

## On evolutionary religion (in interaction with Rottschaefer, Elliott, Dumsday, and Palmqvist)

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**Abstract:** Here I explain the concept of evolutionary religion and consider its relations to what in previous work I have called sceptical religion. I also interact with five articles recently published in *Religious Studies* that respond to my work and address related themes – articles by William A. Rottschaefer, James Elliott, Travis Dumsday, and Carl-Johan Palmqvist.

In this article I explain an idea of mine that is not yet well understood, namely, the idea of evolutionary religion,<sup>1</sup> and consider the relations between evolutionary religion and what in my earlier trilogy I called sceptical religion.<sup>2</sup> I am motivated, in part, by the appearance in *Religious Studies* of several new articles on my work, and so the present piece is furthermore a response to their authors.<sup>3</sup> I do not here reply to everything they have offered, but after saying something about my own topics, I seek to identify what can be learned from their articles about my topics and also point out where the record needs correcting. Though it does occasionally need correcting, particularly on the nature of evolutionary religion, those two results – the discovery of illumination and of error – are not always mutually exclusive as one reflects on these articles. In particular, as we'll see, a misunderstanding found in more than one of the articles also reflects a better use of the term 'sceptical religion' than my own former use – a broader use I shall happily adopt.

### What evolutionary religion is

From the perspective afforded by scientific timescales, it must seem that religion began rather recently on our planet. The content of this thought is purely temporal. But, provoked by it, we may for the first time notice the

importance of the following question: is human religious life just getting started developmentally, too? Looking about us with eyes newly opened, it is hard to miss all the evidence of a certain religious immaturity. Think, for example, of religious violence or the disgraceful treatment of women through much of religious history. Our history features many missed opportunities – across psychological, social, moral, and also intellectual domains – for religious development. In part because of this evident *immaturity of shortcoming*, as I have called it, we cannot properly rule out (treat as false) an *immaturity of potential* as we scrutinize human religious life at the large-scale or macro level.<sup>4</sup> In particular, when considering with due humility all the relevant information available to us, we cannot properly rule out the idea that fundamental religious capacities remain undeveloped for the species but would, with sufficient time and effort, and as nature takes its course, be enlarged in a manner allowing us to perceive important religious truths we have not yet contemplated. Perhaps the present human understanding of religious possibilities is no less misleading than Aristotle's understanding of physical possibilities.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, indeed, it would take a long future of moral and other improvements, many tens or even hundreds of thousands of years of multidirectional growth, to bring human beings to the level of capacity most think themselves now to possess, which would allow us to detect any religious truths there may be. Perhaps. This also might *not* be the case – there is no thought of inevitable religious progress here. But we should not rule it out.

As it happens, most forms of religion as we see it today, including forms of Christianity accepted by many philosophers of religion, do rule out such a future and are therefore subject to criticism. We might want to level this criticism by saying that many of their ways of thinking and operating, by presupposing that things are otherwise, are unjustified. But notice that we really see a new kind of criticism emerging here. If these ways of thinking and operating are unjustified in light of immaturity concerns left unaddressed it is because they are *premature*, and we say what needs to be said most perspicuously by using this idea of the premature. At the same time, another new question emerges – and with it the concept of evolutionary religion. The question is this: what form(s) of religion, if any, would *not* be premature in these ways? Stated positively: what form(s) of religion, if any, would fit or be appropriate to or be *adapted* to the temporally early stage of human religious life in which we find ourselves, in which all these issues about the extent of our religious development, all these actual and possible developmental immaturities, still face us? The quest for an answer to this question, because of the connections to evolutionary thought bristling here, is the quest for evolutionary religion.<sup>6</sup>

This is a new quest, dependent as it is on the steps of thought I have traced, and the new evaluational category of the premature thus dislodged. With it comes a new way of addressing and perhaps solving problems of faith and reason, one holding that evolutionary religion can indeed be found and is to be approved,

even if a form of religion acceptable *simpliciter*, appropriate in some absolute sense and at any stage of human development, does not exist.<sup>7</sup>

### **Evolutionary religion and sceptical religion**

When I hit on the relativist notion just described – the notion of religion adapted to a temporally early stage of human religious life, in which myriad actual and possible religious immaturities still loom – I also saw that the modest form of religion I had in my trilogy found to be eminently defensible, an ultimistic form of non-doxastic, imagination-based faith, might credibly claim to realize it – that is, might claim to realize *evolutionary religion*. In the eponymous book I developed a case for the view that the form of religion defended in the trilogy, there called *sceptical religion*, was indeed the form of religion adapted to the present stage of human religious life. In other words, I was arguing that what I called sceptical religion deserves the additional label of ‘evolutionary religion’. It realizes the sort of religion that ‘evolutionary religion’ names. I could therefore have said that what I’ve called sceptical religion *is* evolutionary religion, but of course that expression – on my interpretation – employs the ‘is’ of instantiation not the ‘is’ of identity, and so the two things named here remain distinct. It is like saying that a certain candidate for mayor, call her Prudence, is the fiscally responsible candidate. Even if Prudence doesn’t instantiate the sort of thing we have in mind when we speak of fiscal responsibility, someone else might do so. In the book I explicitly distinguished what I have called sceptical religion from evolutionary religion in this way – for example, by inviting other attempts to identify how evolutionary religion could successfully be instantiated.<sup>8</sup>

As this etiological summary may help to clarify, evolutionary religion is to be understood as a sort of religion instantiated by any form of religiousness satisfying a certain description: namely, ‘a form of religiousness adapted to this temporally early stage of religion, in which many actual and possible religious immaturities still loom’. So long as what I’ve said about immaturity and prematurity provides the parameters for talk of evolutionary appropriateness, a rough synonym would be ‘evolutionarily appropriate religion’. It is important to see that the term ‘evolutionary religion’ does not name any particular candidate for that status and so it does not name my favourite candidate, which, even if it were a successful candidate, might be no more than one way of realizing evolutionary religion. (Though when writing Schellenberg (2013) I was more narrow-minded on this point, I would now affirm that there might be more than one way.) This candidate or that – whether mine or someone else’s – should in my view receive its own name, while the name ‘evolutionary religion’ should be reserved for the sort of thing they seek to instantiate. Thus understood, evolutionary religion can be a subject of investigation that many address in diverse ways. That is why I have spoken of the *quest* for evolutionary religion.

Some of the authors responding to my work in the articles mentioned above are silent on these points, and others appear to have misunderstood them. There is, in particular, a tendency to treat evolutionary religion as *identical* to what I called sceptical religion, and so to treat whatever might be meant by 'evolutionary religion' as though it rises or falls with the ultimistic faith I have defended – as just another way of talking about the same thing. This is an error. Rottschaefer's article exhibits this tendency. He speaks of my 'arguments for evolutionary religion', apparently thinking of these as arguments for ultimistic faith, and of 'adherents of evolutionary religion',<sup>9</sup> when as we've seen evolutionary religion as such can have no adherents; only forms of religious life hoping to realize it do. Elliott likewise says that the form of religiousness I have defended and evolutionary religion may be treated interchangeably and accordingly uses for the former the abbreviation 'ER' throughout his article.<sup>10</sup> I hope that my clarifications above will make this error a thing of the past.

Another error – also involving sceptical religion – appears in these articles, too. But my feelings about it are rather different. Indeed, I think it affords an insight that deserves to be a thing of the future. Let me explain. As already indicated, when I wrote my trilogy I used the label 'sceptical religion' for the ultimistic imagination-based form of religiousness defended in its third volume, and this without paying much attention to the fact that the same term might well be used for a *type* of religion that the faith I was defending exemplified. Both Rottschaefer and Elliott have treated the term as though I did use it thus.<sup>11</sup> This is, strictly speaking, an expository error. But it is an instructive one. For we should accommodate the fact that someone who followed, say, Palmqvist's advice and favoured traditional religion, approaching Christianity or Hinduism with an imagination-based faith or some other sort of non-doxastic faith rather than with belief, might also very naturally be said to exhibit 'sceptical religion'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, if willing to countenance the notion of naturalistic religion, we should leave room for a naturalistic *non-doxastic* religiousness such as the Hegelian sort defended by Rottschaefer, and be ready to view it as instantiating sceptical religion. 'Sceptical religion' I shall therefore from now on associate with a broader non-doxastic notion that can be instantiated in various different ways rather than with the specific view involving an imagination-based faith directed to ultimism that I have defended.

It may now be wondered whether, if we distinguish the two meanings of 'sceptical religion' seen here – the original meaning and the considered meaning, as from my point of view I would call them – and focus only on the latter, the first of the two interpretative errors I've just pointed out can be replaced with insight. That is, if Rottschaefer and Elliott avoided conflating evolutionary religion with the form of religiousness I have defended, whether by calling it sceptical religion (using that term in its original sense) or otherwise, and elided only evolutionary religion and sceptical religion in the second, *broader* sense, would they be correct? They would not. We do now have a type of religiousness in each case, but sceptical religion is defined by reference to its non-doxastic features,

whereas evolutionary religion is defined by reference to its being a form of religiousness adapted to a temporally early, and perhaps immature, stage of human religious life – and these properties are hardly identical! Even if we dropped the identity claim and claimed only that religion with the former property instantiates religion defined by the latter, many other properties would no doubt need to be cited to fully explain the coincidence. Furthermore, although it may be that the candidates most persuasively proposed for the status of evolutionary religion will be forms of religion prepared to do without religious belief, this is for serious future discussion to determine, and we could hardly reasonably insist, at the beginning of such a discussion, that only non-doxastic contenders will be admitted to it.

### **Is the quest for evolutionary religion itself premature?**

As it happens, the forms of life defended by Rottschaefer, Elliott, and Palmqvist are all non-doxastic in the relevant sense: they are all proposed forms of *sceptical religion*, as I am now inclined to construe it. I shall have something to say about what they bring to the table, in relation to the quest for evolutionary religion, in a few moments. But I begin with the central suggestion of Travis Dumsday, which raises a prior issue – a problem for any straightforward acceptance of the quest for evolutionary religion. Though not disputing my general religious scepticism, Dumsday, in ‘The exoteric/esoteric divide and Schellenberg’s Sceptical Religion’, does hold that its ‘pragmatic implications’ are at odds with what he sees me as having suggested by my recommendation of an imagination-based faith response to ultimism. The latter move is too quick, he says. Since Dumsday bases what he says about pragmatic implications largely on Schellenberg (2013),<sup>13</sup> I shall assume, as I defend my view, that the background concept of evolutionary religion described above may legitimately be brought into play, even though Dumsday leaves it out of view. (I shall make a similar assumption later when discussing Palmqvist, as it seems worth investigating whether his points remain strong even when aspects of my overall position to which he has not explicitly referred are mobilized.) Bringing that concept into play, Dumsday’s view amounts, in effect, to this: that the quest for evolutionary religion is itself premature.

Why does Dumsday think this? Why is my move too quick? Because, he thinks, it would have us ignore – through the presupposition that they are false – the suggestion of various esoteric religious traditions (whose exact views, since kept secret, I have naturally not been in a position to take into account) that final religious truths have been received in their midst in the *here-and-now*. My view, he says, ‘presupposes that all of us’ and so ‘any adherents of esoteric religions’ share ‘the same basic capacities’. I am ‘presupposing not merely uncertainty’ about an esoteric view of human nature, ‘but its falsehood’. He commends the comment of a referee to the effect that my view ‘presupposes that religious

maturity claims are all false'.<sup>14</sup> Going with the evolutionarily inspired, imagination-based ultimistic faith I have defended is accordingly, Dumsday suggests, pragmatically ill-advised for the religious sceptic looking for the truth and also aiming to maximize the likelihood of religious salvation (should such be possible at all). For by presupposing that any final revelation will have to wait for the future and focusing her efforts on the discovery of a form of religion suited to various facts involving immaturity, she cuts herself off from the possibility of esoteric religious enlightenment in the present. And the presupposition she makes lacks a good basis. It is one she has not earned. For all we know, it is false.<sup>15</sup>

Dumsday, in much of his article, presses his views cautiously, circumspectly, and with plenty of attention to what I have written. So it is unfortunate that he has here missed what are in fact the relevant aspects of my view. It may be that incaution on my own part has sometimes led me to convey a contrary impression. But I have often stated quite explicitly that the religious immaturity we can be sure about is what above I call our immaturity of 'shortcoming', and that what above I call an immaturity of 'potential', which in the religious case would mean that no-one has yet developed to the point where religious truths, if such there be, can be made available to human awareness, is to be regarded, more modestly, as epistemically possible. Indeed, Dumsday himself reproduces a passage from Schellenberg (2013) in which I say just that.<sup>16</sup> So the presupposition he claims to find in my work is not in fact there. If on my view we are now to turn our attention to what the facts about human immaturity demand, it is because we have no idea how far we are developed, religiously, but can see a lot that might be fixed in hopes of a clearer view, and not because of confidence that only in the far future will religious enlightenment be achieved (if ever it will).

Looking into the matter he has raised a bit more deeply, I think we can see that the distinction Dumsday makes between esoteric and exoteric religions is in the end somewhat artificial, at least in application to my view. Esoteric religions may be keeping their supposed revelations hidden, but they too face the *incompatible* religious and irreligious claims found elsewhere in human life. We don't need to know the details of esoteric religious beliefs and practices to expose this issue. For one thing, it's not as though exoteric religions *don't* lay claim to religious revelations. In this respect esoteric and exoteric traditions are on all fours. And given that the former do not acquiesce in the alleged insights of the latter, we may suppose their own alleged insights to be at odds with the others - at least in respect of how far the ultimate religious truth is thought to have been glimpsed in them. Perhaps it will be said that what esoterics are keeping hidden would make short work of the competition if it were revealed. But it *hasn't* been revealed. And confidence about making short work of competition is not exactly in short supply elsewhere in the religious realm. People in exoteric traditions, too (for example, people in the tradition of Orthodox Christianity with which Dumsday allies himself), may have convincing-seeming religious experiences as they 'grow in the faith', whose depth or enlightening features esoterics would need to

contest successfully. Here it's important to remind oneself that people in esoteric traditions have no secret additional brain – these people are evolved humans, just like the rest of us – and that their alleged mode of access to the divine, by definition, can be shared and corroborated only by others in their own tradition. So we have a problem. It's not hard to see that it's a rather familiar problem, the problem of religious diversity, which in the end applies to esoterics as much as to anyone else. It would be nice if in all humility they opened their processes to the gaze of the wider community, and helped us resolve that problem, perhaps in their favour, but as it is they are only making the problem worse.

Another way of explaining what's going on here, which helps itself to these data, would suggest that the presupposition shoe is on the other foot. That is, a somewhat different presupposition from the one Dumsday mistakenly supposes I have made is being exposed here and is showing its unsustainability, for esoterics as much as for any other participants in human religion, namely the presupposition of potential-related religious maturity alluded to at the beginning of this article. Since many of my arguments have been aimed precisely at this presupposition and have the conclusion that it isn't justifiedly retained, not that it is false, based on grounds that traverse the whole of human life, my arguments apply to esoteric human religion as much as to exoteric and avoid the problem raised by Dumsday. Esoteric religion is just another aspect of the present religious scene that contributes to the obscuring of our vision and to the need for a new form of religiousness, adapted to this situation, that might (among other things) enable us eventually to clear it.

There is something else to be learned from Dumsday's article, however, which I want to bring out briefly before moving on. When he's not suggesting that I am presupposing the falsehood of esoteric religious claims, he sometimes says that I'm presupposing that the esoterics lack religious *knowledge*.<sup>17</sup> This reminds us that it is possible to construe potential-related maturity in the religious case in terms of the acquisition of religious knowledge, not just as the full development of religious intellectual capacities or beliefs that hit on fundamental religious truths. And the denial of the former is different from the denial of the latter. It could be true and justified even if the other denial is not justified, as I have suggested it is not. Now it seems to me that given the circumstances I have described (our general circumstances and also the specific circumstances of esoterics), the denial of the former *is* true and justified. So if the charge is that I have made *this* claim – namely, that religious knowledge has not yet been achieved by human beings – I embrace the charge.

### **Is evolutionary religion naturalistic and Darwinian-Hegelian?**

William A. Rottschaefer, in his article 'Schellenberg's evolutionary religion: how evolutionary and how religious?', has in effect defended an affirmative answer to the question of my section title. I will here ignore the mistaken conflating of

evolutionary religion and sceptical religion pointed out earlier to consider his proposal and his criticisms of my own, on the assumption that no bar to a quest for evolutionary religion of the sort proposed by Dumsday can be made to stand.

According to Rottschaefer, the form of religion that might satisfy such a quest would be much more thoroughly evolutionary than the version of sceptical religion I have defended – in particular, it would be both epistemically and ontologically evolutionary. ‘For realists’, he says, ‘ontology precedes and determines epistemology’.<sup>18</sup> To do justice to the idea of a Darwinian future, which he finds intriguing, Rottschaefer says we need an evolutionary ontology, ‘an ontology of natural, material entities, or processes that come in and out of existence, an ontology of causing and being caused, and an ontology of becoming’.<sup>19</sup> My ultimism won’t do, because its ontology is static and un-evolutionary – rather a lot like the ontology of much traditional religion, which I had hoped to transcend. To *really* transcend it, says Rottschaefer, and take a properly large step forward in our thinking about religion, we need to move to a thoroughly *naturalistic* conception of religion.

He proposes one way of doing so, which he calls ‘Darwin’s Hegelian Spirit’. This view ‘envisages emerging higher-level phenomena constituted by physical, biological, and cultural systems that possess increasing, though finite, metaphysical unity, axiological value, and soteriological power’.<sup>20</sup> Without definitely committing himself to this option, Rottschaefer argues that a non-doxastic faith directed to it is preferable to ultimistic faith by being more true to the evolutionary impulse – but also because in this sphere practitioners of religion can act to ‘bring about their own redemption’ and furthermore can ‘increase the soteriological value of the whole of which they are a part’.<sup>21</sup> In stark contrast, he says, on my view redemption is largely left to an unknown Ultimate, which remains unaffected by anything we may do.

Rottschaefer’s positive contribution deserves further development, and more attention than I can offer here. As I see it, he is providing the discussion of evolutionary religion with something to feed on by generating another candidate for the latter’s instantiation. We need much more such work. As this suggests, I am open to the possibility that our conception of religion will eventually be expanded to admit naturalistic possibilities. Whether it is thus expanded should, in my view, depend on, among other things, how persuasively ideas like those Rottschaefer is asking us to call religious can be developed as such and on how well a non-doxastic adherence to them, on the part of those who find them attractive, can be shown to contribute to the diminishment of human religious immaturity.

At the same time, I must point out that (a) some of the implications of my own stance are here misunderstood, and that (b) the power and evolutionary integrity of certain other implications it has are underestimated. Some examples. First, on (a): nothing in my characterization of ultimism, the proposition that there is a triply ultimate – a metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate – reality, implies that the nature of such an ultimate reality would be static not



dynamic. Change does not entail improvement,<sup>22</sup> so it cannot be because an axiologically ultimate reality would be unimprovable that change would not be found in it. Yes, such a reality would be transcendent of natural processes, as Rottschaefer points out, but this only suggests that any dynamism it possesses is not the dynamism of nature. And even that is not logically entailed. Because our investigations are at an early stage, I have urged that as little as possible be read into the concepts embedded in ultimism, and this leaves room, as I have elsewhere observed,<sup>23</sup> for the possibility that the Ultimate in some way transcends but *includes* the natural world – though they may seem obscure and problematic, such ideas should continue to be developed – and also for monist views like the one I find in Spinoza. By the same token, it is not an implication of ultimism that nothing we do can affect the Ultimate. (Something like this might be derivable from some elaborated version of ultimism but not from ultimism plain and simple.) It is conceivable that a process of maturing from our present stage of development to fundamental religious insight, if any such is to be had, would be negotiated only through immensely complex and multifarious interaction between an ultimate divine reality, which is gradually being revealed, and ourselves, and that we, at this present stage, help to bring about ‘our own redemption’ and that of the world by actively lending our imaginations to such ideas and combatting immaturities at every turn.

Second, on (b): there is one form of redemption that a naturalistic view will find difficult to promise, namely the redemption of all those whom nature has destroyed, often when little of their potential had yet been realized.<sup>24</sup> An ultimistic view can keep this hope alive. Now if a science-fed metaphysical naturalism were clearly true, it might be silly to speak of such things. But given the success of the sort of scepticism I have defended, it is far from silly. Given the success of such scepticism, therefore, it is hard to see, *especially* from a soteriological point of view, why religion should be strongly tempted by naturalism. It is unclear whether Rottschaefer thinks better of naturalism’s epistemic status than he allows by going along with my religious scepticism (as he says) for the sake of argument. A statement like ‘ontology precedes and determines epistemology’ suggests some confidence about the proper shape of ontology – confidence, here, about the truth of naturalism. However that may be, my own epistemology, though it accords respect to the consensus results of science, is open to the possibility that no science will measure all things – that there are things not to be dreamt of in any science. On my view epistemology at our immature stage of development, rather than leaning on a presupposed ontology, ought to *enlarge* the sphere of ontological possibilities. From the perspective of a chastened epistemology suited to our immaturity, we will see that it is far too soon to give up on the more ambitious dreams of religion.

That, precisely, is what the ‘Darwinian future’ Rottschaefer too finds inspiring means for me, religiously. And so I would make my view *less* evolutionary in the sense that, to my mind, matters most were I to follow his advice. It seems to

Rottschaefer that I should make evolution the measure of all things, but it is precisely the imagination-lifting effect of reflection on the evolutionary sciences that moves me not to do so.

### **Ietsism rather than ultimism?**

James Elliott, in ‘The power of humility in sceptical religion: why Ietsism is preferable to J. L. Schellenberg’s Ultimism’, offers us another alternative candidate for evolutionary religion worthy of discussion with his version of the Dutch notion of ietsism (‘somethingism’). As with Rottschaefer, I will assume, in my interaction with him, that the confusion over the nature of evolutionary religion has been rectified, and the difference between the latter and sceptical religion noted.<sup>25</sup>

Elliott’s view, unlike Rottschaefer’s, is non-naturalistic. But he wants to take the shortest possible religious step beyond naturalism. His ietsism says that there exists ‘a soteriologically transcendent reality that may or may not also be axiologically and/or metaphysically transcendent’.<sup>26</sup> (With ‘may or may not’ the metaphysical component of this proposition appears to be conflated with an epistemic notion; I will treat these as distinct.) Elliott’s ietsism, regarded as a metaphysical option, goes only as far as transcendence, avoiding the further step to ultimacy, and moreover includes but one sort of transcendence rather than three. This difference provides his basis for preferring ietsism over ultimism where the attempt to realize evolutionary religion is concerned. Ietsism, he says, allows for a ‘more epistemically and practically tenable’ position.<sup>27</sup>

By ‘more epistemically tenable’ Elliott appears to mean that ietsism better lends itself to epistemic responsibility. In particular, it has more in the way of ‘epistemic modesty’ – it is ‘*necessarily* more likely to be true’.<sup>28</sup> By ‘more practically tenable’ he means that ietsism is easier to assent to in a non-doxastic way.<sup>29</sup> And these considerations, epistemic and practical, are, as he sees it, linked: ‘It’s simply impractical’, Elliott says, ‘to assume the sceptical religionist can so robustly assent to something like [ultimism], because it just seems far too immodest.’<sup>30</sup>

Elliott also has what he regards as a third reason to prefer ietsism over ultimism in sceptical religion, but since this is only a reason to suppose that the former is *not inferior* to the latter in certain other important respects involving the accommodation of powerful religious experiences and the ability to challenge and inspire and stretch immature humans existentially, I set it aside here. Though I am not convinced by all of Elliott’s points in connection with this reason, they are relevant and helpful to his case only if the other points stand up to scrutiny, and I don’t think they do.

Turning, then, to the latter: consider first that ultimism’s likelihood on the evidence available to us is hard to turn into something that matters in relation to intellectual humility and other intellectual goods when we’re still in the dark about how various religious propositions fare on the *total* body of relevant evidence, whatever that may be. Here we need to take the measure of available arguments for religious

scepticism and feel the serious possibility of our species's temporally deep religious immaturity (and it is for those who accept such things that Elliott says he wishes to make ietsism appear preferable to ultimism). For all we know, the probability of ultimism on the total evidence is high. And for all we know, the claim that there is a soteriologically transcendent reality will in the end have full epistemic respectability conferred on it only by the evidence discovered for ultimism, which entails it.<sup>31</sup> When these points are conjoined with Elliott's, we no longer have an effective epistemic deterrent to ultimistic faith.<sup>32</sup>

Perhaps it will seem that by avoiding talk of metaphysical transcendence, Elliott still makes a relevant epistemic advance. But it is hard to see how he has really avoided it. I understand why Elliott would focus on soteriology, since the latter is most obviously tied to distinctively religious concerns. But if the reality in question were purely natural, metaphysically, with purely natural powers, all the effects of its 'behaviour' (whether taken personally or impersonally), including its soteriological effects, would be natural too, unless some of them were transformed into more by something that *was* metaphysically transcendent – in which case the latter reality rather than the former would also be the more relevant, religiously, and the one properly called soteriologically transcendent.<sup>33</sup> Ietsism needs metaphysical as well as soteriological transcendence. And so the appearance of having a less controversial proposition that might come with Elliott's focus on soteriology alone is dispelled. Meanwhile, the epistemic judgement I myself have emphasized as needing to be made before shifting into the mode of imaginative faith, namely, that a proposition is epistemically possible and thus not justifiably believed false, can be made in relation to *both* ietsism and ultimism.

If the point about greater epistemic tenability is by these means made problematic, the point about greater practical tenability is not likely to be unaffected, for the two points are linked, as we've seen. Not having identified the probability of ietsism or ultimism on the total body of relevant evidence – allowing any confidence about such things to be replaced by religious scepticism – Elliott cannot, without begging the question concerning such matters, offer to make things psychologically easier for us in the name of ietsism. Certainly, ultimacy is more extravagant than transcendence, but religious sceptics who have internalized the relevant facts and possibilities about human immaturity will see themselves as in no position to look askance on the idea that reality is thus extravagant. The point here is very much the same as the one I made at the end of the previous section.

And other points suggest themselves. Our evolutionary history has apparently made ultimistic ideas quite easy to believe – witness the wide influence of theistic belief, which is ultimistic – and although religious sceptics have left belief behind, this 'easiness' is relevant when we consider the purely psychological question about how much difficulty sceptics might be expected to have *imagining* an ultimistic claim to be true and continuing to take it seriously. It suggests that the correct answer is 'not much'. Now one can't rule out that evidence – perhaps

from experimental philosophy – could be gathered to help Elliott push in a different direction. But he has not offered any such evidence. Another relevant point is that there is a wider pragmatic landscape to be considered given all the arguments – *pragmatic* arguments – presented in Schellenberg (2009) for a brand of sceptical religion that requires ultimism, not just ietsism. Influenced by such arguments, persons hoping to realize evolutionary religion might reasonably choose to press on with an imaginative ultimistic faith even if they *would* have found a trimmer ietsistic faith easier. Among these arguments are again some that flag the redemptive power to be associated with the truth of ultimism, as observed in the previous section. Ietsistic religion, by not going beyond transcendence, loses pragmatic points here in much the way that Rottschaefer's naturalistic religion does.

Now none of this is to say that ietsistic religion cannot realize evolutionary religion – only that it would not do so in a manner that is to be *preferred* to an imaginative ultimistic approach. Perhaps, in the soils of this new land, more than one flower should be encouraged to grow.

### **Is a traditional non-doxastic stance preferable to ultimistic faith?**

At the opposite extreme from Elliott's ietsism we find the view of Carl-Johan Palmqvist, who brings a traditional brand of non-doxastic faith into conversation with my own view in two articles. In 'Faith and hope in situations of epistemic uncertainty' Palmqvist advocates a non-doxastic alternative to the faith attitude I have defended. And the project of the other article, which appears in the present issue of *Religious Studies*, is well explained by its title: 'The proper object of non-doxastic religion: why traditional religion should be preferred over Schellenberg's simple ultimism'.

Palmqvist's interesting alternative non-doxastic attitude is a persistent religious hope combined with *occasional* faith. Appreciating my idea that faith involves 'picturing the actuality of an epistemic possibility to oneself',<sup>34</sup> Palmqvist nonetheless finds epistemically troubling the notion that this should, in the religious case, involve 'closing off investigation on matters concerning one's overall stance to important aspects of human life without planning to take up those investigations again'. For example, he says, to have ultimistic faith as I have described it means indefinitely setting aside investigation into the truth of naturalism. But the continuation of investigation on matters concerning one's overall stance to important aspects of human life, including the continuing investigation of naturalism, 'is surely an epistemic goal worth pursuing'.<sup>35</sup> Palmqvist's solution is to restrict faith to certain 'limited situations' such as those that involve 'performing religious rituals, visiting a place of worship, praying, and so forth'.<sup>36</sup> With these isolated events held together and put in context by a continuing religious hope, we can, he suggests, claim the benefits of my approach to the nature of faith while avoiding its problems. For such hope is compatible with continuing to investigate the truth

of religious and irreligious claims at those times when one is *not* in a faith-appropriate situation.

In his second article, in the present issue, Palmqvist adds to this first proposal a proposal concerning the proper object of a non-doxastic attitude in the religious case. Here he departs rather more radically from my own view, defending the idea that a detailed and elaborated ultimistic claim of the sort to be found in various religious traditions of the world today, including Christianity, makes a better object for non-doxastic religion than my simple ultimism, which is focused on triple ultimacy alone – at any rate when the tradition in which the claim is found, by providing access to religious experiences, offers the possibility of contact with the divine reality it has detailed. The latter thought about *contact* is indeed central to Palmqvist's article, and is made much of for a pragmatic reason: 'what good is a vague but true religious view if it is too abstract to let us experience religious reality?' And simple ultimism, according to Palmqvist, is just such a view. Being 'too abstract', it 'precludes the subject from being aligned with reality'. If we want to 'maximize our chances of getting in touch with religious reality', we should choose a 'fully detailed view'. Since '[t]raditional forms of qualified ultimism', by contrast with simple ultimism, 'are both specific and contain religious experience', Palmqvist concludes that '[w]hen choosing an object for non-doxastic religious commitment, we should prefer a traditional form of qualified ultimism over simple ultimism'.

I will interact with these arguments in turn, feeling free – for the reason mentioned earlier – to draw on the concept of evolutionary religion as I do. So, first, on attitude: I will not suggest that there is something religiously untoward in Palmqvist's positive proposal. Indeed, it may represent one way of instantiating evolutionary religion. But I do not think it is *better* suited to that role than the persistent rather than occasional faith attitude I have defended. This is because the latter does not in fact involve 'closing off investigation on matters concerning one's overall stance to important aspects of human life without planning to take up those investigations again'.

Many issues bristle here, and many things might be said about them. Some I *have* said in my books. Here I will refine one such response. The wisdom to doubt I've spoken of is earned in part from evidence of human immaturity, and especially from an awareness of how much investigation of non-naturalistic religious ideas (ideas already before us and ideas yet to be freed from our ignorance) remains to be done. Such religious investigation the religious sceptic I have described will regard as highly relevant to future – perhaps far future – judgements about the intellectual status of belief in the truth of any existing, known elaboration of ultimism and about the status of naturalistic belief. Indeed, on the view I have defended, neither belief in the truth of an existing, known elaboration of ultimism nor naturalistic belief could be justified before this enquiry is carried out. By the same token, a sceptical enquirer who chose to devote the remainder of her investigative life to such enquiry would be engaged in intellectual work that contributes

to the satisfaction of a necessary condition for the justification of any such beliefs. In such circumstances it would be false to say that investigation of naturalism or of any other relevant proposition has been indefinitely postponed. And so Palmqvist is mistaken when he puts this into his description of someone who, as a life choice, adopts the faith I have defended. For the one who adds to the wisdom to doubt the will to imagine becomes committed to precisely such religious investigation. (Notice that it's in the nature of the case that she needn't expect justifying evidence for naturalism or any other relevant proposition to appear before it's done.) This, indeed, is a large part of what qualifies such faith to instantiate evolutionary religion.

What about Palmqvist's second article, where the focus on simple ultimism is opposed? One problem here is that a good deal of relevant discussion in the third chapter of Schellenberg (2009), concerned with how a mutually beneficial relationship might exist between sceptical ultimistic religion and traditional forms of faith, is not taken into account. But, quite apart from that, there are three reasons why Palmqvist's vigorous defence of traditional faith is in the end unpersuasive.

First, his assumption that the activities of ultimistic religion allow for no experiential access to the divine is questionable. Here Palmqvist neglects, among other things, mystical experiences that we already know about, which in their powerful but opaque profundity are sometimes easier to link to simple ultimism than to any elaborated version. Indeed, it might be because of her exposure to religious experiences difficult to fit into any traditional box that someone finds ultimistic faith appealing. Palmqvist here neglects as well the possibility that new, quite different forms of religious experience will become available in the future as those committed to ultimistic faith work in the context of an approach defined by the idea of evolutionary religion.

Second, Palmqvist questionably assumes that the *true* details about a divine reality would be within our power to understand, at the present stage of human development. Otherwise why would he say that 'to make alignment with reality possible . . . one's view must be detailed enough to postulate concrete entities of the right kind'? Not taken into account here is that details about concrete entities of the right kind might be impossible for immature humans to grasp, and in that case the best we could do would be to get right generalia of the sort found in simple ultimism. Now Palmqvist might respond that if the true details are unknowable then an experiential alignment with a religious reality is impossible, and so, given our ignorance on this score, our best bet is to pick an alternative on which alignment is possible, and hope for its truth. But this argument (specifically, its first premise) is refuted by my previous point.

Third is a point that should be understood against the background of the previous two. Anyone who takes Palmqvist's advice will have to select some *one* from a number of traditional detailed religious options. But given the previous points, anyone whose religious scepticism is formed as mine is will conclude that

she has no better reason to suppose that *that* one is correct and can bring her to experiential contact with the divine than to suppose that simple ultimism represents the best way to go, in relation to these desiderata, at our present stage of development. In particular, Palmqvist is mistaken in supposing that, in such circumstances, a detailed object of faith selected from one of the existing religious traditions will allow one to ‘maximize one’s chances of getting in touch with religious reality’.

For the various reasons mentioned, then, I think we ought to conclude that the arguments against my views in Palmqvist’s two articles are unsuccessful. But I still applaud his exploration of ideas that are alternatives to all of the other ways of trying to instantiate evolutionary religion I have addressed in the present piece. Perhaps there is some way we have not yet thought of for a traditional form of religion, especially when taken non-doxastically, to satisfy the conditions required for evolutionary religion – to fit or be appropriate to or be adapted to the temporally early stage of human religious life in which we find ourselves, in which many issues about the extent of our religious development, many actual and possible developmental immaturities, still face us. Stranger things have happened! The idea of evolutionary religion, as I hope will by now be clear, is powerful and capacious enough to stimulate and reward a diverse set of attempts to reconceive religious faith. It also provides an excellent rationale for thinking about religion non-doxastically in the first place – one that might even, in time, allow what Palmqvist rightly calls ‘an important minority view among philosophers of religion’ to become more widely held. And it may well be that, in the end, it will help more than one form of non-doxastic religion to make its case.<sup>37</sup>

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### Notes

1. See Schellenberg (2013). The distinctive notion of evolutionary religion, first spelled out in this book, is key to everything else in it. Hence the title. But reviewers have sometimes missed this fact. See, for example: <<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/evolutionary-religion/>>.
2. By the trilogy I mean Schellenberg (2005), Schellenberg (2007), and Schellenberg (2009).
3. See Rottschaefer (2016), Elliott (2017), Dumsday (2019), Palmqvist (2019a), and Palmqvist (2019b).
4. My terminology here reflects my latest work on these subjects, which appears in Schellenberg (2019), but the basic ideas involved are already in Schellenberg (2013) – see, for example, *ibid.*, 46–49. The more recent work improves, I hope, on the earlier in several ways, but it also has a slightly altered focus, considering what I call the human 'religion project' rather than religion *per se* and arguing that the religion project is immature in every way. In this article, however, as in Schellenberg (2013), I will be focused on religion itself, and my immaturity claims – in particular my claim about religion's potential-related immaturity – will accordingly sometimes be more modest. Where I say more definitely that religion is immature, I have in mind its shortcoming-related immaturity.
5. I first encountered this comparison of religion's present stage of development with that of early science – as I was recently led to recall – in Alston (1991), 278. Alston makes this connection when his back is against the wall in a chapter on the problem of religious disagreement. Perhaps for this reason he does not take his insight nearly as far as the insight itself – as distinct from Alston's more conservative aims in that chapter – would have us go. Even when he entertains the thought of future change leading to a new religious consensus, Alston's assumption is that a personal God will be at the centre of it. (You can see this on the same page.)
6. See Schellenberg (2013), 4–6, 73–75.
7. See *ibid.*, 74.
8. See *ibid.*, 74, 93.
9. Rottschaefer (2016), 476, 477.
10. Elliott (2017), 98.
11. See, for example, Rottschaefer (2016), 477, 478, and Elliott (2017), 97, 98. Dumsday (2019) introduces yet another use for the term by applying it to a set of 'tenets' – a 'theory' – that he extracts from my trilogy (*ibid.*, 39). His might generously be interpreted as a suggested or proposed use, given the absence of an explicit denial that I have used the term differently in the trilogy. For various reasons, I do not find this proposed use as compelling as the alternative usage associated with Rottschaefer and Elliott and discussed in the text.
12. We should – for another example – be happy to accept as exemplifying sceptical religion the sort of Christian at the centre of Howard-Snyder (2017).
13. See Dumsday (2019), nn. 5 & 6.
14. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
15. *Ibid.*, 47–50.
16. *Ibid.*, 47.
17. See, for example, *ibid.*, 50.
18. Rottschaefer (2016), 482.
19. *Ibid.*, 483.
20. *Ibid.*, 487.
21. *Ibid.*, 490, 491.
22. Contrary to what Rottschaefer appears to assume. See *ibid.*, 494, n. 16.
23. See, for example, Schellenberg (2005), 26.
24. Perhaps a naturalistic afterlife cannot entirely be ruled out. See the interesting speculations of Steinhart (2015).
25. I will also refer to ultimism as invariably I myself have done, using only the lower case and regarding it exclusively as a proposition (treating ietism accordingly). Both Rottschaefer and Elliott (though in



different ways!) suggest using the one term 'ultimism' for more than one purpose, and in my opinion such practices should for clarity's sake be avoided.

26. Elliott (2017), 98.
27. *Ibid.*, 108.
28. *Ibid.*, 98–99.
29. In this connection Elliott sometimes speaks, somewhat confusingly and distractingly, of greater 'believability' (see, e.g. *ibid.*, 106), but I will regard this as an aberration and ignore it accordingly.
30. *Ibid.*
31. Elliott sometimes writes as though ultimism excludes ietsism, but this it could do only if ietsism were the claim that there exists a soteriologically transcendent reality that is *not also* metaphysically or axiologically transcendent. And in his hands it is not. Apparently it is because of the epistemic component Elliott slips into the formulation of ietsism ('may or may not') that he regards ultimism as excluding ietsism, but the proposition that really would oppose ietsism when the latter is formulated thus is not ultimism but rather the *epistemic* claim that ultimism is certainly true or justifiedly believed true. Needless to say, you will never catch a religious sceptic making such a claim.
32. It may seem that I have emphasized the importance of simple ultimism's greater relative likelihood when discussing various elaborated ultimisms such as theism, and so I am here denying force to a form of reasoning I myself have used. But such an impression would be based on misunderstanding. Although I have emphasized how simple ultimism is a more general and more fundamental proposition than its elaborations and could be true even if various elaborations including theism are not, this has been to show (for example) how atheism can be religious, and how simple ultimism makes a better framework for ongoing religious investigation than theism, not to support a point about relative likelihood – and this precisely because of my emphasis, in various works, on how the relevant present likelihoods lose their importance in the face of what we don't know about the total relevant evidence.
33. A similar argument would invite us to bring axiological transcendence into ietsism too, but I will not develop it here.
34. Palmqvist (2019a), 329.
35. *Ibid.*, 324.
36. *Ibid.*, 330.
37. I am grateful for the helpful comments on this article of two anonymous *Religious Studies* reviewers.