. An anonymous referee deserves special thanks for inviting me to develop my argument in a further direction.