

## Is It More Reasonable for a Critical Rationalist to Be non-Religious? Belief and Unbelief in a Post-secular Era\*

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### ABSTRACT

In modern times many militant atheist thinkers and activists have tried to promote the idea that religions, as well as religious ways of life, are one of the main, if not *the* main source of evil in the social arena. Some other non-believer scholars, while taking a respectful approach towards religions and religious people, maintaining that it is more rational for people and communities to adopt a non-religious outlook on life and become members of the community of non-believers. In this paper, I do not take issue with the militant non-believers. The reason is that their approach to religion is so ideologically driven that it leaves not much room for proper rational discussions; it only invites some polemical replies. My aim here is, instead, to enter into a dialogue with those non-believer scholars who view religion in a measured and rational way. My intention is to critically assess the claims of this latter group of scholars and explain why, contrary to what they suggest, certain interpretations of religion, and in particular, the Islamic faith, can provide them with better alternatives than their atheist outlooks. The arguments of this paper are mostly in reply to the views expressed by Professor Shearmur in his paper on critical rationalism and religion.

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\* This paper was written in the form of a debate with Professor Jeremy Shearmur.

## Part I- Preliminaries

In the first part of my paper, I discuss some general themes whose function is to prepare the ground for tackling the main obstacles that hamper the appreciation of the ways in which religion is perceived and understood by a critical rationalist who is also a believer.

### 0- In Place of the Introduction

In the summer of 2022, the Islamic Cultural Centre for Northern California (ICCNC) invited Prof. Jeremy Shearmur and me to participate in an Oxford Style debate entitled “Is it more reasonable for a Critical Rationalist to be non-Religious?” Our debate was the first in a series of live discussions under the general rubric of “Belief and Unbelief in a Post-secular Era”.

In that meeting, Professor Shearmur defended a Yes answer to the main question of the debate while I tried to argue for a No answer. The following is based on my reply to Professor Shearmur in that meeting.

I would like to highlight Karl Popper’s answer concerning his approach to religion before producing my full-fledged answer. In an interview conducted by Edward Zerin, a Jewish Rabbi, concerning his [Popper’s] view about God, Popper made the following remarks, among others:

When I look at what I call the gift of life, I feel a gratitude which is in tune with some religious ideas of God. However, the moment I even speak of it, I am embarrassed that I may do something wrong to God in talking about God (Popper, 2008:48, 49, 51). I do think that all men, including myself, are religious (Popper, 2008: 49). Although I am not a Jew by religion, I have come to the conclusion that there is great wisdom in the Jewish commandment ‘not to take the name of God in vain’ (Popper, 2008: 48).

Popper’s highly reverential approach towards God and religion had impelled him to adopt an agnostic, and not a rejectionist, attitude with regard to God. I should like to argue that a critical rationalist can happily embrace religion and that it is a better option than either agnosticism or atheism.

However, since people use the term ‘religion’ equivocally, it is important to emphasise, at this juncture, that by religion, I do not mean what the likes of Daesh or Taleban in the Middle East or the white supremacists in the United States, or the militant Hindu in India, take as religion. I shall shortly present my own understanding of religion. Before that, however, I need to say a few words about Critical Rationalism.

### 1. On Critical Rationalism

Critical rationalism, as a philosophical doctrine (Popper,1963/2002, Introduction; 1994/2000: Ch. 13), a way of life (Popper ,1963/2002:206, 2008: 200-201) and a critical intellectual perspective

which is against intellectual fashions (Popper 1994, *passim*), was originally suggested by Karl Popper<sup>1</sup> and further developed by his students and followers.<sup>2</sup> Its main mottos are as follows<sup>3</sup>:

Critical rationalism is a quest for knowledge and truth, for ‘emancipation through knowledge’ and ‘spiritual freedom (Popper 1963/2002: 175); The critical attitude ... seeks undogmatically to subject all attitudes, ideas, institutions, and traditions, along with ... knowledge and ... freedom, to critical examination and appraisal;<sup>4</sup> [Critical] rationalists are those people who are ready to challenge and to criticise everything, including ... their own tradition (Popper, 1963/2002: 122).

On the basis of the above insights and in relation to a number of important epistemological problems with which he was grappling, including the problem of demarcation, which is about the nature of our knowledge claims and the problem of induction, which pertains to how we acquire knowledge (Miller 2006/2017), Popper developed an elaborate theoretical system whose main tenets included (though not exhausted by) the following theses<sup>5</sup>:

- \* Realism (that there exists something, i.e., reality, not created by us) (Popper, 1983).
- \* Human beings are capable of acquiring knowledge about (at least some aspects) of reality (Popper, 1963/2002; 1983).
- \* All knowledge claims are conjectural (Popper, 1963/2002: 1983).
- \* It is the growth of knowledge, and not knowledge per se, which is important in our epistemic quests and knowledge pursuits (Popper, 1963/2002:1983; 1979).
- \* Knowledge pursuits begin when we encounter new problems. New problems emerge when our expectations of reality are shattered by reality itself.

The growth of knowledge is achieved through eliminating the errors of the conjectures produced by us as solutions to the problems reality presents to us. Popper has depicted this process by means of the following tetradic schemata:

$$P_1 \rightarrow TS \rightarrow EE \rightarrow P_2$$

<sup>1</sup> See the Bibliography for a Number of Popper’s books in which various tenets of critical rationalism are introduced and discussed as well as applied to a variety of intellectual problems.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the direct students/assistants of Popper are David Mille, Jeremy Shearmur, Ian Jarvi, William Bartley III, and Joseph Agassi. See the Bibliography of the work of some of these scholars.

<sup>3</sup> All the points that follow are based on the work of Popper. Since Popper has discussed them in many of his publications, including Popper 1954/1966, 1963/2002, 1972/1979, 1994, and elsewhere, I refrain from referring to these titles in the case of the statements in the text for the sake of brevity.

<sup>4</sup> Popper 1963/2002, 135, 151, 122, 127 ; 1945/1966, vol. II, 224–7.

<sup>5</sup> The following is based on Paya 2018, Introduction.

(P<sub>1</sub> = Problem 1, TS = Tentative Solution, EE = Error Elimination, P<sub>2</sub> = Problem 2).<sup>1</sup>

\* To facilitate our knowledge pursuits, we identify and highlight three separate, though interrelated, realms in reality (R), namely, World<sub>1</sub> (W<sub>1</sub>) (the physical universe), World<sub>2</sub> (W<sub>2</sub>) (the subjective cognitive and emotive states of each individual) and World<sub>3</sub> (W<sub>3</sub>) (an emergent and independent realm which is the outcome of the interaction between W<sub>2</sub> and W<sub>1</sub>. It is the abode of all types of human constructs, knowledge claims, conventions and laws, artistic creations, value systems, and technological blueprints. It interacts with W<sub>2</sub> and, through it, with W<sub>1</sub>).<sup>2</sup>

\* Certainty belongs to the realm of personal psychology. It is not an epistemic value.

\* Intuitions, flashes of insights, and moments of epiphany, which emerge in the course of grappling with genuine problems and play an important role in formulating our conjectures, belong to the ‘context of discovery’. This context is part of our personal psychology. Knowledge claims, proper, belong to the ‘context of assessment’.<sup>3</sup>

\* Our repertoire of knowledge consists of two sets of knowledge claims: 1) the set of refuted conjectures and 2) the set of yet-to-be-refuted conjectures. The first set provides us knowledge *via negativa*. Its members tell us what is not the case with regard to reality. The second set, as long as its members remain corroborated, provides us knowledge *via positiva*. Its members tell us, in a conjectural and, of course, provisional manner, how we should conceive/understand reality (Miller 1994).

\* The growth of knowledge is intimately related to the ethics of research: the dishonesty of researchers with respect to their knowledge claims could seriously hamper the growth of knowledge. (Popper, 1994: Ch. 6.)

\* The future is open, and it is “our duty to remain optimists”. (Popper 1994)

## 2- On Religion<sup>4</sup>

I suggest, as a conjecture, that almost all religions, especially those that belong to the Abrahamic tradition, comprise two principal parts: an ontological-epistemological and a technological part.

The first part consists of the following two simple statements (Paya, 2018: Ch. 3):

<sup>1</sup> Popper 1979, 243. In some of his other publications, Popper has used the abbreviation TT (Tentative Theory) instead of TS

<sup>2</sup> Popper 1979. It should be emphasised that reality is not exhausted by the above three realms. Popper says: “We might, especially, distinguish more than three worlds.” (1979:107). “I will propose a view of the universe that recognizes *at least* three different but interacting sub-universes” (emphasis added). (1978:1).

<sup>3</sup> Popper has discussed the idea of these two contexts in his 1959/2002, 31-32. Popper had argued the same idea in his 1935. But he has not used the terms I have introduced in the text. The first term, namely, ‘the context of discovery’ was used by Reichenbach in his 1938, 6-7. For the second context, Reichenbach coined the term ‘the context of justification’. Critical rationalists however, maintain that justification is not possible (Miller 2006/2017, Ch. 3). They separate the two contexts mentioned in the text and emphasise that all epistemological activities belong to the context of assessment. Popper says: “... we [should] clearly separate the psychological from the logical and methodological aspects of the problem. We must distinguish between, on the one hand, our subjective experiences or our feelings of conviction, which can never justify any statement (though they can be made the subject of psychological investigation) and, on the other hand, the objective logical relations subsisting among the various systems of scientific statements, and within each of them.” (1959, 22) Also see Swedberg 2014, 3.

<sup>4</sup> The following is based on Paya 2018, Ch. 3.

(a) Ontological part: there exists a non-human, Supreme Being who is regarded as the Creator and Sustainer and/or the Lord and Master of the whole realm of being;

(b) Epistemological part: We can, in principle, learn more and more about this Being. This, however, does not imply that the realm of being is devoid of mysteries.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the very existence of these mysteries is a powerful source for encouraging the seekers of knowledge to tirelessly continue their never-ending pursuit of the truth about reality. For religious critical rationalists, part of this pursuit concerns getting closer to a better understanding of God.

The ontological statement, which posits the existence of a ‘Supreme Being’, of course, does this in a conjectural manner. Moreover, this is an extremely compact statement and needs to be unpacked. The process of unpacking the entailments of this statement leads to the emergence of a rich and ever-expanding network of meaning with regard to the attributes of the Lord/ Master of being. Different religions may attribute different characteristics to this Lord/Master. In some religions, the Lord/Master, as was suggested above, may be regarded as the Creator and Sustainer of the realm of being. Attributes such as infinite wisdom, power and compassion are among many other characteristics assigned to the Lord/Master of being. In some other religions, the Lord/Master may be described by means of anthropomorphic attributes such as eyes, ears, hands etc. In still other religions, the Lord/ Master may be identified with and analogically described by an amorphous cosmic force or energy.

Each of the attributes which are assigned to the Supreme Being, with the aim of further unpacking the compact statement about its existence, is, of course, nothing but a conjectural effort to develop (to the extent that it is possible) an accurate understanding of this Being. These conjectures, like all other knowledge claims, must be subjected to critical scrutiny.

The second part of all religions consists of rituals and religious practices, ethical norms, rules and regulations devised to assist the managing of the worldly affairs of the faithful. All elements of this second aspect fall under the general category of ‘technology’ and, as such, can be regarded as various types of ‘religious technology’ (Paya, 2018, ch 3).

Technologies of all sorts and types have two main functions: some respond to people’s non-cognitive needs while others facilitate, only as tools and instruments, our cognitive/knowledge pursuits. Chairs, shoes, cars, and democracies are examples of the first type of technology, while books, pens, laptops, and cyclotrons are examples of the second type. Of course, some technologies, like mobile phones, have both functions.

Religious technologies, just like all other technologies, have the two aforementioned functions, albeit in the sphere of religious aims and objectives. Religious technologies, in the context of any particular religion, help to construct particular forms of life. In this way, they respond to the non-cognitive needs of the faithful. For example, alms-giving, charity works, and collective forms of worship help to further consolidate community spirit amongst the faithful.

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<sup>1</sup> Some aspects of reality or the realm of being may forever be beyond the reach of man’s knowledge. For example, the largest prime number or the number immediately after number 1 on the set of real numbers, or the cardinality of greatest infinity as defined by Cantor, can never be known

Moreover, such rituals can also help the faithful to develop a better character and become a better person. On the other hand, religious technologies could help the faithful in their pursuit of a better understanding of God. Prayers, for example, can elevate believers and assist them in their pursuit of acquiring a more truthful understanding of God. However, prayers, or any other religious ritual, on their own, are not knowledge; they are tools for achieving certain aims.

A sure sign of the effective use of religious technologies by the faithful is the effect of those technologies on the outlook and conduct of the believers. For example, in the case of those believers who apparently observe all their religious rituals but whose outward conducts remain unacceptable (e.g., they cheat, act immorally and treat others unjustly), one can safely assume that they have not benefitted from the religious technologies that they use.

For me, as a critical rationalist who happens to be religious, as stated above, religion is not based upon blind faith. It is a quest to understand aspects of reality that science does not touch. I do not regard religious faith as entirely based upon non-cognitive emotive elements or meaningful language games with no real referents. In fact, I argue that blind faith, i.e., a faith which is devoid of genuine cognitive elements, could pave the way to violence and evil acts. Such faith is motivated purely by emotions and propelled by will-power, not guided by the light of reason. There is no room for critical considerations in such a combination.

At this juncture, the following point needs to be clarified. On the one hand, as Popper has correctly observed, the realms of science and religion are distinct, and trespassing should not occur on both sides. (Popper, 2008: Ch. 5.) But on the other hand, and at the same time, one should not fall into the trap of either reducing religion to purely psychological, emotional and non-cognitive states or of regarding religious claims as being beyond rational critical assessment. Of course, religious claims need not be empirically testable or falsifiable to be assessable. They only need to be rationally criticisable.

Criticisability is a broader criterion than falsifiability which Popper himself developed after he realised the limitations of the falsifiability criterion for assessing non-empirical (e.g., philosophical) claims (Popper, 1963/2002: Ch. 8). I have stated that religious claims ought to be rationally criticisable. If religious claims are not rationally criticisable, they will be cognitively empty. Moreover, religious claims cannot be declared to be beyond critical assessment due to their 'sacred' status. The reason is apparent, even the most sacred religious proclamations and statements, just like reality itself, can only be approached through our interpretations and explanations. The latter, being human constructs, are certainly not sacred and, therefore, not exempt from critical assessment. In this respect, even science can be used to help us critically assess some of the claims made by believers in their conjectural bid to understand God and make sense of His words.

In the case of the religion of Islam, the conjectures with regard to the attributes of God are informed by a number of sources. These sources can play a role in the context of discovery as well as the context of assessment (Paya 2018: Ch. 2.). The first source is the Quran, which the majority of Muslims believe represents God's words. (Paya, *ibid*) The second source is the tradition

(Sunnah) of the Prophet Mohammad (and also, in the case of the Shi 'i Muslims, the tradition of the Shi 'i Imams). The third source is the views expressed by Muslim scholars and perhaps religious scholars who belong to other religions. And the last source is the believers' own personal religious experiences. The role of personal religious experiences in developing one's knowledge of God is a large topic which deserves closer attention.<sup>1</sup> Here I shall not be able to do justice to this important topic due to lack of space. However, whatever the role of the above sources, a main tenet of critical rationalism that one should bear in mind at this juncture is that our understanding of religious teachings, like our understanding of any other aspect of reality (in the extended sense of this term) always remains conjectural.

### 3- Critical Rationalism and Religion

Critical Rationalism, as a distinct school of thought and a way of life, has many things in common with certain interpretations of religion. The interpretation in question is the one which I have developed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Some of the main common themes between this interpretation and CR are as follows:

Both are against the extremist understanding of religion manifested by the likes of Daesh, supremacist Christians, extremist Jews, or militant Hindus who have no qualms about killing those who *they* regard as 'others';

Both are anti-positivism, anti-materialism, and anti-physicalism in that they subscribe to the view that reality is far richer than what can be grasped by the testimony of our senses or could be subjected to scrutiny by means of empirical evidence.

Both believe that there are many mysteries in reality, some of which we may never be able to comprehend or decipher.

Both maintain that individuals and communities ought to be moral, and both uphold and observe codes of morality.

Both share the view that knowledge is a pathway towards spiritual emancipation. And Truth is the ultimate goal of our knowledge pursuits.

Both aim at making the world a better place for all. And

Both argue that the future is open and optimism is a moral duty.

### Part II- The Main Bones of Contention between a Believer and a Non-believer Critical Rationalist

In this part, the six issues which Professor Shearmur has discussed in his paper will be critically examined and replied to.

<sup>1</sup> Martin and McCutcheon 2012, Bernard 1992, Proudfoot 1985, Bellah 1970, Lewis & Whiteley 1955, James 1902/2002

<sup>2</sup> Paya 2018, Introduction

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## 1- God and the Problem of Evil

Professor Shearmur's argument from evil presents a major challenge to believers.<sup>1</sup> As a way of responding to his challenge, let's begin by noting that evil is an absence of good. It is a privation. Like shadows, it does not have a real existence.<sup>2</sup> There are two types of evil:

- 1- Natural Evil, like natural disasters, such as earthquakes, the eruption of volcanos, pandemics, etc., are regarded as evil only when looked up from a human perspective. A quake or a hurricane in an uninhabited part of the earth, which does not cause the death of human beings or destruction of their properties, is not regarded as evil.
- 2- Moral Evil, which is caused as a result of human beings' immoral acts. A corrupt politician who betrays his constituency or a murderer who kills innocent individuals, are just two examples of this type of evil.

With regard to both types of evil, further deliberation would reveal that, in many cases, the appearance of an evil and the suffering that it causes are directly related to the intended or unintended human action. For example, the recent tragedy of the collapse of the Metropole Tower in Abadan was due to human negligence of the fact that nature takes its course regardless of peoples' wishful thinking.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, those who build their houses in areas that are low-lying and liable to flooding, and neglect the fact that putting in place proper flood-control measures is a necessity, suffer from the consequences of their negligence. Or, when people choose unhealthy lifestyles, for example, by eating too much processed foods, exposing themselves to excessive amounts of sun rays without proper protection, or inhaling polluted air on a daily basis, etc., they will be liable to suffer from all types of diseases.

With respect to moral evil, people suffer as a result of the ill-intent of their fellow human beings who have chosen to exercise their free-will in morally unacceptable ways. The case of the Norwegian ultra-right terrorist, Anders Breivik, who killed 77 in twin attacks on Utøya island and Oslo (Townsend 2012), or the case of a British sperm donor who fathered fifteen children without telling their lesbian mothers who had received his sperm about his inheritable condition (Giordano 2022) are further examples of the appearance of moral evil.

Another aspect of the problem of evil which we must take into account is that, from a certain perspective, it has two dimensions: intellectual and emotional. I submit, without reservation, that while one may be able to explain, to some extent, the intricacies of the problem of evil and show that it has nothing to do with an all-powerful, all-knowing God whose goodwill is absolute and non-conditional, it is not at all easy, and even may be impossible, to tackle the emotional aspect of this problem. A mother whose little child has died as a result of an incurable type of cancer may well remain inconsolable, even after listening to many lengthy rational explanations.

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<sup>1</sup> Points II 2.1 & 2.2. in Professor Shearmur's paper.

<sup>2</sup> On the problem of evil see, among others, Farrington (2015), Davies (2006), Koslowski (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Berg 2022, Ahmadi and Peyravi 2022



One of the trickiest aspects of the problem of evil is that people ask, “Where has God been when they were suffering and calling upon Him but receiving no reply?” While I readily admit that one may not always be able to offer a satisfactory answer to the above question, I suggest that if one could momentarily bracket the emotional aspect of the problem, it may be possible to take some steps towards a somewhat reasonable answer. There is a nice proverb in English which says, “One cannot have one’s cake and eat it”. But what does it mean in this context?

The difference between us, human beings, and both animals and angels are that while animals act according to their pre-programmed instincts, and Angel’s act according to their pre-programmed rational designs, it is us, the human beings, who are endowed with not only rational and emotional capacities but also free will.

If God constantly intervenes in human affairs, in other words, if He micromanages *our* affairs, He deprives us of the consequences of our free choices and reduces us to mere robots and automatons. In other words, free will and personal responsibility go hand in hand. And they are two of the main hallmarks that set human beings apart from other beings. One cannot expect to enjoy the privileges of having free will and, at the same time, expect to be micro-managed by God or any other entity, for that matter.

God is just. He is also wise. However, in talking about God’s attributes and actions, one must not adopt an anthropomorphic approach. God’s justice does not mean that God acts according to our understanding of justice. *Our* understanding of justice and *our* understanding of rationality, as well as *our* understanding of the principles of morality, are constantly evolving.

Values such as justice and principles of ethics are objective and part of the fabric of reality (Paya 2019). We constantly find out more and more about the infinite capacities of these values and principles, and correct our earlier mistaken views about them through our lived experiences in the sphere of the human condition.

I will say more about the problem of evil later on. But at this juncture, I must say something about the issue of non-conventional lifestyles.<sup>1</sup> I have deliberately chosen the term “non-conventional lifestyles” as an all-inclusive, neutral term to cover all those groups who identify themselves to be outside the conventional part of a Bell-shaped curve which depicts the distribution of all types of sexual relationships between people. I discuss this issue in a number of steps.

a- The issue of ‘non-conventional lifestyles’ is complicated and, therefore, should be discussed with care and patience.

b- The complexity of this issue, in the context of Islamic culture, is due to the impact of a number of independent factors, including God, the fuqaha (Muslim experts of the Sharia law), the law of the land, the individuals who have adopted the non-conventional lifestyle, and the varieties of these lifestyles, which each invites a separate treatment.

c- For example, whereas transvestites who wish to adjust their bodies to their psychological dispositions receive support from Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence) and the fuqaha, homosexuals are

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<sup>1</sup> Point II 3. in Professor Shearmur’s paper.

treated differently according to the traditional juristic views. There are also certain differences between the religious rulings for homosexuals and lesbians (Teymoori 2018, Al-Munajjid 2009).

d- It is claimed by some scientists that non-conventional lifestyles have biological and genetic causes. This is a controversial issue among the scientists themselves.<sup>1</sup> Some, for example, lay more emphasis on environmental (including social) factors and minimise the role of biological causes. But assuming that at least some of those who prefer a non-conventional lifestyle are biologically programmed and cannot do anything about it, then this adds a new layer of difficulty to the problem of their status from a religious point of view.

e- As far as God is concerned, His will, as is understood by believers, is to facilitate mankind's journey towards the goal of getting as close to God and becoming similar to Him (with respect to adopting God-like attributes) as humanly possible. In the context of Islam, whoever acknowledges himself/herself as a Muslim, cannot be denied this status. I.e., being regarded as a Muslim. Among all attributes of God, the two that outshine the rest are His mercy and compassion. All Muslims, whether sinners or pious, could partake in the journey towards God. God does not deprive them, nor does He deprive even the non-believers, of His mercy and compassion.

f- All Muslim fuqaha (jurists) have declared homosexual and lesbian lifestyles as *haram* (forbidden) and prohibited Muslims from adopting them.<sup>2</sup>

7- An individual who lives in a particular jurisdiction, Islamic or otherwise, is obliged to observe the laws of the land in which he/she has chosen to reside.

g- If an observant Muslim, who is inclined towards an unconventional lifestyle, realised that his/her choice had been made as a result of environmental pressures and *not* as the outcome of an unchangeable biological or genetic condition, then he/she ought to refrain from pursuing the lifestyle which is considered to be *haram* in the eyes of Shariah.

h- If an observant Muslim who is inclined towards a non-conventional lifestyle feels so due to his/her biological condition, then he/she is advised to adopt (if possible) a celibate lifestyle. This is in tune with the rulings of Sharia.

i- If an observant Muslim who is inclined towards a non-conventional lifestyle wishes to change his/her lifestyle and adopt a conventional lifestyle, then the authorities and lawmakers must provide him/her with all sorts of facilities which are needed for this purpose.

j- If an observant Muslim, who is inclined towards a non-conventional lifestyle, decides not to adopt a celibate lifestyle, then he/she must be aware of the fact that in the eyes of Sharia, he/she is regarded as committing a heinous sin. Such as, an individual can still continue to be a practising Muslim. His/her relation with God is only between him/her and God. Sharia is mostly concerned with Muslims' interactions in the public sphere.

<sup>1</sup> Akapn 2019, Reardon 2019, Kaiser 2019.

<sup>2</sup> In contrast, some reform-minded Muslims have tried to challenge the fuqaha's rulings in this respect. See for example

Having discussed, albeit briefly, two major issues raised by Professor Shearmur, which might appear as conceptual problems for believers, I should now say a few words about one substantial conceptual difficulty for non-believers. I discuss some of the other difficulties in the latter parts of the paper.

Immanuel Kant, the great German philosopher, introduced three fundamental questions which, in a sense, set the agenda for the present debate. Kant's questions were as follows:

“What can I know?”

“What must I do?” and

“What may I hope?” (Kant, 1788/2015, A805/B833)

The first question deals with our innate urge to acquire knowledge about reality, The second question pertains to our conduct in life as moral agents, and the third question concerns our fate at the end of our life.

I readily grant that my learned friend, Professor Shearmur, could come up with more or less satisfactory answers for questions 1&2. But I submit that finding a satisfactory answer to question 3 is not easy, if not impossible, for a non-believer. But why?

The third question is closely related to what great thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as Nietzsche and Dostoevski, had dubbed ‘nihilism’ (Nietzsche 1882/1892/ 1974, Dostoevski 1879/1912/2015). It is about the **meaning** of one's life and the **values** one holds dear (Hendricks (2010), Kugle (2010)). It emerges because of the phenomenon of death and our awareness of its inevitability.

The issue or challenge of nihilism can be formulated in the following way:

If God does not exist, and if death means the absolute end to one's actual participation in life and the development of one's abilities and positive potentials, then the whole enterprise of living in the world as a self-conscious being with lofty ideas and ideals, including making the world a better place for all, and lessening the amount of suffering, becomes meaningless or absurd.

If one's perspective on life is based upon the conviction that one has come into a deaf and dumb universe by pure chance, and all that one can expect and hope for, is, if one is lucky, to live for a short period of time and, assuming that one is a moral agent, participate in a limited number of remarkable deeds before turning into stardust, then one should ask oneself: what is the point?

The above predicament has been brought into sharp relief by an eye-opening thought experiment suggested by Samuel Scheffler, the American philosopher (Scheffler (2013)). Scheffler invites us to think about the following scenario (I have made a slight change in his thought experiment): Suppose scientists have discovered that a large asteroid is on course to hit the earth a month from now, and as a result of the impact, the whole earth will be annihilated, and no one will survive.

Scheffler asks: how this affects one's attitude and consideration about one's choices and what one has to do now. In the context of the above thought experiment and with respect to Kant's third question, i.e., what may I hope? It seems non-believers can no longer hope that future generations will benefit from the fruits of their labour. There will be nobody to either appreciate or benefit from them.

In the context of the above thought experiment, it is not difficult to see why nihilism poses a serious threat to those who think this life is all that they have got. The above, however, is not the case for believers who believe that this life is just a small part of a never-ending journey of acquiring perfection.

But the argument from nihilism is not the only reason that gives the position of the believers who subscribe to enlightened interpretations of religion, and in this case, I specifically have in mind a critical rationalist interpretation of religion an edge over the position of non-believers, including a critical rationalist non-believer. There are other cases which, as it will be shown below, further strengthen the position of believer's vis-à-vis non-believers. In what follows, I discuss, in a brief manner, a number of such cases under these headings: 'Hope, suffering, Death, Consolation, and Salvation,' 'religion and our knowledge of the world,' and 'why genuine personal religious or mystical experiences could be used by believers to not only further refine their knowledge of God but help them to assess such knowledge critically and possibly (provisionally and until fresh experiences become available, corroborate it)?'

## 2. Hope, Suffering, Death, Consolation, Salvation

The network of the interconnected concepts of hope, suffering, death, consolation and salvation could be used to produce some arguments against the position of non-believers.

Hope, as we know, plays an important role in the well-being of individuals, groups and nations. With respect to Kant's third question, i.e., what may I hope? The account that religion proposes could help people to adopt a more positive and hopeful attitude towards life, even in the face of adversities and unbearable suffering.

In my opening remarks, I briefly referred to the issue of emotional response to suffering and hardship, which are caused by tragedies such as the loss of our loved ones. Consoling people in such tragic situations is not easy. However, I would like to argue that even in such cases, believers have an edge over non-believers.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE), the great Roman orator and politician, and one of the best-known members of the school of Stoicism, who had written a treatise on consolation (Cicero (2022)), is the champion of the art of consolation for non-believers, even today. Stoics, both classic and modern, maintain that wise individuals should learn to endure suffering. But as Michael Ignatieff has eloquently explained in his recent book, *On Consolation: Finding Solace in Dark Times* (Ignatieff 2015/2021), when Cicero's beloved daughter died while giving birth to her child, Cicero's philosophical writings proved unable to console him. For a long time, the champion of consolation was unable to console himself.

I should like to suggest, as an empirically testable conjecture, that believers are better equipped to deal with personal tragedies. For believers, even in the darkest hours, there is hope since God never leaves His friends alone.

It seems for the majority of people; the greatest personal tragedy is their own death or the death of their nearest and dearest. Perhaps the most effective consolation in the case of death is the notion

of salvation. I submit that such a powerful and positive tool is missing from the armoury of non-believers.

Another argument from the above network of meaning is related to the notion of endurance in the face of hardship and consolation. Luc Ferry, the French philosopher, himself a non-believer, in his book *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living* (Ferry 1996) argues that one of the main reasons that Stoicism, despite all its powerful intellectual facilities, was defeated in competition with the then newly-emerged Christianity was the poverty of its account of salvation.

The Stoic doctrine of salvation is resolutely anonymous and impersonal. It promises us eternity but of a non-personal kind, as an oblivious fragment of the cosmos. In contrast, Christianity (and indeed all Abrahamic religions) promise us no less than everything that we would wish for personal immortality and the salvation of our loved ones (Ferry 1996).

Another point that gives believers an edge over non-believers is a particular type of richness which is exclusive to religious life. A non-religious individual who has never had any serious dealing with the religious sphere, religious experiences and religious forms of life cannot fully appreciate the literary and artistic works whose core meaning and values are religious. If God is removed from the history of mankind, this history will become very impoverished indeed. The majority of the greatest artistic & literary works in the history of mankind are inspired by the belief in God, i.e., a transcendental, sublime reality.<sup>1</sup>

Another argument which works in favour of the position held by believers is the issue of the unresolved cases of injustice at the level of individuals or groups. Throughout the history of mankind, there have been many cases in which individuals, groups or even nations have been wronged by others without being able to obtain justice. If death is the end of everything, then innocent victims, who have been wronged, have every right to feel betrayed.

Such victims, if they are convinced that they are not going to get the justice they deserve, may react in many unexpected ways which may not be compatible with the well-being of other innocent individuals or society at large.

In Islamic teachings, on the one hand, people are invited to observe justice, in its fullest sense, in all their activities. After all, they are created in the image of God and should try to become like Him.

The Quran says:

O believers, be your securers of justice, witnesses for God. Let not detestation for a people move you not to be equitable; be equitable -- that is nearer to *taqva*

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<sup>1</sup> Dupré 1975. The point that I have made in the text should not be misunderstood. I entirely agree with Professor Shearmure that many non-believers have refined sense of aesthetic and enjoy all sorts of art including religious art. However, the point I have tried to make in the text is that the type of personal experiences which religious people undergo upon encountering a piece of religious art, could be qualitatively different from what non-believer's experience in their encounter with those same pieces of art.

(i.e., observing the etiquettes of being in the presence of God). And observe the *taqva* of God; surely God is aware of the things you do.<sup>1</sup>

On the other, it assures the believers that God is aware of people's deeds and even their intentions, and He will reward them or punish them accordingly. And escape from His governance (the realm of authority) is impossible.

The Quran says:

And whoever does an atom's weight of good shall see it, and whoever does an atom's weight of evil shall see it. The above is a constant theme in the Quran. It is a message of hope for believers and a stern warning to wrong-doers.<sup>2</sup>

And let's not forget that one of God's attributes is the Truth with capital T. This means, among other things, that God never gives any untrue message to people.

With regard to the above argument, Professor Shearmur has raised a rather serious challenge. In the section entitled: "Part III: Concluding Reflections his paper" under the subtitle "1. Is belief in God a Consolation?" he argues: "to believe in things just because one thinks that if they were true, it would be nice, is what one would expect from the feeble-minded, but obviously not from someone of the calibre of Professor Paya. One should, surely, require that it is reasonable to hope that one's views could be true or close to the truth. And in my view, in the face of the sorts of problems to which I have referred, the case against them being reasonable looks to me a tough one to meet."

The above is an important argument. I entirely agree with my learned friend that naïve and baseless hope in things which have no basis in reality is certainly irrational. But the question is: is believers' hope in God's mercy and benevolence naïve and baseless? Immanuel Kant has already provided an answer to this important question which to me seems to be comprehensive and cogent. Kant's answer was directly related to his understanding of the notion of 'the sublime'. Kant presented his answer in three of his treatises, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (Kant 1764/2011), *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Kant 1772/2006), and the *Critique of Judgement* (Kant 1790/2000). Kant tried not only to explain why to have hope in the mercy and benevolence of God is rational but also tried to elaborate under what sort of conditions such hope is rational. He distinguished three kinds of sublime (Kant, 1764/2011, 2:209: 16)

- ✓ 'The terrifying sublime' which is accompanied with dread or melancholy;
- ✓ 'The noble sublime' which deals with a quiet wonderment; and

<sup>1</sup> The Quran 5: 8 (Arberry).

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُونُوا قَوَّامِينَ لِلَّهِ شُهَدَاءَ بِالْقِسْطِ وَلَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شَنَاٰنُ قَوْمٍ عَلَىٰ أَلَّا تَعْدِلُوا اعْدِلُوا هُوَ أَقْرَبُ لِلتَّقْوَىٰ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ (المائدة ٨).

<sup>2</sup>The Quran 99:7 & 8 (Arberry+ Qarai),

مَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ خَيْرًا يَرَهُ (٧) وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ مِثْقَالَ ذَرَّةٍ شَرًّا يَرَهُ (الزلزله ٨).

- ✓ ‘The splendid sublime’ that deals with beauty pervading a sublime design, e.g., St. Peter in Rome (Hund, 1983: 46).

And in his in *Anthropology*, he described the sublime in this way:

The sublime is awe-inspiring greatness (*magnitudo reverenda*) in extent or degree which invites approach (in order to measure our powers against it); but the fear that in comparison with it we will disappear in our own estimation is at the same time a deterrent (for example, thunder over our heads, or a high rugged mountain). And if we ourselves are in a safe place, the collecting of our powers to grasp the appearance, along with our anxiety that we are unable to measure up to its greatness, arouses surprise (a pleasant feeling owing to its continual overcoming of pain).<sup>1</sup>

Kant argues ‘the sublime’ cannot be perceived in a sensuous form but can only be conceived, rather inadequately, by the mind’s eye and the power of reason. However, since all our mental activities are prompted by challenges introduced by reality, in the case of ‘seeing’ the sublime with our mind’s eye, nature can play an important role. Kant introduces two types of phenomena that can prompt us to develop some (inevitably inadequate) conception of the sublime. He dubs these two types of phenomena ‘mathematically sublime’ and ‘dynamically sublime’.<sup>2</sup> The first refers to various kinds of mathematical infinities and the latter to the might of nature to bring about natural phenomena with colossal proportions. Kant gives the example of the eruption of powerful volcanos or the emergence of tremendous hurricanes or devastating earthquakes. We can think of the explosion of supermassive black holes as a new set of ‘dynamically sublime’ phenomena unknown to Kant. Having introduced these two concepts, Kant further argues that both serve to demonstrate the superiority of the human mind over whatever which belongs to the realm of phenomena: “The above explanation can also be expressed thus: That is sublime in comparison with which everything else is small. ... Thus, we can also add this to the foregoing formulation of the explanation of the sublime: That is sublime which even to be able to think of demonstrates a faculty of the mind that surpasses every measure of the senses.”<sup>3</sup>

While the notion of ‘mathematically sublime’ establishes the intellectual power of humans over nature, the notion of ‘dynamically sublime’ serve to demonstrate something even more subtle. Kant says: “**Power** is a capacity that is superior to great obstacles. The same thing is called **dominion** if it is also superior to the resistance of something that itself possesses power. Nature considered in

<sup>1</sup> Kant 1772/2006, 140. Goldswait 1960, in his translation of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, has translated the same paragraph in this way: “The sublime is that greatness in size or intensity which inspires awe: it simultaneously invites us to approach it (so as to make our forces equal to it) and deters us by the fear that in comparison with it we shall shrink into insignificance in our own estimation (thunder over our head, for example, or a high rugged mountain). When we are in a safe place, the gathering of our forces to grasp the appearance, along with our anxiety about not being able to rise to its greatness, arouses *astonishment* (a feeling that is agreeable because it continuously triumphs over pain).” (Goldswait 1960, 45). Lund has used this translation in his paper (Lund 1983, 46).

<sup>2</sup> Kant 1790/2000, First Section, Second Book, Analytic of the Sublime, 128-159.

<sup>3</sup> Kant 1790/2000, 134. Emphases suppressed.

aesthetic judgment as a power that has no dominion over us is **dynamically sublime**. If nature is to be judged by us dynamically as sublime, it must be represented as arousing fear (although, conversely, not every object that arouses fear is found sublime in our aesthetic judgment).<sup>1</sup> From here, Kant moves to present an argument which provides an excellent answer to Professor Shearmur's objection. Kant argues that God, with all His Might and Power, *can* (in principle) induce immeasurable degrees of fear in mortal souls. But those believers who have lived genuinely moral lives have no fear of God, instead they realistically believe in God's infinite mercy and benevolence:

Thus, the virtuous man fears God without being afraid of him, because he does not think of the case of wishing to resist God and his commands as anything that is worrisome for **him** ...<sup>2</sup> ... Only when he is conscious of his upright, God-pleasing disposition do those effects of power serve to awaken in him the idea of the sublimity of this being, insofar as he recognises in himself a sublimity of disposition suitable to God's will, and is thereby raised above the fear of such effects of nature, which he does not regard as outbursts of God's wrath (Kant, 1790/2000: 147) ... In this way alone does religion internally distinguish itself from superstition, the latter not providing a basis in the mind for reverence for the sublime, but only for fear and anxiety before the being of superior power, to who's will the terrified person sees himself as subjected without holding him in great esteem; from which of course nothing can arise but the attempt to curry favour and ingratiate oneself, instead of a religion of the good conduct of life.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Religion and Our Knowledge of the World

When it comes to our knowledge of reality, it is clear from the teachings of Islam that the task of the Prophet and the Quran is not to teach us physics or chemistry or natural sciences in general. A clear division of labour can be observed in Islamic teachings.

On the one hand, Islamic teachings encourage us to explore various aspects of reality by means of the power of our intellect and the cognitive facilities we are endowed with. On the other, Islamic teachings help us to better understand the intricacies of *the human condition* and, even more importantly, the complexities of the afterlife.

Our understanding of the teachings of Islam, as critical rationalists explain, always remains conjectural. And, of course, we are expected to constantly subject our conjectures to the severest critical assessments.

<sup>1</sup> Kant 1790/2000, 143-4. Emphases in original.

<sup>2</sup> Kant 1790/2000, 144. Emphasis in original.

<sup>3</sup> Kant, *ibid.* What Kant discusses concerning the confidence of the virtuous human beings before God, is echoed in many of the verses of the Quran, including the following: "O soul at peace, return unto thy Lord, well-pleased, well-pleasing! Enter thou among My servants! Enter thou, My Paradise!" (89: 27-30, Arberry)



#### 4. The Epistemic Worth of Religious or Mystical Experiences

Genuine mystical experiences are a subset of lived religious experiences. Lived religious experiences are, in turn, a subspecies of lived or personal experiences in general. Lived experiences, in general, as critical rationalists have argued, form the backbone of all our knowledge claims.<sup>1</sup> In the absence of such experiences, which are informed by our quests to find solutions for some of the challenges reality presents to us, no conjecture can be formed. And in the absence of conjectures about reality, no knowledge can be gained.

Our personal or lived experiences, to be of epistemic service to us, should be reconstructed with the help of our memory, the conceptual schemes as well as the categories we have created, and the language facilities at our disposal. Personal experiences, which are reconstructed, take the shape of statements and propositions. In this form, they can be presented to the public sphere, as conjectures or knowledge claims concerning a certain aspect of reality, for critical scrutiny.

Whether a particular personal or lived experience is refuted or corroborated, as the result of critical scrutiny in the public sphere, we stand to learn something about reality. In the case of refutation, we learn that reality is not the way the refuted conjecture had claimed. In the case of corroboration, we regard the knowledge imparted by the conjecture in question as our best understanding of a particular aspect of reality for the time being.

One of the common criticisms against religious and mystical experiences is that they are, more than other types of knowledge claims, open to abuse because they are subjective and, therefore, not criticisable. This common conception, however, is not correct.

Muslim mystics (*'urafa*) have introduced rigorous methods for separating fake mystical experiences from genuine ones. They have discussed their methods in various books. One of the better-known works in this genre is Ibn Arabi's treatise entitled, *A Treatise on what cannot be trusted (or relied upon)*.<sup>2</sup> It contains more than 300 practical instructions to help the practitioners of mysticism and the public to assess the worth of mystical experiences. In short, it contains some methodological rules, on par with modern methods discussed in modern methodologies, such as critical rationalism (Paya 2023).

#### Part III. Concluding Remarks

In the last part of my paper, I would like to highlight some of the main arguments, which I hope, show why a critical rationalist is better off being a believer and not a non-believer.

<sup>1</sup> Popper 1974, 1087; Paya 2003, Ch. 7; 2024, Ch. 8. Popper writes: "Intellectual intuition and imagination are most important [in the sciences]" I wrote [in C.& R., p. 28 (point 8)], 'but they are not reliable: they may show us things very clearly, and yet they may mislead us. They are indispensable as the main sources of our theories; but most of our theories are false anyway.' All this applies to the discovery of new theories (or proofs). Once they are produced, we examine them critically. And this critical examination is the rational part of theory production. But all this is, of necessity, highly schematic. In reality, we constantly switch from intuition to criticism and back to intuition; besides, intuition often enters in the critical phase: we often learn to "see" without any detailed examination that something is wrong (and sometimes we "see" wrongly)." (1974, 1087)

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Arabi. (رسالة ما لا يُعَوَّلُ عليه) *Mā Lā Yo'awwalu 'Alaih*

As was discussed earlier, it seems to me that the issues of the end of life and unresolved cases of injustice and inequity cannot be adequately answered by those who do not believe in an all-knowing, all-powerful, absolutely just and merciful God.

Allow me to elaborate:

It was already stated that critical rationalists lay great emphasis on the importance of living a moral life and on the duty of the individual to do their best to make the world a better place for all.

But how can this goal be achieved in practice?

For critical rationalists, while in the realm of ideas, one is to be revolutionary in that one should try to produce as many viable conjectures for theoretical problems and critically assess their weaknesses in the hope of learning from their shortcomings. But, in contrast, when it comes to dealing with people instead of ideas, one ought to be extra cautious and adopt a piecemeal approach towards making the world a better place for all. This is because, in this sphere, one can cause irrevocable harm if one is not extra careful with people's lives and their well-being.

Now, consider the case of those who believe that death is the end of everything for them. If they have been wronged and have suffered from cases of unresolved injustice, they are likely to adopt one of the following two approaches:

They may become depressed and live the rest of their lives with the sad and depressing feeling that others have wronged them without any prospect of receiving justice, or they may decide to take the law into their own hands and rebel against a system they regard as unjust.

Neither of these options leaves much room for making the world a better place. Because in the first case, the individuals will be victims of what others have done to them. In the second case, the actions of the rebel individuals may cause the death and destruction of lives and properties and victimisation of innocent individuals.

In contrast, as was explained before, a critical rationalist approach to religion encourages people to do their best to live a moral life and help make the world a better place for all.

But at the same time, a religious interpretation of critical rationalism advises individuals not to lose hope under any circumstance and never yield to despair and depression. It advises the individuals that even if, at the end of the day, as a result of the injustices imposed upon them, they have not been able to obtain justice and reap the rewards of their labour in this world, despite their best rational efforts to address them, all is not lost. They can still remain hopeful that their good deeds are not wasted and that the inequities they have experienced, undeservedly, at the hand of others, will not go unpunished.

This is because, according to a critical rationalism account of religion, this world is only the first stage of a never-ending journey towards perfection, and whatever people do, good or bad, will be assessed by an omniscient, omnipotent, just and compassionate God.

In contrast, a deaf and dumb world, which is subject to blind random actions of physical forces, is a very scary and terrifying abode indeed.

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