

Is sceptical religion adequate as a religion?

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Abstract: I argue that J. L. Schellenberg's sceptical religion faces two problems of religious adequacy. The first has to do with its relationship to the goal of bringing persons into proper alignment with an ultimate good; the second, with the desideratum of sceptical religion's becoming sufficiently well-established as to be a vehicle for the accomplishment of great things on the stage of history. I argue that actual sceptical religion would need to accommodate itself to the requirements of historical existence, and that such accommodation might well lead to a blurring of the distinctions Schellenberg draws between 'sectarian' and sceptical religion.

My project in this article is to assess the adequacy of J. L. Schellenberg's 'sceptical religion'. There are two pitfalls to the undertaking which I will try to avoid, both of which stem from the fact that it is by no means clear how such assessment is best carried out. The first of these is the risk of being unfair to sceptical religion by employing a conception of adequacy to which its author does not subscribe.¹ I will try to avoid this pitfall by construing adequacy in relation to two aims which Schellenberg himself embraces: on the one hand, the aim of bringing persons into proper alignment with the ultimate good in the universe, and on the other hand, the aim of turning the 'culturally powerful force' of religion to the task – not to put too fine a point on it – of saving humanity from itself.²

The other pitfall is not so easily avoided. I take it that I am trying to discern how well sceptical religion would fare were it to escape the printed page and become actual in the lives of persons. I recall it being said of Thomas Edison that he could construct a representation of a mechanical device in his mind, set it in motion, and discover through introspection which of its components would fail from the stress of operation and how soon (I have no idea whether the story is true). I think I am engaged in a similar project, one of imaginatively constructing an example of whatever sort of device a religion is (following, as it were, Schellenberg's blueprint) and then observing how well it does whatever it is supposed to do.

Such a project will be highly responsive to the intuitions, prejudices, and experiences of the one doing the imagining, as these play on his understanding of how religion works in real life and why. As a result, the grounds for any assessments generated by such a procedure will be open to challenge.

A vivid example is ready to hand. Schellenberg imagines an objection that a religion that offers no traffic with superhuman agents 'should not be expected to catch on any time soon'.³ His response is to challenge 'the unquestioned influence of things familiar' in this objection.⁴ Now in what follows I will be relying on things familiar, largely because if such reliance were disallowed I should not know how to proceed. I think I have observed that religion is the more vibrant as it contains more historical and conceptual content (including, for example, ideas about supernatural agents). I think there is also good reason to think that a causal relationship between content-richness and vibrancy obtains in religion. Such a connection would provide the best available explanation of why the forms of religion observable on the stage of history have almost without exception been highly concrete, and why 'natural religion', i.e. religion shorn of all elements not vouchsafed by reason (of which sceptical religion is, I think, an example), is usually regarded as a textual curiosity whose provenance is the European Enlightenment.⁵ Now certainly, history and experience might not be reliable guides to the possibilities for religion. But short of leaving my armchair and embarking on adventures in socio-religious experimentation, I must work with the available materials.

Sufficient unto salvation?

If I understand his position correctly, Schellenberg takes sceptical religion to be oriented towards the goal of attaining an ultimate good. Sceptical religion is not supposed to be idiosyncratic in aiming at this goal: as early as *Prolegomena* Schellenberg suggests that having this aim is just part of what it means to be a religion.⁶

Consider what might be termed *soteriologically sufficient information*. Soteriologically sufficient information will be whatever human beings need to know (or believe, or take on faith, or whatever) in order to be in a position to attain an ultimate good. If the ultimate good consists of intimate relationship with God, then the soteriologically sufficient information will consist of whatever creatures need in order to attain this relationship; alternatively, if the ultimate good is escape from the cycle of rebirth through the disciplined surrender of desire, then the soteriologically sufficient information will consist of whatever creatures need in order to successfully accomplish this surrender.

Now the customary arrangement, I think, is for a religion to claim that it provides such information. We typically think of religions as phenomena that present themselves as methods for attaining whatever is best for human beings

(although I don't hold that religious adherence is always properly explained as the result of prudential calculation). The details obviously differ from one tradition to the next, with some claiming exclusive possession of the proper instructions (or of divine favour) and others presenting themselves as one among many 'pathways up the mountain', and with some declaring the truth available to all and others granting access only to privileged adherents.

Now if I understand Schellenberg's proposal correctly, sceptical religion deliberately refrains from claiming that it possesses soteriologically sufficient information. That is, the adherent of sceptical religion does not take herself to be in possession of information that puts her in a position actually to attain the ultimate good. Since this claim may be controversial, I want to take some time to make a textual case for it.

The adherent of sceptical religion embraces (in faith) 'simple ultimism', which refrains from attributing to the Ultimate more than that it is metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate, together with what follows from these characteristics.⁷ Such an adherent rejects the various 'interpretations of ultimism' advanced by the world's religions as unjustified. She does not believe that the Ultimate does not have the characteristics attributed to it by the world's 'qualified ultimisms', but does believe that it is possible that it does not: as Schellenberg puts it, 'From an evolutionary perspective we are in a position to notice that much of what humans have come up with so far *may* represent only poor attempts to fill out that ultimistic vision'.⁸

Moreover, while the adherent of sceptical religion holds (in faith) that 'the value of the Ultimate can be communicated to us' and that 'by relating ourselves appropriately to the Ultimate, our own deepest good can be realized', she also believes that she may not be in possession of the 'final truth about value'.⁹ Since, according to Schellenberg, 'we should regard many of our thoughts about what has value or about how value is realized in things as limited and quite possibly imperfect in their apprehension of the truth',¹⁰ the adherent of sceptical religion thinks it possible that her own views regarding value are not ultimately reliable.

Now early on in *The Will to Imagine*, Schellenberg confronts a version of the 'emptiness objection' to sceptical religion which he formulates as follows:

Because of the aforementioned emptiness, how is there enough content for us to answer questions about which actions are appropriate to the truth of simple ultimism? ... How can we articulate what is involved in trusting [the ultimate] to 'save' us unless we know what to do in order to be saved, and how can we know this unless we posit more specific properties?¹¹

Schellenberg's response to this objection involves arguing that simple ultimism provides enough content to generate substantial guidance for living. Simple ultimism motivates moral action aimed at promoting the realization of the 'human good' (argued most extensively in the chapter on Kant);¹² the appreciation and

preservation of beauty (argued in the chapter on William Paley);¹³ and humbler activities such as seeking contentment with what one has and striving to maintain equanimity in the face of illness.¹⁴ And if these are activities which contribute directly to a person's attaining the highest good, sceptical religious faith also motivates second-order activities such as the 'religious research project' of learning more about the ultimate and the pursuit of religious community.¹⁵

So, simple ultimism contains enough content that a person committed to it in faith will find ways to keep religiously busy. But to say this is not to say that sceptical religion contains soteriologically sufficient information. For if it is possible that we are not in possession of the 'final truth' concerning value, it is possible that activities we deem religiously valuable do not suffice for the attainment of the ultimate good. This possibility is vividly brought to mind at several places in *The Will to Imagine*, as when Schellenberg speaks of the Ultimate 'permitting the realization of the best that humans could seek for themselves and for their world (even if it is not something that they have yet learned how to seek)'.¹⁶

This, then, is the position that I attribute to the sceptically religious person regarding its soteriological efficacy. The adherent of sceptical religion finds certain activities to befit her commitment to there being something ultimate. But she does not know how reliable her sense of value is and so does not know whether the activities will attain for her the ultimate good. She holds that it is possible that, given the passage of time and the success of religious inquiry, later generations (and, perhaps, her later self) will be in a better position in regard to these questions. But she believes only in the possibility that this is so; she does not actually believe one way or the other.

I think there is a problem of adequacy here. I have called attention to Schellenberg's claim that a central aim of religion as such is to bring persons into alignment with an ultimate good. Suppose we say that, given this claim, a necessary condition for a religion to be objectively adequate is that it contains soteriologically sufficient information, and that a necessary condition for a religion to be subjectively adequate is that its adherents have good reason to think that it contains such information.¹⁷ Leaving aside the question of whether sceptical religion is objectively adequate (for reasons that readers of this article will be able to supply for themselves), I think it is fairly clear that the necessary condition for subjective adequacy is not satisfied. That is, the sceptically religious person does not have good reason to think that the activities which sceptical religion motivates will suffice to bring her into proper alignment with an ultimate good. The soteriological efficacy of sceptical religion is, as it were, inscrutable. If this is so, then to the extent that religions ordinarily present themselves as pathways to an ultimate good, sceptical religion is an odd bird: it presents the prospective adherent with a pathway, but warns that while this pathway seems to lead in the proper direction, for all we know it may not.

Now, in correspondence, Schellenberg has offered a response to this sort of worry. Part of his response involves proposing a specific conception of subjective adequacy: as he puts it, sceptical religion is religiously adequate in the requisite sense 'only if there is sufficient motivation to take its activities as sufficient on this score'. And when subjective adequacy is understood in this way, sceptical religion satisfies the condition: 'For skeptical religion is pursued by people who have become comfortable enough with doubt, and sure enough about the importance of achieving [proper alignment with the Ultimate] . . . to be motivated to take - i.e. to imagine - the activities of skeptical religion as sufficient to that end.'¹⁸

I think this response creates more problems than it solves. The difference between having good reason to think that something is the case and having sufficient motivation to imagine that something is the case is a significant one, and the latter seems to me to be sufficiently permissive as not to be particularly useful for unpacking the notion of subjective religious adequacy. But for the moment I will focus on two different problems.

First, so far as I can see, sceptical religion in fact provides no motivation to imagine that the activities which our present grasp of value prompts us to undertake will suffice to bring us into proper alignment with the Ultimate. I do not see how being comfortable with doubt and convinced of the importance of achieving proper alignment provides such a motivation, any more than being comfortable with doubt and convinced of the importance of ascertaining whether or not alien intelligences exist provides a motivation to imagine that the relevant research projects currently under way will settle the question.¹⁹ It just does not seem to me that such imaginings make any contribution to the success of the projects in question.

Second, I do not see how one could take sceptical religion to be soteriologically sufficient while at the same time preserving either the simplicity of simple ultimism or the openness to future discoveries which Schellenberg prizes. To take sceptical religion to be soteriologically sufficient is, I think, to foreclose on many possible ways the Ultimate could be while still being metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate; it is to imagine that any possible futures in which we will discover our present grasp of value to be soteriologically deficient will not become actual.²⁰ Now Schellenberg has written that the adherent of sceptical religion is to be wary of 'terminat[ing] religious investigation in its early stages' by embracing even in faith any qualified form of ultimism.²¹ Perhaps imagining is sufficiently weaker than embracing in faith that where the latter impinges on openness, the former does not. But if this is so, it would seem that the adherent who imagines that sceptical religion is soteriologically sufficient could also imaginatively qualify ultimism in other ways without impinging on openness. I wonder whether Schellenberg would be entirely happy with this result.

Now I do not think that what I have described is a fatal flaw in sceptical religion: more precisely, I do not think that the inscrutability of its soteriological efficacy would make it impossible for sceptical religion to become historically actual. But I would also not expect an actual sceptical religion to preserve the characteristics that generate it. I will return to this issue, if briefly, at the close of this article.

A club for saints?

My second line of criticism has to do with the topic of religious community, but some remarks are needed to frame up this topic in relation to religious adequacy.

Schellenberg (2013) claims that his concern throughout the trilogy has been with ‘religion’ in the personal sense, rather than in the institutional sense.²² And in correspondence, he has indicated that on his view the fortunes of personal religion can be assessed independently of the fortunes of anything like institutional religion.²³ I am sceptical of the latter claim in particular, as it seems to me that prospective forms of religion that have not attained institutionalization in some form have tended to shuffle off the stage of history fairly quickly. But more importantly, I do not see how Schellenberg’s concern can be restricted to personal religion given his ambitions. However valuable sceptical religion might be as the possession of discrete individuals, I do not see how it can alter the course of human religious development for the better, as Schellenberg intends it to do, without becoming a phenomenon of the scale to rival the ‘qualified ultimisms’ that, in virtue of their institutional forms, currently dominate the religious landscape. And I do not see how sceptical religion can even begin to ‘scale up’ beyond the private conviction of readers of *The Will to Imagine* without itself attaining institutional form – that is, without forming religious communities whose members, as Schellenberg has put it, ‘are all committed to the same general religious goals’.²⁴

Now Schellenberg describes two possible forms of engagement in religious community. One of these involves associations of sceptically religious persons as just indicated; the other involves participation by the sceptically religious in the life of extant sects, whether ‘one-to-one’ or ‘one-to-many’.²⁵ I do not disagree with what Schellenberg says about the prospects for the second kind of association; in fact I think it most likely that sceptical religion will attain to historical existence as the position of individuals on the margins of existing communities. My claim in this section will be that sceptical religion is not a promising basis for independent religious community. I think it unlikely that a pure form of sceptical religion could generate a sufficiently robust social infrastructure to maintain independent existence – as Schellenberg has put it, could ‘put down roots sufficient to sustain itself’ not so much within the lives of individuals as ‘within the world’.²⁶

Here I offer three sets of considerations in support of this claim.

(1) In addition to being significantly 'empty' at the conceptual level, sceptical religion is materially empty. As described by Schellenberg, sceptical religion possesses no rituals, no visual symbols, no polity, no hymnody, no priesthood, no prayers, no meditative or contemplative practices, and no architectural or other aesthetic resources. Moreover, sceptical religion possesses little on the basis of which such things could be constructed. Concrete conceptions of the ultimate good, such as might be represented in song, are absent. Sceptical religion celebrates no historical events that might be re-enacted and no departed personages of great stature whom ritual might bring, however fleetingly and metaphorically, back to life. It provides no firm basis for a distinction among roles or offices within religious community, providing little basis for ecclesiological reflection.

Now I think any serious attempt to establish sceptical religion as a freestanding affair would be accompanied by efforts to construct elements of this sort. And to be sure, sceptical religion is not entirely devoid of resources. Sceptical religion does possess a set of foundational texts, even if these are rather less colourful than might be religiously optimal. There is also a nascent body of commentary on these foundational texts, such as the article you are currently reading (fortunately, it is not generally expected that commentaries be colourful). Now sceptical religion lends itself fairly well, in my judgement, to credalism: one can imagine sceptically religious affirmations and renunciations ('I affirm, in faith rather than belief, the existence of an Ultimate, metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological'; 'I do not believe in the Father, the Son, or the Holy Ghost'). One can imagine sceptically religious prayers, which I think ought to be conditional in form: 'O Ultimate, if you are a person, please help us to discover more about You and what You would have us do in order to attain the ultimate good; if not, never mind'. And a more talented person than myself might be able to craft a compelling visual symbol for sceptical religion, one that bespeaks both the value and mystery of the triply Ultimate (the best I can come up with is a golden question mark against a tripartite field, which I think would connote something of a lack of seriousness of purpose).²⁷

The silliness of the foregoing examples has a point. I see no easy way to construct the material trappings of religious community from the contents of sceptical religion as Schellenberg has described it. Now there are other resources for the construction of a religion's material side that one would expect to come into play if sceptical religion were to become actual. For one thing, religious traditions frequently borrow narratives, symbols, and practices from elsewhere, modifying them in ways large and small to suit their new purposes (think, for example, of the story of the Flood, the symbol of the Cross, and the sacrament of baptism). Sceptical religion might well borrow forms of observance from existing religious traditions to outfit its communities – adopting a congregational polity, say, using incense to signify the specialness of religious gatherings, instituting

shared meditative practices, or adopting congenial religious sceptics from history (Thomas Jefferson, perhaps, or Charles Darwin) as its saints. And for another thing, it would be foolish to discount the possibility that creative and sensitive individuals might produce novel symbols, poetry, narratives or the like that would capture, in compelling, crystalline form, the particular combination of open-mindedness and intentionality that is sceptical religion. But there are risks that attend both of these possibilities, which I will explore below.

(2) Suppose one thinks that a religion is flexible to the extent that it is capable of accommodating different kinds of people. Sceptical religion is inflexible along (at least) two important axes of difference.

One important axis of difference is that of cognitive ability. A religion is the more flexible along this axis as it allows for participation by persons of different levels of cognitive ability. The membership of the Christian communities in which I have participated have, without exception, been characterized by a range in the level of such ability, frequently closely related to the educational opportunities that have been made available to individuals over the course of their lifetimes, but sometimes also by factors that bear on mental and physical health, broadness or narrowness of outlook (including the outlook of parents), and simple direction of interest. In significant respects, the resources of the Christian tradition lend themselves to differential apprehension according to differential levels of cognitive ability: the tradition contains not only doctrines, proper understanding and application of which can be quite taxing, but also stories, songs, and the like. Along this axis, the concreteness of the tradition renders it flexible. This observation should not be regarded as either controversial or patronizing, as it has been a staple of discussions concerning the practice of Christian ministry for some time.

Sceptical religion is cognitively demanding. If sceptically religious community just is a community of the sceptically religious, then I can see no place therein for those without the ability to grasp, retain, and apply to themselves the terms and distinctions which Schellenberg presents in his trilogy.²⁸ The sceptically religious person abjures belief and embraces faith; he has become a religious sceptic through the use of reason (rather than through simple prejudice or socialization); and he both sensitive to the importance of holding to the simplicity of simple ultimism and capable of governing his assent in ways conducive to this aim. It may be that any moderately intelligent person with well-developed skills of self-reflection and self-governance could be brought to the requisite level of ability with, say, the equivalent of an introductory course in philosophy. But it seems to me that a great many people in the world would simply be shut out of sceptical religion on the basis of ability alone.

A second axis of flexibility concerns permissibility with respect to propositional attitudes. Suppose one envisions the difference between liberal and conservative forms of the same religious tradition in the following cartoonish way. Conservative forms of religion hold to a set of traditional claims and lay upon their adherents

the duty of believing these to be true, as well as the duty of believing the claims of other religious traditions to be false. In such a situation doubt concerning the claims of the tradition is religiously problematic, as is doubt concerning the falsity of the claims of other traditions. Liberal forms of the same tradition traffic in the same set of religious claims, but take a looser view of what sorts of propositional attitudes are properly to be taken with respect both to them and to the claims of other traditions. Doubt concerning the truth of traditional claims is not a particular cause for anxiety, and neither is a willingness to suppose the claims of other traditions to be true.

If this description is accepted (even as a caricature), then it should be apparent that, formally, sceptical religion resembles conservative religion more closely than it does liberal religion. While sceptical religion does not prescribe the attitude of belief in relation to religious claims, it also does not tolerate a diversity of propositional attitudes towards them. As described by Schellenberg, the sceptically religious person does not believe that the claims of other religious sects are true. Moreover, sceptical religion prescribes the attitude of faith for a fairly small number of claims about the Ultimate, and proscribes this same attitude in relation to claims that would qualify simplicity. If sceptical religion has the character that Schellenberg indicates, then the person who adopts a non-faith propositional attitude towards either the claims that sceptical religion embraces in faith – i.e. simply believes simple ultimism to be true – is not an adherent of sceptical religion, for she has failed to be a religious sceptic in the manner demanded by reason itself.²⁹ And if a person either believes or embraces in faith some claims that add content to simple ultimism (i.e. believes, or accepts in faith, that the Ultimate is personal, that the distinction of persons is preserved in the next life, or similar propositions), then that person is thereby not an adherent of sceptical religion; for acceptance of such a qualified ultimism prematurely terminates religious inquiry.³⁰ This is the characteristic I had in mind in remarking that sceptical religion lends itself to credalism: sceptical religion is defined by the assumption of *specific propositional attitudes* in relation to *specific propositions*, rather than in the looser ways characteristic of traditions which have sought to preserve their distinctive content while leaving behind their dogmatic and divisive pasts.

(3) Sceptical religion is not a religion for children. In saying this I mean something other than what Schellenberg means when he says that sceptical religion is not a ‘religion for infants’ (what he means, I think, is that it is not a religion for morally infantile adults).³¹ I mean to speak of actual children.

The religious education of children is a major preoccupation of most religious traditions. It is primarily through the education of children that religious traditions perpetuate themselves across time (there are exceptions, such as the Shakers). This is the case even in strongly evangelical forms of Christianity, where the official position is that one is not ‘really’ a Christian until one has freely chosen to become

one (I am not aware of evangelicals referring to children below the age of competent volition as 'not-Christians', as might be said of Catholics or liberal Protestants). It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of childhood religious education as a factor in the historical life of religious communities. For some time now it has been evident that the growth of conservative forms of religion at the expense of liberal ones has been due not primarily to ideological differences between them, but to higher rates of reproduction among women in conservative traditions, and this trend is by no means confined to the United States.³² And within my own liberal tradition, the education of children is an engine of adult participation in religious community, in that parents frequently initiate or renew a connection to such community for the sake of their children.

As described by Schellenberg, sceptical religion is not a religion in which children can participate. Schellenberg says in the opening pages of *The Will to Imagine* that it is possible to become a person of religious faith only after one has already negotiated a passage into religious scepticism. In some cases this will involve abandoning previously held religious beliefs; in other cases this might mean that a person has progressed from religious disbelief to scepticism or has simply adopted scepticism at the outset.³³ Schellenberg, in other words, envisions sceptical religion as a religion for adult converts.

Now it might seem unfair to describe this characteristic as an obstacle to the formation of religious community. After all, sceptical religion would hardly be the first tradition to begin its historical existence as religion of conversion. Christianity famously originated precisely as such, and yet this converts' religion managed to accommodate the religious education of children at an early enough stage of its development to become a stable cultural fixture. If Christianity's insistence on being 'born again' was capable of yielding to such practices as infant baptism, perhaps a similar development would be possible within sceptical religion.

In my concluding remarks I will discuss the prospect of sceptical religion accommodating itself to requirements of historical existence such as I have sketched. But for a moment I want to entertain the possibility that it might resist such accommodation – might hew narrowly, in other words, to the description offered by Schellenberg. This would mean that sceptical religion would possess little in the way of ritual or confession, would embrace only the intelligent and at least moderately educated, and provide no avenue for the participation of children.

So understood, sceptical religion would forswear elements that are deeply integrated into the life of 'sectarian' religious communities. These elements provide motivations for participation in the life of religious community other than those that have to do with a religion's ideational content. The religious communities which I think of as successful take these elements seriously and devote considerable resources to their maintenance, with the understanding that they comprise a sort of religious 'overhead' that promotes the continued vitality of

the community and thus of the tradition (and conversely, those which have labelled these elements distractions from 'true religion' have not, in my experience, fared well). If this understanding is well-founded, then in forswearing these elements, sceptical religion would put itself at a considerable sociological disadvantage.

Now, for all that I have said, it remains possible that a sceptical religion that resisted all forms of historical accommodation might flourish. Possibly, there are enough people— people comfortable with doubt, who are well positioned to be inspired by 'simple ultimism', who do not need rituals and hymns, and who either have no young children or can arrange care for these on Sunday mornings— sufficiently densely packed in some geographical regions to constitute sceptically religious community as a going concern. Religions – and people – are sufficiently unpredictable that it would be unwise to foreclose on the possibility before the experiment has even begun. But to revert to the analogy I offered at the outset of this article, in imagining the operation of a machine so constructed, I simply do not see that it has sufficient motive power to continue long in operation.

Conclusion: ideals of religion and historical accommodation

Now in fact, were a serious attempt made to establish sceptical religion as a communal rather than textual or purely individual affair, I would expect to witness some measure of accommodation to the requirements of such existence. I would expect to see attempts at ritual, liturgical and symbolic development, reflection on community structures and questions of leadership, and the like. I would not expect to see either interested but philosophically incapable individuals or children turned away at the door, and neither would I expect to see such persons handed a copy of *The Wisdom to Doubt* and admitted to membership only once they became capable of reading it with understanding. Rather, I would expect the notions of faith and of the Ultimate – the positive commitments of sceptical religion – to become the starting point for religious instruction. With respect to the religious education of children, I would expect to see the conviction arise that a passage into sceptical religion need not take place via a noetic death-and-rebirth experience, but might instead take place by way of a smooth and continuous development *ab initio* of religious sentiment. And I would expect to see the idea of the Ultimate made accessible by the use of various heuristics, which might well generate at least the appearance of embracing a qualified rather than a simple ultimism.

I would also expect the historical development of sceptical religion to be marked by controversy. Consider my remark above regarding the amenability of sceptical religion to credalism. I would expect a division to arise, fairly early on, between those favourable to credalism as a means of preserving religious identity and mission and those who view creeds as religiously stultifying. Reformed Sceptics

might find it appropriate not to insist on the propositional attitude of faith or preservation of the simplicity of ultimism as conditions for good standing, but might rather present these as ideals conformation to which is a goal of personal religious development; Orthodox Sceptics (who would become so named, of course, only after the emergence of the Reformed wing) would on the contrary regard this as a retrograde development and an impediment to the religious evolution of the species. Should this controversy arise early enough, Schellenberg himself might rule on the division. But this being religion we are discussing, I would not expect any such ruling to be accepted by all parties.

A final form of accommodation I will mention refers back to my first line of criticism. Above I argued that the soteriological efficacy of sceptical religion is inscrutable. I would expect to find this inscrutability worked around, as it were, in the life of actual religious communities. My reasons for thinking this are tied to the high regard in which I hold Max Weber's famous explanation of the rise of the 'spirit of capitalism' within Calvinism. On Weber's account, whereas Calvin's own position was that it is impossible to discern whether any person, including oneself, was destined for eternal life rather than damnation, this attitude was simply 'impossible' for the 'broad mass of ordinary men', such that 'wherever the doctrine of predestination was held, the question could not be suppressed whether there were any infallible criteria by which membership in the elect could be known'; and within a few generations, the unofficial conviction had arisen within Calvinism that the accumulation of wealth through work was a reliable sign of divine favour.³⁴

Now Schellenberg, as we have seen, describes adherents of sceptical religion as those who are 'comfortable with doubt', including (I take it) doubt regarding the soteriological efficacy of their religion. I think it likely that Calvin expected that his followers' faith in God's sovereignty would relieve them of a need to know their standing in God's eyes. But it is a fairly safe generalization to say that the founders of religions do not get to choose their followers (at least, not after the first twelve or so). Were sceptical religion to become historically actual, I would expect that over time a more intimate working relationship between its ethics and conceptions of the ultimate good would be forged. I have no firm prediction regarding how such a development might proceed, but I suspect that it would involve some degree of indulgence towards personalistic conceptions of the Ultimate.

In the form described by Schellenberg, sceptical religion is marked by significant disadvantages as regards religious adequacy. This does not doom it to the same fate as earlier attempts to construct a (or the) 'religion of reason', but it does suggest that a form of sceptical religion that thrives may differ significantly from what is described in *The Will to Imagine*. One way of putting the point might be to say that sceptical religion will be the more robust and vibrant, and thus the more culturally powerful, as it forges compromises between Schellenberg's vision and the crooked timber that is humanity.

The real question, to my mind, is whether a historically actual sceptical religion could be the force for religious evolution and earthly salvation that Schellenberg desires it to be. Religions, it seems to me, have difficulty in maintaining a consistent sense of their own priorities. Indeed, in my darker moments I am tempted to think that all historical religions have a tendency to betray the noblest of their founding sentiments, sometimes in spectacular and unforgettable (indeed, even unforgivable) ways. On this topic, I hope that when Schellenberg challenges the ‘unquestioned influence of things familiar’ in our thinking about the religions of the future, he is on to something.³⁵

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Notes

1. In correspondence, Schellenberg has written that the religious adequacy of religion is a different matter from its adequacy as a religion. While it would certainly be possible to start out by offering definitions of these two types of adequacy, I hope that adopting what seem to me to be two ‘internal’ standards of adequacy obviates the need to do this.
2. If so culturally powerful a force could be more fully directed to pragmatic ends, such as a widening love of wisdom, the eradication of war and poverty, and pre-emptive treatments for environmental maladies, surely this would be a cause for rational rejoicing. It is time to make religion work *for* us. In a new evolutionary instantiation it can do so. (Schellenberg (2013), 7)
3. Schellenberg (2009), 49.
4. *Ibid.*, 50.
5. For natural religion’ see Byrne (1989). Much more could be said about the respects in which Schellenberg’s trilogy represents a latter-day contribution to the tradition of natural religion, and I think the topic is an interesting one.
6. The idea that religion is a matter of orientation towards an ultimate good first appears in the statement that ‘S is religious’ entails that ‘S takes there to be a reality that is ultimate, in relation to which an ultimate good can be attained’ (Schellenberg (2005), 23). Schellenberg refers back to this idea when introducing ‘simple ultimism’ in Schellenberg (2009), 18ff.
7. Schellenberg (2009), 31ff.
8. *Ibid.*, 27, emphasis added.
9. *Ibid.*, 31, 33.
10. *Ibid.*, 33.
11. *Ibid.*, 31. In a footnote Schellenberg credits correspondence with Michael Martin for helping him to frame up the issue.
12. *Ibid.*, 194; cf. *ibid.*, 41.
13. *Ibid.*, 146–145.

14. *Ibid.*, 41.
15. *Ibid.*, 46.
16. *Ibid.*, 36.
17. I am indebted to Schellenberg for calling attention, in correspondence, to the importance of this distinction. Schellenberg himself frames the issue of subjective adequacy (my term, not his) rather differently than I do, as will become clear momentarily.
18. Personal correspondence. Italics are in the original.
19. In correspondence Schellenberg points to other motivations for pursuing sceptical religion, detailed in the last three parts of Schellenberg (2009), as relevant to this issue. So perhaps there are further arguments to be constructed on the basis of those resources.
20. Enlightenment proponents of natural religion had grounds for thinking that practically sufficient truth could be found outside the great historical religious traditions. Because they generally embraced a recognizably post- or crypto-Christian understanding of God, they could and did argue that it would be massively unfair for God to have made access to sufficient truth contingent on one's temporal, spatial, or cultural location. They thus had grounds for thinking that practically sufficient religious truth was within the grasp of all persons. So far as I can see, simple ultimism provides no grounds for thinking that such considerations of fairness have any purchase on the Ultimate.
21. *Ibid.*, 63.
22. Schellenberg (2013), *Religious Studies*, 49, 143–150.
23. Personal correspondence.
24. Schellenberg (2009), 46. It is to be noted here that I associate institutionalization with community formation. I assume that the institutionalization of religion follows on the formation of religious community quite naturally, and in this I am greatly influenced by my work on Schleiermacher. But perhaps there are forms of these that are independent – institutionalized religions without community, or religious communities that do not lead to the institutionalization of religion.
25. *Ibid.*, 62.
26. *Ibid.*, 54.
27. Such a symbol might, however, fittingly grace the cover of a volume of commentary on Schellenberg's trilogy.
28. Schellenberg has informed me in correspondence that he is at work on an accessible introduction to sceptical religion. Such an introduction would, I think, broaden the appeal of sceptical religion and thus make its historical actuality more probable.
29. Here I assume that the arguments in Schellenberg (2007) succeed, rendering religious scepticism the only justified religious position. If those arguments prove defective, the claim I make at this point might not hold true. Schellenberg does remark that 'Faith is also compatible with . . . a readiness and willingness to accept new beliefs as justified should their justification be made evident' (83), which suggests a person who believed simple ultimism might still qualify as a person who embraced sceptical religion if the justification of such belief were to be made evident. But in such a circumstance there might no longer be any point in calling the form of religion in question sceptical.
30. Schellenberg (2009), 63.
31. *Ibid.*, 50.
32. See, for example, Hout *et al.* (2001). For a more recent, more global, and more alarmist treatment see Kaufmann (2011).
33. For example, on the same page Schellenberg says both that 'only those who have fully negotiated the transition from religious belief to doubt are in a position to exercise the faith option' and that 'converts to a faith response I envisage include not just former believers but also former disbelievers and pure skeptics' (Schellenberg (2009), 5).
34. Weber (2003), 110, 172.
35. I am grateful to J. L. Schellenberg for comments on an earlier draft of this article.