

My stance in philosophy of religion

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Abbreviations

Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1993): *DH*

Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2005): *PR*

The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2007): *WD*

The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2009): *WI*

Evolutionary Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): *ER*

I am deeply honoured by this special issue of *Religious Studies* devoted to my work. My grateful thanks to the Editor and to Cambridge University Press for approving it. Special thanks go to Dan Howard-Snyder for his very professional, skilled, and collegial handling of the many events leading up to publication.

My stance in philosophy of religion has evolved considerably since *DH* was published twenty years ago. But it bears the imprint of everything that has happened along the way. The views I have developed are most systematically presented in my recent trilogy (*PR*, *WD*, *WI*). Not surprisingly, the trilogy is the focus of the eight articles that follow. But the influence of *DH* can be noticed in some of these papers. And the influence on me, in my replies, of having just written *ER* is also discernible. I shall therefore inevitably have all of my books, and not just the trilogy, in mind as I seek to give expression to my stance in what follows.

My stance seeks to resolve certain tensions and avoid certain pitfalls in philosophy of religion while embodying a variety of insights overlooked or neglected by philosophers. Here is an overview. I am an atheist but not a

metaphysical naturalist. No agnostic in the traditional sense, I am nonetheless a religious sceptic in a much broader sense, one that requires distinguishing traditional theism from a deeper, more basic religious proposition I call ultimism, which invites no more than doubt. I am a defender of faith but not a believer. Indeed, I have a distinction between belief and non-doxastic imaginative faith to go with the distinction between theism and ultimism. The combination of these two distinctions yields a new way of being religious, one that it might seem rather radical or presumptuous to put forward, as I have done, in an attempt to reconcile reason and religion were it not for one of the gifts of *scientific* reason: an awareness of our early place in evolutionary time sufficient to make an imaginative and ultimistic form of faith seem at once peculiarly appropriate and the soul of humility.

Uncertainty is central in all of this (perhaps because it is central in me). One might say I have sought to exploit its creative potential. Just as the uncertainty about theism we call the hiddenness of God is only the starting point for a new proof of atheism, so the more general uncertainty of religious scepticism is only the starting point for a path leading back to religion – though a somewhat different brand of religion than any extant! Utilizing the idea of non-doxastic faith and an understanding of the propositional heart of religion broader than most, reason propels us through a novel forward-looking version of religious scepticism to a form of religion that can exist only on the other side: sceptical religion.

Or so I have argued. This is the forest in which the many detailed perspectives embraced or trimmed or struck at by my commentators are trees. Though I will now go into more detail, identifying some of the main claims and arguments I have advanced on matters religious, it is to be hoped that the forest will remain visible.

The first bit of detail, and for many readers the most obvious one, is that with the hiddenness argument in *DH* and in a variety of papers, I have defended

- (1) Theism is false.

In *WD*, the second volume of the trilogy, the hiddenness argument is restated and joined to a number of distinct atheistic arguments, some seen there for the first time – in particular, a new argument from horrors highlighting the unsurpassable empathy of a personal Ultimate as well as an argument from free will (which I call the Free Will Offence). I have made no secret of my view that these arguments, especially in tandem, justify atheistic belief. But in *WD* my main aim was to show that they are strong enough to prevent theistic philosophers from successfully using theism to defeat my arguments for a general religious scepticism in part I of that book.

The word ‘general’ I have just used already suggests a move beyond theism. Theism isn’t the only game in town. And the interesting thing is that we don’t have to consult any similarly detailed option from non-theistic religion to find an

importantly different religious proposition. A second main claim I have defended (beginning in *PR*) is

- (2) An overlooked general proposition (call it ultimism) which holds that there is a reality triply ultimate – metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically – is clearly a religious proposition and clearly distinct from theism, though entailed by it.

We often forget that a religious proposition requires a soteriological component. (Only by inserting it into the content of theism do we make *that* proposition religious.) This component, together with the axiological one, when *added* to a reference to metaphysical ultimacy, so I argue in *PR*, clearly distinguishes religiousness in a claim from what you see in any non-religious – perhaps scientific – reference *purely* to metaphysical ultimacy. Notice that there may be many ways of filling out the general content of ultimism we humans have yet to devise. This is one reason why generic or simple ultimism makes a better starting point for religious investigation than theism or any other elaborated ultimism.

The reason for linking ultimism to religion at all, fleshed out in *PR*, is that ultimistic elements can be found in all or most religion. As I also argue there, even if a one-size-fits-all definition of ‘religion’ (in the personal – as opposed to institutional – sense that has concerned me) cannot be built on this fact, there is good reason, given the distinctive concerns of philosophy, to accept

- (3) Ultimistic forms of religion – practices involving adherence to ultimism or some proposition entailing it – are the proper focus for philosophy of religion.

Philosophers, with their love of the most fundamental understanding, are interested in the deepest truths about fact and value. And ultimistic propositions might conceivably do a lot of work for someone so interested. This, I think, helps to explain why theism has had such a rich history in philosophy, and still today is used to generate answers to philosophical questions. I infer that a restriction of our attention (at least initially) to ultimistic religion is a rather natural restriction for philosophers of religion to accept. Besides, a new focus on ultimism would involve an appropriate widening of concern after today’s preoccupation with theism, while not excluding the latter, which represents one way in which ultimism could be true.

So what *should* philosophers make of ultimism? (Note that from here on ‘ultimism’ and ‘ultimistic’ will be used exclusively in connection with simple or generic or unelaborated ultimism.) In *WD* one will find support for

- (4) Reason justifies no more than scepticism about ultimism even if it justifies disbelief of theism.

Let me clarify what I mean by ‘religious scepticism’. In *PR* several importantly different forms of religious scepticism are distinguished. *Categorical* religious scepticism is scepticism as to whether *any* religious claim is true, that is, scepticism about the disjunction of – what philosophy has reason to call – religious claims, a disjunction which is logically equivalent to ultimism. (Religious belief, by contrast, affirms one of the disjuncts; irreligious belief denies them all and so denies the disjunction.) *Capacity* scepticism is scepticism concerning humans having the ability to access truths about whether a religious Ultimate exists or about the details of its nature. Both forms of scepticism may be *passive*, involving simply involuntary doubt or uncertainty about the truth of the relevant proposition, or *active*, in which case we have a deliberately cultivated position of scepticism. (The common idea of ‘withholding judgment’, so I have suggested, is more properly associated with the latter notion than with the former.)

Part I of *WD* develops seven modes of categorical religious scepticism. The *Subject* Mode focuses on matters endemic to human life, affecting the finite subject of any belief at all. Five ways of failing to recognize relevant evidence are here distinguished, as well as four possible properties of propositions (precision, detail, profundity, and attractiveness), which, *overlapping* as they do where the contents of religious and irreligious belief are concerned, make such forms of believing especially vulnerable to considerations of unrecognized evidence and to an ‘unrecognized defeater-defeater’. The *Object* Mode presses discussion in another direction, focusing attention on problems that derive from the unique nature of the object of religious (and, in its own way, irreligious) concern, namely ultimism. Here a form of capacity scepticism is developed and made to support categorical religious scepticism. The *Retrospective* Mode considers all the ways in which investigation of matters religious has been stunted during our short past in a manner that, for all we know, leaves us still without the capacities needed for religious discernment, arguing from this conclusion to categorical religious scepticism. And the *Prospective* Mode looks at the investigative issues that are opened up by taking into account the neglected evolutionary future of life on our planet – a possibly billion-year-long future that, whether it eventually passes humans by or not, may eventually see intelligent beings on Earth much better equipped to adjudicate religious issues than we are. One example of its reasoning: since we are not, at our early stage of development, in a position justifiedly to deny that epistemic superiors of the future will see to be false views on religion attractive to us now, we are not in a position justifiedly to deny what that proposition entails, viz. that our present views *are* false.

So much for the four basic modes. Three further modes are formed by combining elements from the first four in various ways. Thus we first have Four Modes, then Two (the *Limitation* Mode and the *Immaturity* Mode), and finally we arrive at One (the *Presumption* Mode), which is the most powerful of all. It reasons

as follows. Surely the very least to be concluded from our limitations is that a long process of very high-quality religious inquiry would be required to justify religious or irreligious belief. And surely the very least we can conclude from our immaturity is that we have not yet engaged in such inquiry. Thus, *a fortiori*, religious and irreligious forms of belief are unworthy states of mind for beings such as we are – which is to say that categorical religious scepticism is positively justified (by this I mean that a sceptical response of this sort is the best response to ultimism that can be made and not simply not surpassed by other responses, or negatively justified).

The upshot is that we should be no more than sceptical about ultimism even if we are disbelievers about theism. Atheism and a more general religious scepticism can be perfectly comfortable in one another's company. But that is not the end of the story. Rather, it is only the beginning. To see why, we need to turn for a moment from the object of religion to its attitudes. A central claim of mine on the subject, defended in *PR*, is this:

- (5) Propositional faith is a voluntary imaginative attitude rather than a believing one and indeed entails *non*-belief of the proposition in question.

In my view, belief, whether belief-that or belief-in, is best construed as falling on the involuntary side of the spectrum of possible religious attitudes; faith, whether faith-that (propositional faith) or faith-in (operational faith), as falling on the voluntary side. And although the fuller attitude of faith-in or operational faith *can* be built on propositional belief, it *need not be*: propositional faith is enough to provide a platform for a fully religious form of life.

It is not a great distance from everything said so far about ultimism and faith to the realization that

- (6) Propositional faith focused on ultimism, and operationalized, is an unnoticed form of religion – *sceptical* religion, as we might fittingly call it.

Here a new way of being religious emerges, brought into the light by the distinction between theism and ultimism and the distinction between propositional belief and propositional faith. And this way of being religious is not at all unavailable to the one who leaves *WD* a sceptic about religion. For it is also a way of being sceptical. And much more than any pure scepticism about religion (the other way of being sceptical, unmixed with faith), it beckons to us.

Or so I argue in the trilogy's third volume, *WI*. What needs to be shown first is that

- (7) Sceptical religion can be spiritually authentic and fulfilling.

To show that the words ‘spiritually authentic and potentially fulfilling’ truly apply here some work is required. That work is attempted in the early stages of *WI*. Assuming this result, we can also prove

- (8) Sceptical ultimistic faith is the form of religion that is justified, if any is.

Though a general faith, and imaginative-sceptical instead of believing, sceptical religion, *if of sufficient quality in purely religious terms*, is preferable to all sectarian and believing contenders because of its unique compatibility with a full and thorough satisfaction of three aims that the religious should surely take on board. Especially given our early stage of development as a species, anyone contemplating a religious form of life should seek to maintain a high degree of *openness* to unexamined elaborations of ultimism and should also want both an unimpeachable *authenticity* and *stability* in the propositional object of faith, which the latter will possess exactly in so far as it really entails ultimism and is not vulnerable to being replaced by a competing understanding of things as our wisdom grows. The practitioner of sceptical ultimistic faith is in a better position to fulfil these aims than any other religious practitioner.

But is her faith *justified*? (It might not be, even if it is the form of religion that is justified, *if any is*.) Now, as already suggested, in my work – though not necessarily in just any plausible discussion of related matters – certain forward-looking evolutionary considerations have loomed large in the treatment of such questions. We can bring these into a clearer focus and begin to see how they will help us here by adding to the list of ‘main claims’ I have defended:

- (9) Intelligence and spiritual sensitivity on our planet may still be at a very early stage of their development, and what is appropriate for a species in the way of religious attitudes may *vary* with the stage of evolution that species is in.

Given (9), which is the centre of attention in *ER*, we can see that even if religious belief is presently inappropriate for us, it does not follow that *religion* is. What is needed is a form of religion with contours that might fit such an immature species as ourselves – that could be appropriate for creatures like us, here, near the beginning of the evolution of intelligence. And a justification of sceptical religion would do well to put what it has to say against this background, arguing that by trading belief for imagination, and theism for ultimism, we can arrive at a new way of being religious that is not only permissible but *peculiarly well suited* to creatures such as we are.

The bulk of *WI* is devoted to showing just this. It argues in favour of

- (10) Sceptical ultimistic faith is both negatively and positively justified – that is, not only is no type of response to religion better, but this is

the response that, all things considered, we should make, in the sense that it is the best type of response we can make to religion in our time, more worthy than any alternative.

The strategy utilized in producing this result involves a bit of *intellectual* evolution – generating adaptations of traditional theistic arguments, altered species of reasoning more fitted than their ancestors (arguments associated with such figures as Anselm, Leibniz, Kant, Paley, Pascal, and James) to the support of a religious way, which philosophy, building on a science-based openness to the future, is able to develop and apply. The result is a variety of modes of sceptical religion that need to be taken on board together with *WD's* modes of religious scepticism.

Though criss-crossing and overlapping in various ways, these modes can all be seen as working together. At a certain general level they speak with one voice. What they say is this: through sceptical-imaginative religious faith we are able to *express and honour* and also *further develop and support into the future* the beautiful but fragile, multi-faceted, and value-laden complexity that can be seen in the process of becoming human, as realized at various levels in individuals, communities, and the species at large. We have, in other words, a pragmatic and evolutionary rationale for religious faith. Traditional religion might have inhibited evolutionary development (and might even inhibit acceptance of the *idea* of evolution), but the new evolutionary religion, touched by sensitivity to our place in time, can be a vehicle of highly positive cultural evolution, a straight and narrow path leading us through the challenges of tomorrow. Such religious faith, though it requires imagining the facts to have a certain character and though it would be undermined if they were shown to have a contrary one, is therefore in the end a response not to fact but to *value*. It is deeply humanistic, but precisely because of the depth of its humanistic concern, it refuses to let go of the divine idea.

What I have in mind when speaking in this way is a range of human features: intellect, but also imagination and aesthetic sensibilities; self-interest, but also a concern for self-transcendence and moral commitment (all of which are touched in one way or another by the traditional theistic arguments and arguers). Imaginative religious faith engages and enlarges and also unifies the whole family of such human characteristics and capacities, promising to take us further in the journey toward a deeper humanity. Such faith is therefore intellectually well justified for human beings at an early stage of evolutionary development like our own. Imaginative faith focused on ultimism is justified for us by adaptations of the traditional arguments, even if their forebears were incapable of justifying theistic belief.

We are used to being told how serious are the challenges facing our species. Reputable figures such as Sir Martin Rees soberly wonder whether humans will be found the other side of *this century*. Recognition of our place in time, and of the

beautiful complexity I have already extolled, makes the tragedy contemplated here all the greater. For our species to disappear in blinding fire or suffocating ice, having just *begun* a journey into a richness of experience unimagined and unimaginable by its progenitors (who nonetheless in a certain sense have made it possible), would be unspeakably sad. Aware of this, we should surely be inclined to mobilize in defence of humanity all the powers we can compel. And among them is the power of religion.

One of the reasons for finding a religious role in this rescue mission attractive has to do with religion's powerful hold on *us*. Its arrival early on in our career as a species, and its stubborn persistence through so many rocky times, including the secularizing trends of recent years (which have not quite borne the universal fruit for which their advocates were hoping), has been well and widely documented. 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.