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The Meaning of Faith:

An Essay in the Philosophy of Religion

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An abstract of
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Abstract

The Meaning of Faith:
An Essay in the Philosophy of Religion
By Aaron Lawrence Breiter Pratt Shepherd

Just over a decade ago, a popular literary movement known as "The New Atheism" challenged the place of religion in contemporary Anglo-American society. In this dissertation, I take the New Atheism to be articulating what social science has been documenting for the past forty years: namely, that religious affiliation and praxis are increasingly taken to be either unnecessary or detrimental to life and culture in America. I provide a novel interpretation and engagement with the New Atheism based on what I call the New Atheism's "Three Challenges": the truth challenge (the claims of religion are untrue, and that religious knowledge is untenable), the consequences challenge (religion results in violence and other bad consequences), and the meaning challenge (religious categories are not necessary for meaning-making, nor is religion itself necessary for a meaningful life). My essay aims to clarify what is at stake in these challenges for religion in America today, as well as to offer what I take to be philosophically robust rejoinders to each challenge. A tertiary concern of the essay is assessing the degree to which contemporary approaches in philosophy of religion are or are not well-suited to address and respond to these challenges. To achieve this aim, the essay will operate at both a philosophical and metaphilosophical level, articulating rejoinders to the challenges by taking and assessing different philosophical approaches—from analytic, to empirical, modern, postmodern, and pragmatist philosophies of religion. I will show that some of these approaches are methodologically hamstrung in their ability to respond to the challenges—particularly the meaning challenge—and advocate for others that adequately capture the enduring significance and meaning of religion for the 21st century.

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Pro Christo et Regno Ejus

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Chapter 1: The New Atheism Movement

Almost exactly a decade ago, in October, 2006, Richard Dawkins

published *The God Delusion*, a 400-page polemic against the Abrahamic religions

and in defense of scientific rationalism and evolutionary theory. In less than two

months, *The God Delusion* rose to number four on the *New York Times* Non-

Fiction Best Sellers list, selling millions of copies in the succeeding years.[1] Sam

Harris, a neuroscientist still completing his doctorate at UCLA at the time, had

published *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* two

years prior. Harris had anticipated many of Dawkins' arguments, arguing that the

consequences of religious fundamentalism were dire enough to warrant an end to

Western religion altogether. Both Harris and Dawkins called upon religious

moderates and those "on the fence" about matters of faith to come out against

what they described as the moral and rational shortfalls of Western religion. "It is

imperative that we begin speaking plainly about the absurdity of most of our

religious beliefs," Harris writes. Dawkins states in his preface to *The God*

Delusion that "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be

atheists when they put it down."[2] This aspect of their projects caught the

attention of columnist Gary Wolf, who dubbed these writers (along with Daniel

Dennett, whose book *Breaking the Spell: Religion as Natural Phenomenon* had

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[1] "Best Sellers: Hardcover Non-Fiction," *The New York Times* (December 3, 2006). Accessed May 17, 2016 <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/03/books/bestseller/1203besthardnonfiction.html?_r=1&oref=slogin>.

[2] Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), p. 48; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston/New York: Mariner Books, 2008), p. 28.

come out earlier in 2006) "The New Atheists." Wolf wrote in *Wired* magazine

shortly after publication of *The God Delusion* that "the New Atheists...condemn

not just belief in God but respect for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong; it's

evil. Now that the battle has been joined, there's no excuse for shirking."[3] Wolf's

hyperbolic declaration of war on religion may or may not have been warranted at

the time, but the subsequent popularity of the intellectual movement that would

come to be known as "The New Atheism" lends his early comments some

credence.

In the years following the publication of *The God Delusion*, choruses of

commentators sounded off both in support and condemnation of the New

Atheists. Journalist Christopher Hitchens published *god is Not Great: Why*

Religion Poisons Everything in 2007 to a popular reception that was *God*

Delusion-esque. Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and Dennett, the self-proclaimed

"Four Horsemen" heralding the end of Western religion,[4] were also joined by

Victor Stenger in 2007, whose book *God: The Failed Hypothesis* received

substantially less popular acclaim, but was described by Hitchens as "a huge

addition to the arsenal of argument" for the New Atheism.[5]

Stenger's most important contribution, however, came two years later in

his systematic treatment of the movement, entitled *The New Atheism: Taking a*

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[3] Gary Wolf, "The Church of the Non-Believers," *Wired* (November 1, 2006). Accessed May 17, 2016 <http://www.wired.com/2006/11/atheism/>.

[4] Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science, "The Four Horsemen" (video of discussion between Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris September 30, 2007), accessed May 19, 2016 <https://youtu.be/0lkHzmmSyAE>.

[5] Qtd. in Prometheus Books, "God: The Failed Hypothesis" (marketing website), accessed May 19, 2016
<http://www.prometheusbooks.com/index.php?main_page=product_info&products_id=12>.

Stand for Science and Reason. In that book, Stenger endeavored to "review and expand upon the principles of New Atheism,"[6] as well as respond to the first round of opposition literature that had been produced by theologians Alister McGrath, Keith Ward, Thomas Crean, Scott Hahn, and John Haught, as well as scientists Francis Collins and Jerry Coyne.[7] As more counter-literature was produced by the likes of fellow physicist John C. Lennox,[8] Stenger continued to fire back in public lectures and in publications, including *The Fallacy of Fine Tuning* and *God and the Folly of Faith*.[9] Alongside Stenger and the rest of the self-identified "New Atheists," a small cottage industry of atheist publications sprang up as the rising tide of the New Atheist writers' appeal lifted more anti-religious and secular humanist boats. If nothing else, the New Atheism succeeded in animating a conversation about how religion is treated in the 21st century, as well as opening a space for secular humanists to articulate a positive vision of a religion-less society.

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[6] Victor Stenger, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2009), p. 13.

[7] Alister E. McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007); Keith Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2007), *The Big Questions in Science and Religion* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008); Thomas Crean, O.P., *God Is No Delusion: A Refutation of Richard Dawkins* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007); Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, *Answering the New Atheism: Dismantling Dawkins' Case against God* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road Pub, 2008); John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); Jerry A. Coyne, "Seeing and Believing: The Never-Ending Attempt to Reconcile Science and Religion, and Why It is Doomed to Fail," *New Republic* (February 9, 2009), cf. *Faith vs. Fact: Why Science and Religion are Incompatible* (New York: Viking, 2015); Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

[8] See John C. Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford UK: Lion, 2010); *Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target* (Oxford UK: Lion 2011). In *Gunning for God*, Lennox also chronicles numerous public disputations with Hitchens and Stenger, as well as other religious skeptics in the years between 2008 and 2011 (pp. 13-4).

[9] Victor J. Stenger, *God and the Folly of Faith: The Incompatibility of Science and Religion* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2012); *The Fallacy of Fine Tuning: Why the Universe is Not Designed for Us* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2011).

The Three Challenges of the New Atheism

In what follows, I will articulate what I see as the problem constellation introduced in the New Atheism's challenges to the place and significance of religion in contemporary America. To read professional commentary (particularly professional *academic* commentary), the New Atheist movement was all thunder and no lightning, a blustering collection of angry, Islamophobic, occasionally eloquent writers and speakers trotting out not-so-new arguments against the existence of God and vociferously evangelizing scientific materialism and Darwinism. Most commentators (even sympathetic ones) argue that it was less *what* they had to say than the way they said it: bluntly, publicly, and agonistically.[10] David B. Hart's 2010 article "Believe It or Not" is particularly dismissive, calling the New Atheism a "passing fad" that will "inevitably go the way of pet rocks, disco, prime-time soaps, and *The Bridges of Madison County*."[11] Hart argues that the New Atheists are guilty of making scarecrows out of religious ideas, and claims that their vigorous-yet-fallacious argumentation is a disservice

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[10] In his essay "What is Atheism?" (in *Atheism and Secularity*, vol. 1, Phil Zuckerman, Ed. [Santa Barbara: ABC CLIO, 2010, pp. 1-18), J. David Eller writes that the "so-called 'new atheism'" is, "if nothing else, profitable and vociferous" (p. 14). John C. Lennox puts it bluntly when he writes in *Gunning for God* that "at the intellectual level, [the New Atheists'] arguments never were really new. However, the new thing about them is their tone and their emphasis. The New Atheists are much louder and shriller than their predecessors. They are also more aggressive" (p. 16). William W. Emilsen argues in "The New Atheism and Islam" (*The Expository Times*, vol. 123, no. 11 [2012], pp. 521-8) that, in fact, the novelty of the New Atheism rests in the aggressiveness of its attacks upon Islam in particular, which the New Atheists argue for under the cover of purporting to attack religion in general. Emilsen concludes that, while the New Atheism may not necessarily be synonymous with Islamophobia (a term that is itself in dispute), their writings certainly serve to inflame relations between Muslims and Non-Muslims.
[11] David B. Hart, "Believe It or Not," *First Things*, vol. 203 (May, 2010), p. 35. Cf. Jeffrey Nall, "Fundamentalist Atheism and its Intellectual Failures," *Humanity and Society*, Vol. 32 (August, 2008), pp. 263-280.

to the noble traditions of skepticism and atheism that have helped advance both religious and secular understanding throughout Western history.

Similarly, Teemu Taira argues that the New Atheism is less motivated by the desire to "get it right" about religion than it is by identity politics, "in which atheists demand recognition as atheists" and attempt to win religious people and "nones" (those who claim no religious affiliation) to their cause.[12] In both of these examples, the actual substance of the New Atheism's claims are not given much credence as critiques of religion. As I intend to show, a dismissive focus upon tone, rather than content, has led many to overlook crucial questions raised by the New Atheists' challenges. Because of this oversight, those who have tilted with the New Atheists in the so-called "God Debate" of the past decade have failed to unseat the "Four Horsemen" and assuage the fears of the faithful that the age of religion is coming to an end.

In this chapter, I will outline the New Atheism's core ideas in the form of three challenges to religious belief and practice: the "truth challenge," the "consequences challenge," and "the meaning challenge." The last of these, I hold, is the most important and unique aspect of the New Atheism. While none of these challenges may be "new" *per se*, they can and have been interpreted as a clear and present danger by those worried about the erosion of religious belief and practice in the early 21st century.

This sense of crisis among some theists is evident in their direct responses to the work of the New Atheists. I intend to show, however, that this counter-

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[12] Teemu Taira, "New Atheism as Identity Politics," in *Religion and Knowledge: Sociological Perspectives*, Elizabeth Arweck, Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), p.98.

literature is methodologically hamstrung, particularly in its response to the meaning challenge, by some of the presumptions governing contemporary theological discourse, and the way in which the terms of the debate are set by the New Atheists. Furthermore, as I will argue in the next chapter, the presumptions constraining theological thinking are also often at work in the dominant modes of contemporary philosophy of religion as well. The mutual reinforcement of assumptions about the nature of religious categories, truth, and morality in mainstream philosophical and theological thinking contributes to a situation in which the most fundamental challenge of the New Atheism—the meaning challenge—cannot be adequately addressed. In succeeding chapters, I will present a philosophical genealogy that helps shed light on how we arrived in this predicament, before turning to contemporary continental philosophy of religion and classical pragmatist philosophy of religion as resources for confronting the three challenges.

What's "New" About the New Atheism?

Not Much. A strong case can be made that there is very little that is "new" about the New Atheism; even the phrase "New Atheism" is not all that new.[13] The

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[13] Fully 20 years before Sam Harris published *End of Faith*, Fr. Michael Azkoul published a pamphlet titled *Anti-Christianity: The New Atheism* (Montreal: The Monastery Press, 1984), in which he argues from an Eastern Orthodox perspective that Western Christianity was too wedded to secular Enlightenment philosophy through its scholastic heritage. Two years later, an evangelical pastor named Robert A. Morey published a book called *The New Atheism and the Erosion of Freedom* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1986). Morey decries the rise of what he calls "militant anti-theism," linking it to the cultural upheavals of the 1960s and 70s, the institutionalization of atheism in Soviet Russia and China, and the general erosion of religiosity in America during that period. The difference between this "new" anti-theism and what came before, according to Morey, was its openness and effectiveness in the public sphere. Atheism was no longer just a private belief, spoken by "the fool in his heart" (Psalm 14:1), but a matter of public policy and cultural consequence. Whether or not Morey's hyperbolic condemnations were

title "New Atheism" may be helpful only insofar as it points out that atheism is

not a single, monolithic ideology, but rather an intellectual position that has

stood in for different things in different historical moments. In Michael Buckley's

At the Origins of modern Atheism, he argues that 'atheism' names a situation in

which dominant theistic paradigms in Western thinking are called into question.

Atheism is not necessarily a "problem" for thinking, but rather indicates "a

situation, an atmosphere, a confused history" in which "assertions can be

identical in expression and positively contradictory in sense."[14] According to

Buckley, in such cases, the first step towards clarifying the disagreement is the

recognition of mutually shared concepts. "Atheism is essentially parasitic…The

assertions of the theist provide the state of the question for the atheist, whether

that question bears upon the words, the meaning, or the religious subject."[15] The

meaning of atheism is thus dependent upon the theological and religious ideas

which it opposes at any given historical moment. Adopting an overtly Hegelian

tone, Buckley concludes that "Atheism is essentially a transition, a movement

from the affirmation of the divine into its negation, perhaps a negation awaiting

its own negation."[16]

Gavin Hyman, in his *A Short History of Atheism*, echoes Buckley in

linking the kind of atheism recognized today to the Enlightenment and the dawn

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warranted in 1986, his distinction between the relatively harmless "old-time atheism" and the new "militant anti-theism" indicates that 'atheism' is not a monolithic phenomenon, but takes on new meanings at different historical moments.

[14] Michael F. Buckley, *At the Origins of modern Atheism* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 13.

[15] Ibid., p. 15.

[16] Ibid., p. 20. This is, of course, a presentation of the classical view of atheism presented by Friedrich Nietzsche in sections 108, 125, and 343 of *The Gay Science*, eds. Bernard Williams and Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

of the modern period of Western thought. Prior to the Enlightenment, the denial of theological paradigms was always internal, denoted by 'heresy.' "The real revolutionary turn," Hyman writes, "was the one that allowed for the taking of an external viewpoint, casting judgement on the theological tradition as a whole from a position *outside* it."[17] This external position—the "secular"—is unique to the modern period, Hyman claims. Prior to this, the closest approximation was the "profane," understood as the absence of the holy and the opposite of the sacred. The profane, however, is still a space within the theological worldview (albeit a negative one). The secular, Hyman claims, is not "profane" per se, because it stands outside of and against any theological paradigm.

The secular worldview, Hyman goes on to explain, became institutionalized during the American and French revolutions, but in very different ways. In France, the Revolution and its attendant anti-clericalism lead to a republic that actively opposed religion in the political sphere. In America, on the other hand, the separation of church and state was based upon an assumed foundation of "natural religion." "The religious foundations of the state should be ones that could be shared by everyone, while the absence of an established church meant that everyone was also individually free to 'supplement' this natural religion with their own denominationally-specific religious beliefs and practices."[18] From this perspective, secularism is understood to not have been

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[17] Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010), p. 4. Accessed via ProQuest Ebrary, May 5, 2016.

[18] Hyman, *A Short History*, p. 9. Susan Jacoby, in her book *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), argues the opposite, claiming that we must take the founders at their word in their choice to constitute the United States as a nation without mention of God, and, indeed, with specific prohibitions on religious litmus tests.

associated with atheism or irreligion in early America; rather, this connection

gradually emerged, coming to fruition only in the latter half of the 20th century.

"Atheism developed as an intellectual phenomenon, increasing in respectability

and wider incidence as modernity itself developed," Hyman concludes.[19] This is

evident in the transition from the controversial-albeit-intellectual atheism of

Spinoza[20] to the outspoken atheism of Nietzsche.

Hyman's conflation of secularism with an underlying assumption about

"natural" religion is a particularly modern phenomenon, characteristic of the

period in which thinkers throughout the Western world were endeavoring to

articulate the "first principles" and "essential qualities" of religion *per se*. In the

context of the diminishing influence of religious institutions and an increasing

fervor for secularism in the public sphere, such inquiries in some ways lent

themselves to a kind of violence in the treatment of religious phenomena—a

violence reflected in Bacon's famous metaphor for describing science as "putting

nature on the rack."

"Both modernity and atheism seem to reach their 'high noon' in the

mid/late twentieth century," Hyman goes on to say, "before they begin to

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[19] Hyman, *A Short History*, p. 9.

[20] Spinoza embodies Buckley's description of atheism as "identical in expression and positively contradictory in sense" to theism. Etienne Gilson describes Spinoza as "A religious atheist…truly inebriated with his philosophical God" (*God and Philosophy*, 2nd Ed. [New Haven/London: Yale Nota Bene, 2002] p. 102). Gilson contrasts Spinoza's God, whose existence is intelligible on the basis of God's essential nature (the "philosophical God"), with that of the God whose existence precedes essence (the "religious God" of Judaism and Christianity). "As a philosopher, and toward his own philosophical God," Gilson goes on to say, "Spinoza probably is the most pious thinker there ever was" (ibid). His piety is not properly *religious*, though; rather, Spinoza reverences Nature and the principles that reason discovers there. This distinction between philosophical and religious piety is part of the distinction Gilson is trying to draw throughout *God and Philosophy* between philosophically-derived theology and genuine natural theology (which he locates in the thought of Aquinas).

crumble, giving way to something more nebulous and variegated as the twentieth century turns into the twenty-first."[21] As modernity has given way to postmodernity, so too, Hyman asserts, must modern atheism give way to something new. According to Hyman, however, the New Atheism of Dawkins *et al.* is *not* this "something new." Rather, the New Atheists are a "vociferous" example of "full-blown modern" atheism that is, perhaps, "not atheistic enough" because it remains parasitic upon a modern conception of God that Nietzsche declared dead well over a century ago.[22]

J. David Eller agrees with Hyman's assessment, writing that "The poorly named new atheism may actually prove to be the last shots of the old atheism—the last arguments, the last struggles against someone else's god(s), the last nay-saying. The future of atheism is not in disproving god(s) but, as with the nontheistic and pretheistic religions, in not talking about god(s) at all."[23] What is called for now is to move past the polemical tone of the New Atheists, and even past "the God Argument," as A.C. Grayling calls it,[24] altogether, and instead focus upon the promotion of a positive secular humanist philosophy.[25]

In the end, The New Atheism may not amount to much more than a footnote in the history of Anglophone culture, remembered only as "a well-timed reaction against religious fundamentalism"[26] in the wake of the religiously-

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[21] Hyman, *A Short History*, p. 18.
[22] Hyman, *A Short History*, p. 185.
[23] Eller, "What is Atheism?" p. 17.
[24] See A.C. Grayling, *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).
[25] See, for example, Philip Kitcher's Terry Lectures, entitled *Life After Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).
[26] Sean Illing, "New Atheism's Fatal Arrogance: The glaring intellectual laziness of Bill Maher & Richard Dawkins," *Salon.com* (May 9, 2015). Accessed 17 May, 2016

motivated attacks of September 11th, 2001. As a form of hyper-modern atheism, a

kind of dialectical mirror image of the fundamentalist forms of modern religion,

the ideas of the New Atheism may be inexorably linked to a historical moment

that burned bright but exhausted itself quickly.

On the other hand, the emergence of the New Atheism as a popular

literary and social movement was concomitant with a statistical increase in

atheism and religious disaffection, even in the hyper-religious context[27] of the

United States. There has been a persistent and well-documented trend of

"disaffiliation" from organized religion in the U.S for the past 40-plus years, but

the trend has become more pronounced since the turn of the century. The Pew

Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study indicated that the number of

Americans who claim "no religious affiliation" had increased during the previous

seven years from around 16% to 23% of the population. This pattern of

disaffiliation was sharpest in the younger generation (those born between 1981

and 1996 commonly identified as "Millennials"), 35% of whom claimed no

religious affiliation in 2014. There are now more Americans (statistically

speaking) who identify as "nones" than there are Catholics (21%) or mainline

Protestants (15%), and Protestants (including both institutional mainline

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<http://www.salon.com/2015/05/09/new_atheisms_fatal_arrogance_the_glaring_intellectual_laziness_of_bill_maher_richard_dawkins/>.

[27] According to recent polling data, as well as the historical accounts of social scientists like Alexis de Tocqueville, the United States stands out from its counterparts in the developed world in having a higher percentage that considers religion an important feature of one's life. See George Gao, "How do Americans Stand Out from the Rest of the World?" *FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center (March 12, 2015), accessed January 30, 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/>.

denominations and evangelical Protestants) have lost their slim majority in the

population, falling from 51.3% in 2007 to 46.5% in 2014.[28]

In addition, the "nones" have become more secular in their reported

beliefs and practices. According to Pew's findings, the number of non-affiliated

Americans who believe in the existence of God dropped from 70% to 61%

between 2007 and 2014. The number of "nones" claiming that religion has little

or no importance in their life also increased from 57%-65%.[29] At the same time,

the number of "nones" who claim "a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being"

has increased from 35%-40%.[30] These "spiritual, but not religious" folks are a

vexing case when it comes to addressing questions about the future of religion.[31]

These statistical findings indicate a shift in the way Americans understand

the significance and meaningfulness of religious beliefs and religious practice, in

particular. While the actual number of Americans who openly identify as

"atheists" has only increased slightly, the downward trend of religious affiliation

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[28] See Michael Lipka, "10 facts about religion in America," *FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center (August 27, 2015). Accessed May 5, 2016 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/27/10-facts-about-religion-in-america/>. For the full study results, see Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape" (May 12, 2015). Accessed May 5, 2016 <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf>. Robert Jones declares these statistics indicate a fundamental shift in the political and cultural landscape of the United States. See Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2016).

[29] See Michael Lipka, "Religious 'nones' are not only growing, they're becoming more secular," *FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center (November 11, 2015). Accessed May 5, 2016 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/>.

[30] David Maschi and Michael Lipka, "Americans may be getting less religious, but feelings of spirituality are on the rise," *FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center (January 21, 2016). Accessed May 5, 2016 <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/21/americans-spirituality/>.

[31] Some, including Diana Butler Bass, for example, claim that SBNR folks represent the future of religion in America, and that religious institutions should reorganize to reflect this changing paradigm of what it means to be religious. See Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012).

and those who claim that religion has little or no importance indicates a growing uncertainty about the role religion ought to play in peoples' lives.

Much has been made of these results, particularly because of how they compare with the historical results of other surveys Pew surveys. Modern polling has provided data on the disaffiliation trend since 1972. The National Religious Identification Survey, conducted in 1989-90, for example, indicated that "nones" made up just 8% of the total adult population of the U.S.[32] In the past quarter century, the 15% increase indicated in this research has been steadily picking up its pace, with the largest gains coming as Millennials have entered adulthood. Those who do profess some religious affiliation still make up the vast majority of the U.S. population, but the growing number of "nones" can no longer be considered statistically insignificant in America's social makeup. Perhaps most significant, however, is the effect this rapid increase has had on diminishing the social and political capital of traditionally influential religious communities (such as white, mainline protestants) in America.

I have tarried over these statistical findings to provide some sense of the context in which the New Atheism movement emerged. My goal was not to present a causal link between the two, but rather to indicate the cultural climate that enabled books like *The God Delusion* and *god is Not Great* to sell hundreds of thousands of copies. Say what you will about the quality of the New Atheists' writing or thinking, it cannot be denied that their challenges to religion found a receptive audience in the U.S. It is what this indicates about the changing

[32] Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," p. 112.

significance of religion that fascinates and concerns me in this dissertation. At the same time, I wonder about what kind of philosophical approach is best suited to articulate this significance. It is not enough to engage in an uncritical apologetic for religion; what's needed is a philosophical attitude that can make sense of the space between religion and non-religion, the pluralistic frontier into which American culture has wandered in the 21st century.

I have somewhat selfishly highlighted the increases in the Millennial generation—recall that fully one in three Millennials identify as "nones"—because it gives some sense of my own personal stake in addressing this movement. As a member of the "older Millennials" (those born between 1981 and 1990), I entered adulthood at precisely the moment when the New Atheists' books were hitting the shelves. In the spring of 2008, in my second year of undergraduate studies at Pacific University, I took a course called "Unbelief," in which we studied Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and Dennett.[33] I remember being surprised by the way my classmates gleefully ate up the New Atheist's arguments and conclusions. Even though I was not swayed to their cause, this confrontation with the New Atheism was a shock to my personal religious sensibilities, and made me aware of an underlying instability in my generation's relation to religious matters.

There was something simultaneously unsettling and unsatisfying in the New Atheism. Something in my own lived experience hinted that Dawkins et al. had gotten it wrong about religion. At the same time, their challenges to the meaning and place of religion had an air of rationality to them. How is it that

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[33] Thanks are due to Dr. Michael Steele, professor emeritus at Pacific University, for this course, and for still remembering my fiery final paper from his class.

these arguments can get religion right and wrong at the same time? To answer this question requires taking a wider view of the nature of the confrontation of the religious and non-religious in discourse.

In the end, the central concern in philosophy of religion is the articulation of this wider view—to systematically account for the meaning of 'religion' and its attendant conceptual framework. The challenges raised by the New Atheism can be answered in through a kind of philosophical apology—the traditional role of philosophy as "handmaiden" to theology. But such an apology will always be constrained by the terms of the discourse in which it operates. To truly understand and respond to the concerns of the New Atheists in a philosophical sense, then, requires a meta-analysis of that discursive space in which the meaning and place of religion is contested.

<p align="center">The Three Challenges: A Critical Exposition</p>

It is important at the outset to emphasize the extent to which the New Atheists seek to challenge the beliefs and practices of the Abrahamic religions, focusing their most sustained critiques upon Christianity and Islam in particular.[34] The New Atheism, despite its predilection for making very general claims, is very much a product of its times, and arises in part as a response to the political victories of Christian conservatives in America and England in the 1980s

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[34] While Harris and Stenger describe Eastern religions as positive, naturalistic alternatives to the supernaturalism of Western religion (citing empirical studies of the benefits of Eastern mindfulness practices, for example), Dawkins and Hitchens are less inclined to support any system of beliefs or practices that has even the faint whiff of religiosity to it. The latter two emphasize humanism and philosophical naturalism as the only viable alternative to religion in Western society.

and 90s, as well as in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States and 7/7 in the United Kingdom. The New Atheism's challenges target a very specific set of religious claims and norms, which, in turn, set the terms of debate for religious apologists in their counter-literature. This creates the conditions for what I consider to be a rather unfruitful discussion of some very important questions about the place and role of religion in contemporary American society.

<div align="center">The Truth Challenge</div>

The first thematic challenge of the New Atheism is the most predictable: that the claims of religion are simply not true; that religious propositions about God, heaven, hell, sin, angels, etc. are false; and that religion has been, in the words of Dawkins, "shamelessly invented."[35] Religious ideas have long been presented as the deepest facts of existence, with theologians claiming the authority of reason for their descriptions of the nature of the divine. The New Atheism—as with any "a-theism"—challenges this presentation by asserting that the scientific method, rather than the authority of religious experts, is the best and only way to determine the truth about reality. This is especially true about the widest and deepest truths human beings seek—the how and why of life, as well as the structure and organization of the universe.

The truth challenge consists of both a negative critique of religious ideas, and the positing of scientifically-derived theories as reasonable alternatives. The negative side of the challenge targets both the logical coherence of religious ideas

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[35] Dawkins, *God Delusion*, p. 56.

and the correspondence of religious propositions with reality. Many of these criticisms are derived from longstanding refutations of theistic argumentation. For example, Dawkins catalogues Aquinas's five proofs, Anselm's ontological argument, arguments from personal experience, from scripture, Pascal's wager, the argument from Bayesian inference, and the so-called "improbability" argument.[36] He draws upon Hume, Kant, and Bertrand Russell to refute some of the arguments, as well as offering his own rebuttals (particularly to the last three). In each case, Dawkins also presents an alternative model of an evolved and evolving universe, which is the cornerstone of his own thinking.[37]

The New Atheists' denial of the correspondence of theistic claims to reality relies upon a particular definition of *evidence*. Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Stenger all emphasize the need for verifiable, scientific evidence for a rational justification of religion. This emphasis, in turn, rests upon a more fundamental epistemological principle that religious ideas are/ought to be subject to scientific study and verification if they are to be called "true" in any worthwhile sense. This principle is the thesis of Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, in which he asserts "It is high time that we subject religion as a global phenomenon to the most intensive multidisciplinary research we can muster."[38] Dennett goes on to describe the hesitancy that many scientists have around the study of religion, claiming that the "spell" cast by religious folks around their beliefs has made culturally-

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[36] Dawkins, *God Delusion*, chaps. 3-4 (pp. 101-189).
[37] Dawkins offers the following thesis early in *The God Delusion* as both a refutation of theistic claims about God's role in creating the universe and an alternative ordering principle for existence: "*any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution*" (p. 52).
[38] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, pp. 6.

sensitive researchers uneasy with breaking the taboo by subjecting those beliefs to empirical testing. He also points out that the study of religion requires interdisciplinary work with the squishier and less prestigious fields of theology, religious studies, and philosophy, which is a further disincentive for scientists to undertake this kind of study. The implication of Dennett's argument is that such studies are in fact worthwhile, and that they ought to be accounted for when it comes to assessing the truth or falsity of religious claims.

"One of the significant propositions of New Atheism," Victor Stenger writes, "is that faith should not be exonerated, should not be treated with respect, but rather disputed and, when damaging to individuals or society, condemned. In fact, we should call faith exactly what it is—absurd."[39] Stenger argues that the logical inconsistencies of theistic arguments already indicate the absurdity of believing in something like a "God concept.[40] Even more important, however, is the lack of empirical, verifiable evidence that God exists, that God created the universe, that God is just or loving or omniscient, that is the real source of religion's absurdity. In this epistemological framework, a lack of verifiable, scientific evidence, is logically equivalent to the absence of *any* rational justification. Faith (i.e. belief oriented by a "God Concept") is not even truth-functional, and it is a mistake to treat it as such. Harris summarizes the point in a passage that is often quoted in other New Atheist literature: "We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call them 'religious'; otherwise, they are

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[39] Stenger, *The New Atheism*, p. 46.
[40] See Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, p. 30-4, in which he inventories arguments against theism (*a la* Dawkins).

likely to be called 'mad,' 'psychotic,' or 'delusional.'"[41] Hence the title of Dawkins' best-seller.

Evidence for God's existence—the central idea of theism—is the focus of Stenger's *God: The Failed Hypothesis*. Stenger asserts that the lack of scientific evidence for the existence of God has consistently been chalked up to "divine hiddenness," which he describes as a problem for theologians on par with the problem of evil.[42] But Stenger contends that the God of Western religion is not understood as completely hidden, but rather has known attributes that should give some indication that God exists and participates in our reality. For instance, God is understood to be the creative designer of the universe, so presumably there should be evidence of intention and design in the universe's creation. If God is capable of intervening in human affairs by, say, responding to intercessory prayer, there should be empirically verifiable evidence of this as well. Most of all, if God was a necessary factor in the creation of the universe, a supernatural intervention in the creation of the natural (read: material) universe, then there should be some evidence of a process or input in the universe that cannot be accounted for by standard models.[43] In fact, Stenger concludes that,

> the natural state of affairs [according to the standard models of quantum physics] is something rather than nothing. An empty universe requires supernatural intervention—not a full one. Only by the constant action of an agent outside the universe, such as God, could a state of nothingness be maintained. The fact that we have something is just what we would expect if there is no God.[44]

[41] Harris, *End of Faith*, p. 72.
[42] Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, p. 22.
[43] Stenger provides a list of 11 "Hypothetical Observations That Would Have Favored the God Hypothesis," which include the examples I have cited, as well as evidence for moral laws and moral conduct being tied to religiosity (Stenger asserts that no such evidence exists). See *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, pp. 231-3.
[44] Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, p. 133.

Stenger's conclusion refutes the "God of the Gaps" argument—that God is necessary to fill the gaps in scientific models of the universe—which Dawkins brings up in *The God Delusion* as well.[45] The gaps are full, Stenger argues; the models that physics and quantum physics have provided for the origin and structure of the universe are sufficiently sound as to not allow any lacuna requiring supernatural intervention to explain.

The New Atheists' favorite example of the lack of evidence for the veracity of religion are empirical studies on the effects of intercessory prayer. The most often mentioned is the "Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer" [STEP],[46] a joint venture of Harvard Medical School and the Mayo Clinic. The STEP study tracked the rate of complications for a group of patients who were prayed for after undergoing cardiac surgery (some of whom were informed they were being prayed for, and others who were not), and compared it with a control group that was not prayed for. The study found that there was no difference in the rate of complications, and that there were slightly *more* complications for patients who knew they were receiving prayer. These results conflicted with earlier studies from as far back as the 1980s that had validated the therapeutic effects of prayer.[47] Of course, even in these earlier studies, the empirical evidence

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[45] See Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 151-5.

[46] Herbert Benson et al., "Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) in cardiac bypass patients: A multicenter randomized trial of uncertainty and certainty of receiving intercessory prayer," *American Heart Journal*, Vol. 151 , No. 4 (April, 2006) , pp. 934 – 942. The STEP project comes up in *The God Delusion*, *Breaking the Spell*, and *God: The Failed Hypothesis*.

[47] The same has been said of the STEP Project as well. See Mitchell W. Krucoff, et al., "From efficacy to safety concerns: A STEP forward or a step back for clinical research and intercessory prayer?" *American Heart Journal*, Vol. 151 , No. 4 (April 2006), pp. 762 – 764. Sociologist of Religion Wendy Cadge describes the development of these studies and their evolving understanding of the nature of intercessory prayer. Cadge argues that while early studies focused

of a therapeutic effect of prayer is not equivalent to empirical evidence of divine

intervention. Such studies indicate the limitedness of empirical methods for

verifying theological claims about the agency of God.

The lack of this specific kind of evidence (i.e. measurable, quantifiable

effects of supernatural or divine agency) is the cornerstone of the truth challenge.

When theological claims are empirically investigated, one simply cannot find the

evidence of supernatural agency which would confirm a supernatural God's

existence and agency. Other forms of evidence, such as the evidence of scripture

or personal experience, are necessarily excluded, because they lack the potential

for experimental, scientific verification. As Dawkins points out, the piecemeal

construction of scripture and the lack of archaeological or other historical

documents corroborating the events described in the Bible makes it nearly

impossible to argue that the text constitutes scientific evidence for the existence

and activity of God.[48] Similarly, Dawkins argues that those who claim to have

"experienced God directly" are just as likely to be experiencing a hallucination

caused by "the formidable power of the brain's simulation software."[49] Stenger

goes further, in arguing that "without independent confirmation, the reported

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upon a conservative Protestant model of intercessory prayer, more recent studies have reflected a greater degree of religious pluralism, but only in a superficial way. She concludes that these studies reveal more about the assumptions held by the researchers about intercessory prayer than its therapeutic effects. See Wendy Cadge, "Saying Your Prayers, Constructing Your Religions: Medical Studies of Intercessory Prayer," *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (July 2009), pp. 299-327). Medical Ethicist D.D. Turner goes further than Cadge in critiquing the problematic assumptions underlying clinical studies that treat intercessory prayer as "just another drug." He concludes that there are internal tensions between the aims of those providing prayer and the scientists studying the effects that are irreconcilable, rendering such studies methodologically nonsensical. See D.D. Turner, "Just Another Drug? A Philosophical Assessment of Randomised Controlled Studies on Intercessory Prayer," *Journal of Medical Ethics*, Vol. 32, No. 8 (August 2006), pp. 487-90.

[48] See Dawkins, *The God Delusion,* pp. 117-123.

[49] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 112,115.

[religious] experiences could have been all in their heads."[50] He argues that if these religious experiences had the effect they claim—namely, to reveal some deep truth about the nature of a supernatural reality—then there would be evidence of the person who had the experience gaining some new, deep knowledge about the world. But the truths of religious experience are usually banal, and Stenger points out that "purely material brain processes can produce the same experiences as reported in a mystical experience," so there ought to be no special privileging of these "religious" experiences over any others.[51]

In general, this assessment of the evidence of religious experience is gravely impoverished and represents a willing disregard for clear-cut cases in which religious experiences effected significant personal change that was then publicly reported and affirmed (Jonathan Edwards' chronicles of conversions during the First Great Awakening come to mind). The claim that religious truths are "banal" also speaks to the way in which the insights of ancient religious traditions that have a much lengthier and deeper imprint on Western civilization than scientific naturalism does can be taken for granted. Most of all, however, excluding much of the history and testimony that is considered essential in the context of the Abrahamic religious traditions for understanding these traditions already sets the debate on uneven terms. To refute the truth challenge in a way that is satisfactory to the New Atheists would require a very specific kind of evidence that would not be at the disposal of religionists.[52]

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[50] Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, p. 171.
[51] Ibid., p. 172.
[52] The well-publicized "debates" between creationists like Ken Ham and scientists are representative of the degree to which religious texts are ill-suited to engage in a debate based upon principles of scientific naturalism.

Dawkins, Stenger, and Harris argue that when religious claims are empirically investigated—what Dennett proposes in *Breaking the Spell*—they lack the requisite evidence of supernatural intervention, and, on the contrary, are readily explainable on the basis of material causes and effects. This only serves to strengthen the New Atheists' epistemic principle that the veracity of all claims is to be judged within the network of scientifically-verified, materialistic models of experience. If religious phenomena can be accounted for on the purely materialistic physical, biological, evolutionary, and psychological models of experience, those models push out any specific domain of "religious truths." Truth is rational, scientific, materially verifiable, and monolithic. Hence, theological claims are either false, or they are meaningless (i.e. excluded from the domain of truth-functional discourse).

In *The End of Faith*, Harris argues that the truth challenge is crucial to New Atheism because it gets to the core of what it means to be religious. "Truth is of paramount concern to the faithful themselves," he writes; "indeed, the *truth* of a given doctrine is the very object of their faith…It is only the notion that a doctrine is in accord with reality at large that renders a person's faith useful, redemptive, or, indeed, logically possible."[53] The basic idea of religious activity is that it is guided by claims about the world that are true: that is, that those beliefs are "in accord with reality at large." "Even the most extreme expressions of faith are often perfectly rational, given the requisite beliefs."[54] Rather than dismissing religious claims one by one, Harris targets the underlying "principle of faith"—the

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[53] Harris, *End of Faith*, p. 68.
[54] Ibid., p. 69.

"belief in, and life orientation toward, certain historical and metaphysical propositions" that "disregard the facts of this world"[55]—concluding that "The faithful have never been indifferent to the truth; and yet, the principle of faith leaves them unequipped to distinguish truth from falsity in matters that most concern them."[56] Hence, the truth challenge asserts the need to reacquaint religious folks with the limits of reason.

According to Harris, to be religious—to have faith and to act on it—entails dividing the domain of reason into "religious" and "secular," and prizing the truths of one over the other. The New Atheism contends that religious claims have no place in the domain of reason to begin with, because they do not adhere to the epistemic rules that govern the truth or falsity of claims in general. There is no "space of exception" in which religious claims can both claim to be true, while simultaneously escaping the standards of scientific verification to which all other beliefs are subjected.

This division of "religious" from "secular," and the assignation of reason and rationality solely to the secular domain is another instance in which the terms of the "God Debate" are set up to disadvantage the religionist. There is a clear historical trajectory for why this division came to be taken for granted in the modern period. This is not, however, to say that there is anything objectively necessary about this division. It rather indicates the radical historicity and contextualization of the truth challenge in the full-blown period of late-modernity.

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[55] Ibid., pp. 64-5.
[56] Ibid., p. 68.

The univocity of rationality motivates the New Atheists' sharpest disagreement with those who seek a compromise between scientific and religious worldviews. One of the defining features of the New Atheism movement is its antipathy towards "moderate" religion and agnosticism, both of which represent attempts to compromise modern values of toleration and pluralism with the absolutism of fundamentalist religion.[57] When it comes to the truth challenge, Stephen Jay Gould's idea of "non-overlapping magisteria" (NOMA) is the compromise position that the New Atheists target most frequently. Gould describes this compromise in *Rocks of Ages*:

> The net, or magisterium, of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two magisteria do not overlap...to cite the old clichés, science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven.[58]

Gould argues that the domain of knowledge concerned with explaining the material workings of the cosmos is sharply distinguished from that concerned with providing explanations for the moral, aesthetic, and religious significance of those workings. Both domains are truth-functional; however, the truth of ideas in one domain is contingent upon its coherence to the subject matter of that domain. Hence, what is "true" in the religious domain is not necessarily "true" in

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[57] See Harris, *The End of Faith*, pp. 16-23; Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 69-77; and Stenger, *The New Atheism*, pp. 28-9.

[58] Stephen Jay Gould, *Rock of Ages*, qtd. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 78-9. While Dawkins is the only one to include this passage in his text, Dennett, Harris, and Stenger all make repeated reference to the idea of NOMA in their texts as well.

the scientific domain, and vice versa. In either case, however, the ideas found in each respective "net" are true, insofar as they are a part of that specific web of knowledge.

The New Atheists flatly disagree with the claim that "questions of ultimate meaning" lay outside the investigative sphere of scientists in some separate "magisterium." Dawkins asks, "What expertise can theologians bring to deep cosmological questions that scientists cannot? ...if science cannot answer some ultimate question, what makes anybody think that religion can?" "I have yet to see any good reason," he concludes, "to suppose that theology...is a subject at all."[59] Similarly, Stenger points out that "Religions make statements about all kinds of phenomena that are legitimate parts of science, such as the origin of the universe and evolution of life. Even the principles of morality are subject to scientific investigation since they involve observable human behavior." Therefore, he concludes, the New Atheists "strongly disagree with the National Academy of Sciences, and many scientists, that science has nothing to say about God or the supernatural."[60]

Harris sums up the problem with NOMA in its underlying claim that "there is no need to have all of our beliefs about the universe cohere."[61] Not only is Gould's separation of the world into facts and morals arbitrary, his assignation of morals and meaning to religion, and facts and theories to science sunders the principle of epistemological and methodological unity that the New Atheists argue is the very basis of rationality. In something of a break from the other New

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[59] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 79-80.
[60] Stenger, *The New Atheism*, p. 14.
[61] Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 15.

Atheists, Harris is willing to affirm that "there is clearly a sacred dimension of our existence, and coming to terms with it could well be the highest purpose of human life." But, he concludes, this "sacred dimension" is not immune to scientific investigation, and, ultimately, "requires no faith in untestable propositions."[62] Whatever sacredness there is in this world, its nature and existence is subject to the same standard of verification as any other phenomena that we experience. If there is some truth to be found about this "sacred dimension," the New Atheism holds that science will bear it out.

In conclusion, the truth challenge of the New Atheists asserts that when religious claims are empirically investigated, one does not find evidence of supernatural activity, but rather discovers evidence of natural causation that can be accounted for using purely naturalistic and materialistic explanations. Faith (i.e. action oriented by theological claims), is not truth functional, but it is mistakenly treated as such. Whether moderate or fundamentalist, religious faith represents an epistemic danger significant enough to warrant the abandonment of religion altogether. So long as the idea of "religious knowledge" persists, it undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of genuine, scientific knowledge.

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[62] Ibid., p. 16. Cf. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, pp. 30-31. Harris's "break" from the other New Atheists on the matter of a "spiritual dimension" is mostly a matter of his use of the word "spiritual." Harris is a major proponent of Eastern spiritualism, which Dawkins and Stenger argue is too wedded to supernaturalism to be a reasonable alternative to religion. Dawkins does, however, write extensively about the need for a kind of romantic aestheticism towards the universe, which he calls "wonder" (see *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion, and the Appetite for Wonder* [Boston: Mariner Books, 2000]).

The Consequences Challenge

If we follow the thinking of the New Atheists, the "consequences challenge" flows directly from the truth challenge. In *The New Atheism*, Stenger lays out the line of argumentation: "Perhaps the most unique position of New Atheism is that faith, which is belief without supportive evidence, should not be given the respect, even deference, it obtains in modern society. Faith is always foolish, and leads to many of the evils of society."[63] Stenger includes as evidence a chronicle of religiously motivated violence in Western history, from the Crusades to the Inquisition and Thirty Years' War, to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, to the Lafferty Brother's murder spree motivated by the teachings of Mormon fundamentalists in the 1980s, and finally the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.[64] Similar chronicles of violence, genocide, and war are present in nearly all of the New Atheist literature, and are a central part of the consciousness-raising mission of the New Atheists to call the role of religion in Western history into question.

Whereas the truth challenge trades in a long tradition of a-theistic argumentation, augmented by new scientific models and the epistemological principle of the univocity of scientific truth, the consequences challenge—namely, that religion produces "many of the evils of society," and, for this reason, should be completely done away with—is considered by most commentators to be what is genuinely distinctive and novel about the New Atheism.[65]

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[63] Stenger, *The New Atheism*, p. 15.

[64] See Ibid., pp. 111-31. The penultimate example cited is the central focus of Jon Krakauer's best-selling book *Under the Banner of Heaven* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003).

[65] See, e.g., Gregory R. Peterson, "Why the New Atheism Shouldn't Be (Completely) Dismissed," *Zygon*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Dec. 2007), pp. 803-6.

The consequences challenge is Harris's most sustained point of attack. *The End of Faith* opens with a vignette about a young man detonating a suicide bomb on a crowded bus. The news of this event is greeted by the boy's parents with "pride at his accomplishment," for having won his place in paradise and sent his victims to hell. From these facts, Harris claims, we cannot infer much about the young man's intelligence, social station, popularity, or future prospects. "Why is it so easy," Harris muses, "so trivially easy...to guess the young man's religion?"[66] Harris pays particular attention to Islam in his book, because "the Muslim world has no shortage of educated and prosperous men and women, suffering little more than their infatuation with Koranic eschatology, who are eager to murder infidels for God's sake."[67] Harris goes on to argue that "the West" is "at war with Islam,"[68] and that many commentators mistakenly think of the actions of *mujahidin* (those who fight in the name of radical Islam) are motivated by a political, rather than religious agenda. This characterization is precisely reversed, Harris claims; the religious principles of fundamentalist Islam motivate the political project of pushing back against Western liberalization/secularization.

The facts of the matter, Harris claims, are that even in liberal Western societies, where the influence of religion has been substantially curtailed since the Enlightenment period, religious extremism still "presents a grave danger to

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[66] Harris, *The End of Faith*, pp. 11-12.
[67] Harris, *End of Faith*, p. 109.
[68] Ibid., pp. 109-110. He tellingly phrases this claim "*We* are at war with Islam" (p. 109, emphasis added).

everyone,"[69] as evinced by the political victories of the Religious Right in the United States since the 1980s.[70] Harris goes on to say that

> Religious violence is still with us because our religions are *intrinsically* hostile to one another. Where they appear otherwise, it is because secular knowledge and secular interests are restraining the most lethal improprieties of faith.... If religious war is ever to become unthinkable for us...it will be a matter of our having dispensed with the dogmas of faith. If our tribalism is ever to give way to an extended moral identity, our religious beliefs can no longer be sheltered from the tides of genuine inquiry and genuine criticism.[71]

For Harris, the dogmatic character of faith that informs religious practices is inherently exclusive and violent, and contributes to a reprehensible pattern of behavior and political activity that is antithetical to modern, liberal morality. This view, that religious ethics are essentially at odds with modern, liberal values, motivates the New Atheist's consequences challenge. The incongruity between the morality described and enacted in Western religion and the normative values of post-Enlightenment Western Civilization is the basis for their empirical assessment that, in this day and age, religion is responsible for many of the evils of our society.

Harris kept up this line of attack in his 2006 *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which echoed many of the points he'd made in *End of Faith* about the

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[69] Ibid., p. 153.
[70] For a detailed history, see Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
[71] Ibid., p. 225.

incoherence of "moderate" religion. In his extended exhortation to American

Christians, Harris attempts to show that, whether or not the Bible is a sacred text,

it is riddled with contradictions and moral teachings that, in light of

contemporary normative ideas, are decidedly *not* moral (for example, the Bible's

repeated permission of slavery). Furthermore, Harris argues, "religion allows

people to imagine that their concerns are moral when they are highly immoral—

that is, when pressing these concerns inflicts unnecessary and appalling suffering

on innocent human beings." As examples, Harris cites conservative Christians'

attempts to eliminate abortion and comprehensive sex education, rather than

advocating for stem-cell research or condom use that would prevent deadly

STIs.[72] The activities religion often focuses on regulating, Harris claims, can

impede the ability of religious people to order their actions in genuinely moral

ways.

Besides taking away from religious people's prospects for moral behavior,

the beliefs of the Abrahamic religions also directly encourage vicious behaviors

such as honor killings,[73] the torture and murder of heretics or non-believers,[74]

and antisemitism.[75] This line of argumentation is the central focus of the latter

half of Christopher Hitchens' book *god is Not Great: How Religion Poisons*

Everything. Hitchens cites "the doctrine of blood sacrifice; the doctrine of

atonement; the doctrine of eternal reward and/or punishment; [and] the

imposition of impossible tasks and rules" as being among Western religion's

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[72] Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2006), p. 10.
[73] See Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, p. 27.
[74] See Harris, *End of Faith*, pp. 87-92.
[75] See Ibid., pp. 92-7.

"original precepts" that render it "not just amoral, but positively immoral."[76]

Hitchens compares religion to totalitarianism, arguing that they share the feature

of creating "laws that are *impossible to obey*," yet that all who fall under their

control are *required* to obey. This yields two results, Hitchens says: either to exist

in a continual state of self-condemnation and punishment (what he calls a

"spiritual police state"), or "organized hypocrisy, where forbidden foods are

rebaptized as something else, or where a donation to the religious authorities will

purchase some wiggle-room" (a "spiritual banana republic").[77] Neither situation

is particularly conducive to genuine moral character nor to social well-being. The

former basically renders it impossible to live up to moral standards, while the

latter simply ignores them.

In his *Letter*, Harris cites statistical data that indicate that while the

United States is the most religious country in the developed Western world, it

also has the highest rates of homicide, teen pregnancy, and infant mortality, and

that within the United States, the South and Midwest have a similarly higher

correlation between religious conservatism and these "indicators of societal

dysfunction."[78] These findings, Harris concludes, give the lie to the thesis that

more religiosity contributes to greater social well-being. Instead, religion

constitutes an unnecessarily costly feature of modern life. "How many hours of

human labor will be devoured, today, by an imaginary God? ...I'm not suggesting

that the value of every human action should be measured in terms of

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[76] Christopher Hitchens, *god is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), p. 205.
[77] Ibid., p. 213.
[78] Ibid., p. 15.

productivity…But we should still recognize what a fathomless sink for human resources (both financial and attentional) organized religion is."[79] This is a point emphasized by Dawkins and Stenger as well, though they also specify that wasting "attentional resources" on religion actively detracts from the progress of scientific investigation. Faith is not a virtue, Dawkins argues, that is worth putting resources into cultivating. Rather, "I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself, not just so-called 'extremist' faith," because

> Religious faith is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation, which usually seems to trump all others…If somebody announces that it is part of his *faith*, the rest of society, whether of the same faith, or another, or of none, is obliged, by ingrained custom, to 'respect' it without question; respect it until the day it manifests itself in a horrible massacre…[80]

"Faith is an evil," Dawkins concludes, "because it requires no justification and brooks no argument." The evil consequences of faith flow naturally from the way in which religious belief violates or claims immunity from the methods and epistemic principles that govern the rest of rational thinking and action. So religious belief and practice not only result directly in evil outcomes (religious violence/war/persecution), but they also contribute to the erosion of the possibility of genuine, rational discourse (based upon the epistemic principles outlined in the truth challenge). Thus, the consequences challenge asserts, religion results in a weakening of both moral and intellectual character.

Faith is an especially dangerous thing to encourage in children, Dawkins goes on to claim. "Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them…to grow up into potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades."[81]

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[79] Harris, *End of Faith*, p. 149.
[80] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 346.
[81] Ibid., p. 347.

This is a theme that is picked up by Hitchens as well. "We can be sure that religion has always hoped to practice upon the unformed and undefended minds of the young…If religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason, we would be living in a quite different world."[82] Hitchens describes the practice of teaching children about the eternal punishment of hell as particularly evil, because it specifically plays upon children's fears of pain and their tendency to believe that all states of affairs are permanent. What is even more repugnant than these immoral teachings of religion, Hitchens goes on to say, are the religiously motivated or sanctioned activities that inflict bodily harm on children, such as denial of access to contraception or abortion,[83] circumcision ("mutilation of infant genitalia"), and clergy sexual abuse.[84] Hitchens reserves his starkest condemnation for the Roman Catholic Church: "'Child abuse' is really a silly and pathetic euphemism for what has been going on: we are talking about the systematic rape and torture of children, positively aided and abetted by a hierarchy which knowingly moved the grossest offenders to parishes where they would be safer."[85]

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins has a different take on this issue. Recalling an answer to a question about the Catholic sexual abuse scandal at a lecture in Dublin, he writes "I replied that, horrible as sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by

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[82] Hitchens, *god is Not Great*, pp. 217, 220.
[83] Hitchens highlights the need for abortion in cases of "deformed or idiot children who would otherwise have been born, or stillborn, or whose brief lives would have been a torment to themselves and others" (p. 221).
[84] See Ibid., pp. 220-228.
[85] Ibid., p. 228.

bringing the child up Catholic in the first place."[86] In both Hitchens' and Dawkins' discussions of childhood religion, they agree that religion manifests itself in childhood as a source of fear and intimidation, and inflicts long-lasting physical and psychological trauma that is often impossible to recover from. For this reason, Dawkins concludes that "we should all wince when we hear a small child being labelled as belonging to some particular religion or another."[87]

To sum up, the consequences challenge is based upon the claim that religious persons engage in destructive, violent behaviors that follow directly from their theological orientations. There is no similar uniform correlation between liberal, secular mores and wanton violence. Engaging in these behaviors directly contributes to a weakening of both moral and intellectual character. Moreover, the quantum of violence in the world that is attributable to religion is substantial. Eliminating religion, then, is a reasonable moral program to lower the overall amount of violence experienced in the world. Dawkins puts it this way:

> Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as 'Christ-killers,' no Northern Ireland 'troubles,' no 'honour killings,' no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money ('God wants you to give till it hurts'). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient

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[86] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 356.
[87] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 381.

statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin
for the crime of showing an inch of it.[88]

This oft-quoted, rhapsodic passage from Dawkins' preface to *The God Delusion* is representative of both the form of the consequences challenge (i.e. generalizing from the history of religious violence to the conclusion that Western religion is inherently violent and immoral) and the alternative proposed by the New Atheists. Dawkins argues that there is "a consensus that prevails surprisingly widely" in Western culture about what constitutes right and wrong, such that the events he lists off are immediately recognizable to all as repugnant. This moral *sensus communis*, he goes on to say, changes over time, taking the form of an evolving "moral *Zeitgeist*" in which "the progressive trend is unmistakable." Dawkins takes this progressive evolution of morality to be "a matter of observed fact" that is "more than enough to undermine the claim that we need God in order to be good, or to decide what is good."[89]

Stenger agrees with Dawkins' description of the progress of morality, writing that naturalistic explanations of moral development are at least as, if not more plausible that the claim that religion is the single source of positive morals. The fact that most religions share the same kinds of ethical injunctions (what Stenger calls "the universal moral code"[90]) is only further proof that genuine morality is logically prior to religious morality, and that the moral progress

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[88] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 23-4.
[89] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 298, 307, 308.
[90] Stenger, *The New Atheism*, p. 151.

identified in Western culture is a product of non-religious factors.[91] The New

Atheists all seem to agree that Western civilization has succeeded in becoming

more moral and more progressive in spite of religion, rather than because of it.

Hence, the consequences challenge posits the alternative view that secular

morality, unlike religion, contributes to the strengthening of moral and

intellectual character, as well as an overall decrease in violence.

This challenge is often taken to be the signature contribution of the New

Atheism, because it reflects the movement's responsiveness to the genuine fear

and sorrow experienced after the religiously motivated attacks of 9/11 and 7/7. At

the same time, like the truth challenge, it relies upon an old critique of religious

people's hypocrisy and immoral character that Gregory Peterson calls "a canard

of antireligious rhetoric going back to the Enlightenment."[92] Though it may be an

old canard, the consequences challenge indicates that this critique of religion is

once again something about which religious people ought to be concerned.

It is worth noting that, at its most fundamental level, the consequences

challenge is an empirical, utilitarian claim about the quantum of violence in the

world, and the outsized contribution of religion to it. It stands to reason, then,

that the challenge, as it is articulated by the New Atheists, could be resolved with

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[91] In *There is No God: Atheists in America* (Lanham MA: Rowman & Littlefied, 2013), sociologists David A. Williamson and George Yancey write that "political progressiveness is a major component of atheism in the United States. Given the theoretical desire of atheists to refute the dominant religion of the day, we should not have been surprised to find a progressive counterweight to the conservatism in traditional religion...Active atheism in the United States is married to political progressiveness" (p. 66). This progressiveness manifests itself as a strong tendency toward liberal positions on social issues. "The mixing of atheism and political progressiveness," they go on to explain, "can create political individuals who are just as loyal to their political philosophy and can be just as single-minded about pursuing their political goals as religious individuals can be...A progressive political philosophy...provides atheists with a system of morality" (p. 68).
[92] Peterson, "Why the New Atheism Shouldn't Be (Completely) Dismissed," p. 804.

a thorough perusal of historical records on religiously motivated violence and non-religious violence, and some simple arithmetic. As will be discussed in later chapters, doing the math on the consequences challenge is not as straightforward task as it may initially seem. Part of the issue is the uncomplicated and literal way the New Atheists construe violent-imagery-laden religious texts. Part of it is in the blunt claims that political motivations are always and necessarily secondary to religious motivations when it comes to violence. In both cases, a subtler approach is necessary to get at the facts of the matter.

<div align="center">The Meaning Challenge</div>

In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett lists the three *raisons d'etre* for religion as "to *comfort* us in our suffering," "to *explain* things we can't otherwise explain," and "to encourage group *cooperation*."[93] The first of these reasons is in keeping with what Gould asserted about the "religious" net of claims providing "ultimate meaning" and the underlying basis for moral and aesthetic value. The latter two reasons are challenged by the truth and consequences challenges, respectively, leaving the first reason (comforting those who suffer) the presumed final target of the New Atheist challenge. Beyond just challenging the idea that religion is or ought to be a comfort in life, however, the meaning challenge is a fundamental rejection of any and all *raisons d'etre* for religion. It synthesizes the previous two challenges in the claim that, in this day and age, religion is not a necessary feature of a meaningful existence.

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[93] Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 103.

Stenger articulates this point in *The New Atheism*, writing that "Most believers have been brainwashed into thinking that religion is necessary for happiness and contentment. This flies in the face of the fact that the happiest, healthiest, most content societies are the least religious."[94] Citing the examples of Scandinavian countries where the quantitative standard of living is very high and the level of religiosity is very low, Stenger reinforces Dawkins' point that not only are non-religious folks capable of being moral, they are also capable of living happy and meaningful lives without the "comfort" of religion. In fact, the positive message of the New Atheism is that atheists are *more* capable of living meaningful lives than religious people are. "The new atheists are not trying to take away the comfort of faith," Stenger explains. "We are trying to show that life is much more comfortable without it."[95] This claim can be taken in one of two ways: either Stenger means that the material conditions in the more secular democratic-socialist countries of Scandinavia provide a better quality of life in terms of health and well-being, or he is implying that the confusion, divisiveness, and violence that accompanies religion is a greater source of existential *dis*comfort than comfort. In this case, weighing religion in a kind of "existential balance" indicates that its costs outweigh its benefits.

The consoling aspect of religion is a somewhat unwieldy site for New Atheist critique, because, unlike the previous two challenges, where scientific rationalism can be brought to bear in arguments about truth and morality, 'comfort' has to do with feelings and emotions. "I don't want to decry human

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[94] Stenger, *The New Atheism*, p. 17.
[95] Stenger, *The New Atheism*, p. 17.

feelings," Dawkins writes, "But let's be clear, in any particular conversation, what we are talking about: feelings or truth."[96] When it comes to feelings of consolation, Dawkins argues that they derive from beliefs that rely upon a self-reinforcing circular logic: in order to be able to endure suffering or generate meaning in life, there must be some source of goodness and meaning upon which to draw. God is posited as this source in order to fill this need, and this postulate proves a great source of emotional comfort. But Dawkins rebukes such thinking as "infantilism," concluding that "The truly adult view, by contrast, is that our life is as meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it. And we can make it very wonderful indeed" with "a good dose of science, the honest and systematic endeavor to find out the truth about the real world."[97]

For Dawkins, the meaningfulness of life is radically subjective, even as it is inextricably tied to the pursuit of objective truth—truth about the way the world works, as well as the truth about what constitutes good behavior for human beings. It is a view akin to Richard Rorty's description of "edifying philosophy" in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.* The contribution of philosophy to the meaningfulness of one's life lies in its capacity to "sustain a conversation…to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately."[98] Philosophy, Rorty concludes, indicates that the meaningfulness of knowing "the truth" is not a matter of discovering some objective "reality," but rather comes in the ongoing production of new modes of

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[96] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 395.
[97] Ibid., pp. 404-5.
[98] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1979), pp. 378-9.

description of the workings of humankind and the universe itself. These descriptions are true, to the extent that they are reliable and verifiable in experience; however, the edifying quality of philosophy "[prevents] man from deluding himself with the notion that he knows himself, or anything else, except under optional descriptions." Thus, as Dawkins offers, "our life is as meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it" through the sustained conversation of science, literature, art, and philosophy.

Dawkins goes on to describe the meaningfulness of life in terms of the "model of reality" that human beings construct for themselves, and whether or not that model "is useful for dealing with the real world."[99] Following Rorty, Dawkins asserts that a meaningful model is a useful model, one that is in accord with the real world as it is (truth) or ought to be (goodness). For the most part, Dawkins argues, without the discoveries of science, our models of reality are rather narrow windows onto the world. "What science does for us is widen the window."[100]

Similarly, Hitchens concludes *god is Not Great* by calling for "a renewed Enlightenment," which he links to "the study of literature and poetry" and "the pursuit of unfettered scientific inquiry."[101] This renewal is not only a matter of refocusing human energies upon these pursuits, but identifying the forces that impede progress in these areas. "To clear the mind for this project," Hitchens writes, "it has become necessary to know the enemy, and to prepare to fight it."[102]

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[99] Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, pp. 416-7.
[100] Ibid., p. 406.
[101] Hitchens, *god is Not Great*, p. 283.
[102] Ibid.

As was noted in the consequences challenge, one of the supposed bad outcomes of religious belief and practice is that it impedes scientific inquiry and appreciation for the coherence and completeness of scientific models. Stenger asserts that the New Atheism "holds that a completely materialistic model for the universe provides a plausible explanation for all our observations, from cosmology to the human mind, leaving no gap for God or the supernatural to be inserted."[103] The lack of a "gap for God" indicates that there is no inherent *need* for a set of theological claims to have a complete, meaningful description of reality. This lack of the *necessity* of religious categories is the heart of the meaning challenge.

The positive alternative the New Atheism offers, the life of scientific inquiry and naturalistic ethics, becomes a live option only when religion is no longer seen as *necessarily* binding humanity to a specific form of meaning-making. Stenger sums up this point in the closing words of *The New Atheism*:

> Faith is absurd and dangerous and we look forward to the day, no matter how distant, when the human race finally abandons it. Reason is a noble substitute, proven by its success. Religion is an intellectual and moral sickness that cannot endure forever if we believe at all in human progress. Science sees no limit in the human capacity to comprehend the universe and ourselves. God does not exist. Life without God means we are the governors of our own destinies.[104]

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[103] Stenger, *The New Atheism*, p. 240.
[104] Stenger, *The New Atheism*, p. 244.

From the New Atheist's perspective, progress and meaning go hand in hand. Religion always represents a retrogression, in their eyes, to an earlier evolutionary state of human existence, one that is less creative, less free, and less progressive. Its descriptions of the world are outmoded in 21st century Western Civilization. If humanity is to build upon the progress of the past two hundred-plus years of sustained conversation in science, politics, philosophy, and literature, there can be neither "going back" nor "holding back" by clinging to the necessity of employing religious categories for meaning-making descriptions of reality.

Of all the New Atheists, Sam Harris provides the most nuanced consideration of the nature of religion's meaning-making capacity, and the need to upset this paradigmatic association of religion with the meaningfulness of existence. "At the core of every religion," he writes, "lies an undeniable claim about the human condition: it is possible to have one's experience of the world radically transformed." "The problem with religion," Harris goes on to assert, "is that it blends this truth so thoroughly with the venom of unreason."[105] The meaningfulness that religion claims for itself, Harris argues, is really just a feature of human experience in general, which, like any other feature of human experience, stands to be enhanced by the application of reason and understanding. Harris claims that the power to transform one's experience of the world rests in our ability to manipulate our consciousness through spiritual practices, which better enable human beings to be genuinely present in any given

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[105] Harris, *End of Faith*, p. 204.

moment. "Mysticism" of this type, Harris claims, "is a rational enterprise," because "the mystic has recognized something about the nature of consciousness prior to thought, and this recognition is susceptible to rational discussion." "Religion," on the other hand, "is nothing more than bad concepts held in place of good ones for all time."[106] Following the general line of thinking of the other New Atheists, Harris holds that religious beliefs constitute a false model of reality that impedes basic rational practices like evidence-gathering or creating logical coherence. "Our religious traditions are intellectually defunct and politically ruinous," Harris concludes, arguing that the "end of faith" is actually what is needed to achieve a genuine understanding of the spiritual dimension of life.[107] The meaningfulness of human existence—"our deepest personal concerns," as Harris puts it—can and indeed must be wrenched from the hands of Western religion, if reasoned inquiry is ever to have a chance of uncovering its true nature.

The Three Challenges and The "God Debate"

While the New Atheist Movement billed itself as a "consciousness-raising effort" that disbelieving the existence of God was both morally and epistemically acceptable, and even desirable, it was, fundamentally, a challenge to the place and worth of religion in human experience. As such, the challenges of the New Atheists were met with a barrage of publications from theologians, philosophers, and religiously-inclined scientists. These books most often took the form of a point-by-point refutation of the New Atheists' arguments, appended by an

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[106] Ibid., p. 221.
[107] Ibid.

apologetic argument for the religious life. Almost all such responses were written from a Christian perspective; although the New Atheists frequently focused their polemics against Islam, there has been a near-complete absence of publications from Muslim scholars in the West responding to the New Atheists' challenges.[108]

As often as they were praised for being provocative, the works of Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris especially received critical reviews of their polemical and dismissive rhetoric towards religious worldviews, as well as their tendency to cherry-pick examples to support their arguments.[109] Philosophical theologian Alister McGrath calls out Dawkins especially for his tone in the introduction to his book, *The Dawkins Delusion*. "When I read *The God Delusion* I was both saddened and troubled. How, I wondered, could such a gifted popularizer of the natural sciences...turn into such an aggressive anti-religious propagandist, with an apparent disregard for evidence that was not favourable to his case?"[110] McGrath proposes in his book to raise the discourse by not engaging in such polemics (though, given his choice of title, this claim may be tongue in cheek). Keith Ward puts it a bit more delicately in his introduction to *Is Religion Irrational?*, writing that the New Atheists "usually fail to state religious beliefs carefully and sympathetically, fail to note that anything is to be learned from religions, and tend to oppose all religions in a sort of blanket ban, without noting

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[108] A single essay by Taner Edis in *Muhammad in the Digital Age* (Ruqayya Yasmine Khan, Ed. [Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015]) is the only published text responding to the New Atheism from an Islamic perspective ("Finding an Enemy: Islam and the New Atheism," pp. 174-92).

[109] See, e.g., Andrew Brown, "Dawkins the Dogmatist," *Prospect Magazine*, 27 (October 2006), <http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=7803>; Terry Eagleton, "Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching," *The London Review of Books*, 28(20) (October 2006).

[110] Alister and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine* (London: Society Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007), p. x.

important differences between sorts of religious belief."[111] Eric Reitan, in his book *Is God a Delusion? A Response to Religion's Cultured Despisers*, writes that the New Atheists are "distinguished by their outrage...And the public, apparently hungry for such frank expressions of animosity, have been gobbling it up."[112] This anger, Reitan goes on to say, clouded these authors' ability to be objective and rational, even as they vociferously claimed to have taken the moral and intellectual high ground.

Tina Beattie goes one step further, characterizing the whole back-and-forth of this Anglo-American "God Debate" as "a perennial stag-fight between men of Big Ideas" that is "a little comic, if not a little wearisome."[113] Beattie goes on to say that "we need to cultivate a much greater awareness of both the limits and the oppressive effects of a debate dominated by the opinions of a small clique of white English-speaking men."[114] Beattie pushes past her colleagues in arguing for a feminist-postmodern approach, claiming that a genuine rational discourse about religion does not merely require civility, but also radical inclusivity and attention to otherness.

At the same time, however, Beattie's call for inclusivity and civility relies upon the premise that such a debate could occur in the first place. But this assumption is not self-evident at all. In fact, the conditions for the possibility of a meaningful discourse between those who are religious and those who are not—

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[111] Keith Ward, *Is Religion Irrational?* (Oxford: Lion, 2011), p. 9.
[112] Eric Reitan, *Is God a Delusion? A Reply to Religion's Cultured Despisers* (New York/London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 3.
[113] Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd Ltd., 2007) p. 9.
[114] Ibid., p. 10.

even if it were oriented by imperatives of "civility" and "inclusivity"—are murky at best. What would the outcome of such a dialogue even look like? Would one side "win" and the other "lose"? The implication of calling such a confrontation "The God Debate" seems to be that one side will prove more convincing than the other. In fact, the New Atheists seem adamant in their goal to "win over" the religious to their side, or at least persuade those in the middle to be swayed to a non-religious orientation. Most of the theistic rejoinders seem to accept this goal and the debate-like formula in their response. And yet, the question remains as to whether or not this kind of back-and-forth will ever arrive at the truth, morality, and meaning of religion, or if it will only ever be an exercise in polemics.

The theistic rejoinder to the New Atheism boils down to the claim that their challenges "are missing the target," as John C. Lennox puts it.[115] In his book *Gunning for God*, Lennox pushes back against what he takes to be the disingenuous misrepresentation of religious ideas by the New Atheists, arguing that their approach displays "a disquietly dangerous imbalance...both in terms of the diagnosis they make and the solution they propose."[116] Lennox's book is paradigmatic of how theist authors respond to the New Atheism's challenges: first, indicate that the challenges rest upon disingenuous misrepresentations of theist positions; second, point out the irony of the New Atheists' caustic and often violent polemics against religious violence;[117] and lastly, reassert and affirm

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[115] John C. Lennox, *Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target* (London: Lion, 2011).
[116] Ibid., p. 22.
[117] The irony derives from the claim common among the New Atheists that the reason religions are so violent (especially the Abrahamic trinity of Judaism, Christianity, and even more especially Islam) is because their sacred texts are filled with violent rhetoric and imagery. Harris, for example, devotes seven pages to quoting cherry-picked passages from the Qur'an that seem to

theistic principles, citing testimonial and scriptural sources as evidence that warrants holding such beliefs.[118]

This approach to the "God Debate" largely accepts the terms of the debate offered by the New Atheists' first two challenges. As Ward's book titles (*Is Religion Irrational?* and *Is Religion Dangerous?*) indicate, theistic rejoinders to the New Atheism's challenges intend to appeal to the same values (i.e. rationality, consequentialism) that the New Atheists claim as their own. In doing so, these responses purport to make a case for religion and against atheism on moral and rational grounds. In doing so, however, these theological rejoinders utterly avoid the third and arguably most important challenge—the meaning challenge. To demonstrate this, it will be helpful to revisit the three challenges, and take stock of how the theistic counter-literature does or does not answer the questions these challenges raise.

The Truth Challenge Revisited

The truth challenge holds that theological claims are not true. Logical proofs for the existence of God are often incoherent or rely upon unsubstantiated

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describe violence waged against non-believers by God and the faithful (see *End of Faith*, pp. 117-123). He concludes: "There is no substitute for confronting the text itself. I cannot judge the quality of the Arabic; perhaps it is sublime. But the book's contents are not. On almost every page the Koran instructs observant Muslims to despise non-believers. On almost every page, it prepares the ground for religious conflict" (p. 123). Harris goes on to say that anyone who does not appreciate the connection between Islam and violence "should probably consult a neurologist" (ibid). This entire line of thought appears in a chapter uncharitably titled "The Problem with Islam."

[118] This pattern applies to Mcgrath's *Dawkins Delusion*, as well as Ward's *Is Religion Irrational* and *Is Religion Dangerous?* (Oxford: Lion, 2006); Ian Markham, *Against Atheism: Why Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris are Fundamentally Wrong* (New York/London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), and John Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

premises. When theistic claims about God and God's activity are subjected to scientific investigation, claims about supernatural agency lack sufficient empirical evidence to warrant being called 'true.' To hold such claims to be true "by faith" is a mistake, one which has important consequences for science and morality that can be verified in experience. Moreover, religious phenomena often admit of naturalistic explanations, and scientific models of the universe and of nature have reached a point of being sufficiently robust so as not to admit of any "gap" that may allow for the possibility of supernatural intervention. Thus, any theological claims about such activity are either patently false or superfluous.

The truth challenge rests upon the conviction that theological claims ought to be treated in the same manner as scientific claims. Theistic rejoinders to the truth challenge largely take issue with this presupposition. As Ward explains, scientific claims about the universe aim to understand it objectively, in order to contribute to "the mastery of nature." "A religious approach to the universe," on the other hand,

> is a personal and reactive approach...God was never a scientific hypothesis. To believe in God was always to respond to the universe in which we exist as the manifestation, expression, or creation of a personal, conscious, mind-like reality. Such belief was always practice and reactive, not theoretical and objective.[119]

Ward argues that religious knowledge is "personal," while scientific knowledge is "objective." Personal knowledge is transformative; it is constitutive of character,

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[119] Ward, *Is Religion Irrational?* p. 17.

guides moral action, and has an aesthetic quality of wonder to it. Objective knowledge is useful, insofar as it can further the projects that arise from the transformative effects of personal knowledge.

Objective claims can be true or false; personal knowledge, on the other hand, "inevitably involves an element of judgment and evaluation," and "different observers will disagree to some extent in their assessments of other persons and what they think and do."[120] Personal knowledge is moral and aesthetic, according to Ward. The personal knowledge of God is, ultimately, "a beautiful idea," with which scientific descriptions of the universe can also resonate.[121] The truth or falsity of these objective descriptions translates into the degree to which they resonate. Ultimately, objective knowledge is instrumental to personal knowledge, and not vice versa.

In this sense, the truth challenge misses the mark because it falsely identifies the "personal knowledge" of religion as potentially true or false, when personal knowledge is rather the assessment of the degree to which beauty and goodness are expressed in the world. The natural response to such assessments, Ward concludes, is the religious act of worship. "Believers do not go to church or synagogue or mosque to carry out scientific experiments, or to take things to pieces to see how they work. They go to places of worship precisely to worship God. Whatever worshipping God is, it is not any form of scientific experiment or explanation."[122] Then again, Ward's description of what personal knowledge is

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[120] Ibid., p. 19.
[121] Ibid., p. 18.
[122] Ward, *Is Religion Irrational?* p. 10. Reitan follows Ward in emphasizing the aesthetic quality of religious belief in *Is God a Delusion*. Drawing upon Schleiermacher's description of God as the transcendent being upon whom we depend absolutely, Reitan points out that "Transcendent

seems to invite some skepticism as to whether or not this really ought to be called *knowledge*, or whether what he is describing is merely a certain *feeling*. While this differentiation of objective and personal knowledge may sidestep the truth challenge, it does not seem to be a direct answer.

Along the same lines as Ward, John F. Haught argues that the New Atheists' narrow definition of faith as belief in a set of hypotheses without confirming evidence is deeply misguided. "If the right kind of empirical evidence ever turns up, then reasonable people will be permitted to give assent to the God hypothesis or the soul hypothesis. But then there will no longer be any need for faith. Knowledge will have replaced it. For theology, however, the objective is to deepen faith, not eliminate it."[123] According to Haught, the activity of making claims about God—theology—serves a different purpose to that of making empirical claims about natural processes. This is not to say that theology and science are at cross purposes, however. Elsewhere, Haught proposes three models for understanding the interactions between scientific and religious knowledge: the *conflict* model, in which the two stand in binary opposition; the *contrast* model, in which religious and scientific knowledge are not properly concerned with the same subject matter (a la Gould's notion of non-overlapping magisteria); and the *convergence* model, in which religious and scientific discourses describe the world in different ways, but "the two inevitably interact"

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objects are not just inaccessible to empirical observation *in fact*…They are inaccessible *in principle*." Whereas empirical experience involves an interaction in which one is receptive to the world, but has the wherewithal to at the very least choose to focus upon a specific object, an experience of transcendence is characterized by "a feeling of being exclusively receptive" (p. 82).
[123] Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, p. 13.

to "contribute to a richer view of reality than either can achieve on its own."[124] Haught concludes that the richest, truest view of reality comes through the convergence of personal and objective knowledge about the universe.

In *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* Lennox argues that labelling religious claims about God "false" based upon a lack of empirical evidence betrays an underlying metaphysical assumption in favor of materialism or naturalism that is at least as arbitrary as assuming the existence of supernaturalism or theism.[125] The truth challenge rests upon this arbitrary assumption in favor of materialism: "What no scientist can avoid is having his or her own philosophical commitments."[126] Lennox goes on to argue that these philosophical commitments necessarily influence and limit what counts as "empirical evidence." Referring to Thomas Kuhn's notion of scientific paradigms, Lennox points out that evidence inconsistent with entrenched attitudes is not necessarily accepted at first blush, and that while holding doggedly to a well-established paradigm despite disconfirming evidence is often described as a feature of religious faith, it is a feature of scientific claims as well.[127] The notion that science is a progressive discipline, while religious beliefs are essentially conservative, is indicative of a failure to recognize the possibility of genuine

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[124] John F. Haught, *Science and Faith: A New Introduction* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), pp. 3-5.

[125] Lennox equates scientific materialism and theistic supernaturalism as metaphysical matrices available for one to "pick" in the world of Western modernity. He seems to think that the grounds for deciding between these two metaphysical matrices are equally reasonable and essentially arbitrary. Whether a religious ontology is any more or less rationally warranted than a scientific materialist one is a key question for Alvin Plantinga, whose work is discussed in Chapter 2 below.

[126] Lennox, *God's Undertaker*, p. 37.

[127] Ibid., pp. 38-9.

religious experience as evidence inconsistent with the dominant, scientistic paradigm of 21st century Anglophone culture.

This leads to the last line of response to the truth challenge offered by these religious apologists. The truth challenge, they argue, represents precisely the kind of uncritical, fundamentalist conviction about the falsity of religious beliefs that it claims religious folks hold towards scientific claims about cosmogony and evolution. "The total dogmatic conviction of correctness," McGrath writes in *The Dawkins Delusion*, "immediately aligns [the New Atheism] with a religious fundamentalism which refuses to allow its ideas to be examined or challenged."[128] McGrath takes issue with the New Atheists' assumption of the intellectual high ground, even as they undermine their own intellectual authority by providing, in the words of Lennox, "such unscholarly, crass oversimplification"[129] in their descriptions of the nature of religious belief. Ian Markham, in *Against Atheism*, asserts that the considered, rational theological position "requires me to work as hard as I can to understand the arguments of Christian fundamentalists and atheist fundamentalists." Markham describes this as "an act of Christian duty and fidelity to be fair to those with whom you disagree."[130]

From the perspective of what I have been describing as "theistic rejoinders," the truth challenge is disingenuous at best, and downright inaccurate at worst. The theists critique assumptions made in the truth challenge about the nature of knowledge, arguing that the New Atheists uncritically extend the

[128] McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion*, p. xii.
[129] Lennox, *Gunning for God*, p. 60.
[130] Markham, *Against Atheism*, pp. 8-9.

domain of objective knowledge beyond its reasonable boundary. This boundary marks a distinction between "personal" and "objective" forms of knowledge, which, on the theistic view, *together* constitute the "truest" knowledge of reality.

The theistic rejoinders accept the fundamental distinction between the kinds of claims scientists make and those at work in religious experience. This distinction does not render science and religion incommensurate, but rather indicates that some synthesis is necessary. It is not that the truth or falsity of religious beliefs is unimportant. Instead, truth or falsity is wrapped up (and in some sense sublimated) in the moral and aesthetic elements of a broader religious orientation, which is primarily focused upon faithful worship of God, rather than clear-eyed understanding of the universe. In arriving at this conclusion, the theistic responses to the New Atheist's truth challenge reveal their implicit reliance upon moral and aesthetic judgment *rather than a purely "rational" demonstration* to justify the continuation of religion. These theistic responses to the truth challenge are thus revealed to not really be responses at all, but deflationary attempts to reframe the justification of religion upon purely moral and aesthetic grounds.

These attempts are only part of the theistic rejoinder, however. Ward and Lennox (among others) also appeal to the authority of sacred texts and religious traditions (which, for these folks, is almost uniformly an Anglican or Reformed mode of Christianity) as justification for the truth of their religious claims. It is, however, an open question as to whether such appeals justify claiming that a particular religious belief is "true" in any universal or objective sense. It may be

the case that such beliefs are true, but only relative to their domain of religious discourse and tradition.

This implies a radical relativism, however, and a further sundering of truth along the secular/religious divide, as well as the divide between different religious traditions. If the truth of religious claims is always relative to the "windowless" discourse and vocabulary to which they belong, then it would seem impossible actually engage the truth challenge meaningfully in discourse. This may be the unavoidable conclusion of treating the question of the truth or falsity of religious claims; on the other hand, it also seems worthwhile to think further about ways to somehow transcend or bridge the monadic boundaries of distinct secular and religious discourses, in order to forward an argument for the continuation of religion based on its truth in the pluralistic universe of the 21st century.

<p style="text-align:center">The Consequences Challenge Revisited</p>

The consequences challenge holds that religion contributes to a weakening of moral and intellectual character. This contributes to the propagation of religious violence, which has reached a level sufficient to warrant moral outrage. These empirical claims about the consequences of religious belief lead to the hypothesis that eliminating religion altogether may lower the overall quantum of violence in the world.

Pastoral theologian Thomas G. Long gives a sense of what is at stake in the theological response to the consequences challenge. Rather than engage in the classical task of theodicy, to reconcile the speculative claims of God's

omnipotence and omnibenevolence with empirical claims about the reality of suffering and violence, contemporary religious believers seek to "maintain a workable sense of meaning and coherence in the face of experiences that challenge the consistency of one's worldview." Long's interpretation of the meaning of theodicy is a fitting response to the consequences challenge: "The task of theodicy…is not to solve a logical problem in philosophy but instead to repair a faithful but imperiled worldview."[131]

There are three basic tacks which religious apologists take in response to the consequences challenge. On the one hand, some authors attack the claim that religion leads to a weakening of moral and intellectual character. This usually involves appealing to examples of religious figures, like St. Francis of Assisi or George Lemaitre, as paragons of moral and intellectual virtue.[132] Most of these authors are willing to cop to the fact that people claiming religious motivations have committed devastating acts of violence.

Ward, however, does not think that admitting this warrants the strong conclusion of the consequences challenge. "There can be religious beliefs that are infantile, ugly, and pathological. There can be moral codes that are intolerant, repressive and divisive. In comparing secular and religious morality, we need to compare the worst with the worst, and the best with the best."[133] The comparison must be radically contextual as well: "rather than asking 'Is religion dangerous?' we really need to ask, 'Is this particular religion, at this stage of its development,

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[131] Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), p. 55.
[132] See Lennox, *Gunning for God*, pp. 29-30; Ward, *Is Religion Evil?* pp. 179-99.
[133] Ward, *Is Religion Evil?* pp. 138-9.

dangerous in this social context?'"[134] Ward concludes that an objective, unbiased response to this situation would indicate that religion is a stabilizing social force, and source of moral rectitude in most contexts.

A second option for rebuffing the consequences challenge is to muddy the distinction between "religious violence" and "secular violence."[135] In *The Dawkins Delusion*, McGrath argues that violence usually arises in the binary opposition between different social groups. "Divisions are ultimately social constructs…If religion were to cease to exist, other social demarcators would emerge as decisive…There is a real need to deal with the ultimate causes of social division and exclusion. Religion's in there, along with a myriad of other factors."[136] Religious beliefs and identities thus represent only one kind of social force at work in a given situation, and can almost certainly never be wholly credited with being the sole root cause of violent acts. Additionally, Lennox points out that "lumping all religions together indiscriminately, as if all religions were equally guilty of the charge of fomenting dangerous behavior" is an "unscholarly, crass oversimplification…classifying the peace-loving Amish with Islamic fundamentalist extremists is culpably and dangerously naïve."[137] The empirical claim of the consequences challenge that *all* religious beliefs and

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[134] Ibid., p. 55.
[135] William Cavanaugh offers a convincing argument in *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009) that the very category "religious violence" is nothing more than an ideological tool of Western secular culture. The mythic category of irrational, incorrigible, unenlightened religious violence has been used to justify the use of force against non-Western peoples, particularly in the Middle East. The transparency of the myth, Cavanaugh argues, is revealed in the arbitrary isolation of "a universal essence of religion from that of politics." This is particularly true in the case of Muslim radicalism: "Muslim radicalism is best understood as a theopolitical project, which means that any attempt to isolate religion from the political and social contexts of Muslim radicalism will fail to grasp the full reality of Muslim anti-Western sentiment (p. 230).
[136] McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion*, pp. 52-3.
[137] Lennox, *Gunning for God*, p. 60.

practices yield moral and/or intellectual corruption is demonstrably false; it is too broad to stand. It also fails to account for the wide spectrum of levels of adherence to moral principles within a given religious community.

Lastly, Lennox and others seek to turn the consequences challenge on its head: "Do the New Atheists really think that a truly secular society, in which religion had been abolished, would be less prone to violence than a society in which any form of religion was tolerated? This is an astonishing idea to hold, when the twentieth century's examples of such regimes have been the most intolerant and violent in all of history."[138] Lennox argues that the New Atheists' uncharitable generalizations about religious violence—and particularly the extrapolation to religious moderates who are supposedly implicated in the violence of their more extreme brethren—is hypocritical, insofar as they are willing to claim the morality of secular humanism, whilst distancing themselves from the extreme violence of the Nazis, Stalin, Pol Pot, and Chairman Mao. The secular morality offered as the supposed replacement for religion, Lennox goes on to say, "though superficially attractive to many, is potentially dangerous for exactly the same reasons that the New Atheists (with less justification) use against religion."[139] Lennox concludes that the hypothesis posited in the consequences challenge—that eliminating religion will lower the overall quantum of violence in the world—has not only not been borne out in recent history, but has been actively refuted in a number of important and significant instances. The sheer body count of Stalin's Gulags, Mao's "great leap forward" in China, and the

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[138] Ibid., p. 90.
[139] Lennox, *Gunning for God*, pp. 92-3.

brutal regime of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia are enough recent examples to considerably upset the calculus comparing religious and secular violence.[140]

The consequences challenge is primarily based upon an inductive argument in which the historical facts about violence committed ostensibly in the name of religion extrapolate to a generalization about a causal connection between religion and violence. It is also bolstered by a selective reading of religious texts, which are taken to support the claim of a causal link between beliefs based upon those texts and religious violence. Together, these claims purport to provide sufficient evidence to warrant eliminating religion.

While it is widely considered to be the most interesting feature of the New Atheism, the consequences challenge is also perhaps the easiest for religious apologists to undermine. The theistic rejoinders examined in this chapter do so, however, primarily by appealing to examples drawn from their respective faith traditions, in order to argue for the essential goodness and morality of the principles of *their* religion. Ward makes his claims about religious morality more general, concluding that "secular humanism is built on shifting soil, as there is no objective moral demand…[The] belief in the dignity and unique value of personal life…cannot really survive without some form of faith in a supremely personal

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[140] The description of the Nazi regime's genocidal violence as purely "secular" is an oversimplification. Hitler's genocidal anti-semitism, as well as violence against persons with disabilities, Christians, communists, and LGBT folks was either directly or indirectly bolstered by the Roman Catholic church, and so the Shoah is not proper to this list. On Catholic complicity in the Shoah, see David Kertzer, *Unholy War: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Macmillan, 2002). For a more extensive treatment of anti-semitism in Christianity and its relation to the Holocaust, see Michael R. Steele, *Christianity, the Other, and the Holocaust* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2003).

God who gives to humanity its dignity and hope."[141] Insofar as he accepts the need for an "objective moral demand" to orient human action, Ward is faithful to the value of objectivity latent in the consequences challenge. However, Ward finds the consequentialist conception of "objectivity" that undergirds the empirical claims of the New Atheism about the morality of religion to be wanting. The desire to lower the quantum of violence in the world is a worthy sentiment, but what end does it serve? From a theistic perspective, the objective, empirical assessment of experience must be situated within a wider framework of personal knowledge.

While Ward attempts to universalize his claims to the morality of religion, appeals to the moral values of a *particular* religion will inevitably open theists to charges of relativism or false generalization. A proper response to the consequences challenge ought not be based on purely dogmatic, doctrinal grounds, but rather upon a robust moral theory (e.g. utilitarianism, deontology). While it may be possible to translate the claims of a particular religious tradition into a more universal domain of discourse, such a translation is not necessarily required of one whose response to the consequences challenge is "intramural"— that is, addressing a particular religious community as an insider. But a merely "intramural" rejoinder to the consequences challenge once again locks itself into a domain of discourse that is radically circumscribed, in a society and a world that is full of rich and diverse communities. It remains an open question as to

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[141] Ward, *Is Religion Dangerous?* p. 139.

whether it is possible to unproblematically "translate" the specific moral values of a particular religious tradition into a non-religious mode of "public discourse."

The reduction of the meaning of religion to mere morality—to essentially denude religion of every aspect except its ethical content—is another potential pitfall in a response to the consequences challenge. Such a reduction may solve the question of consequences, but it also clears the path for the meaning challenge to be levelled more easily.

The Meaning Challenge Revisited

The meaning challenge holds that what makes life meaningful is subjective, emotional, and non-truth-functional. "Progress" is one traditional marker of meaning-making in Western civilization. Religion, however, is retrogressive, and is therefore antithetical to genuine meaning making. The meaningfulness of religion comes from its capacity to provide consolation in times of tragedy. This consolation, however, relies upon a circular assumption about the capacity of religion for meaning-making that does not necessarily hold. At bottom, the meaning challenge holds that religious folks can only justify the meaningfulness of their beliefs and practices on the subjective basis of the tenets and experiences of their chosen religious tradition. There is thus no way to independently justify the necessity of religion for a meaningful life.

A strictly "theological" response to the meaning challenge is ultimately untenable, because theology (as noted above) is based upon the presupposition that religious categories lend meaning to human existence. As Ward noted, theology is primarily understood as an act of "rational worship," which is more

affective than "rational." It is, nonetheless, crucial to fostering the life of faith. At the same time, however, theology does not concern itself with questions of whence the necessity to worship the divine arises—at least not in a way that is not already beholden to the terms and categories of a given religious tradition or theological discourse.

Theological discourse *qua* discourse is internally coherent within a religious tradition, and may even be coherent across several religious faiths, insofar as terms and categories are mutually translatable. But, as the theistic responses to the truth challenge make clear, the kind of knowledge that theological discourse imparts is not objective, nor can it claim to be coherent outside of a pre-existing theological discourse. That there has been a pre-existent theological discourse of some sort throughout the recorded history of humankind indicates that this knowledge is well-founded historically. But so long as theology rests upon a merely accidental historical foundation, rather than a more thoroughgoing and independent rational justification, the meaning challenge remains unanswered.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided an interpretation of the "God Debate" that took place over the course of the past decade between the New Atheists and their theistic responders. I organized the claims of both sides around three challenges of the New Atheism, two of which I have claimed are dealt with reasonably well in the counter-literature of religious apologists. The third challenge, the meaning challenge, is not adequately addressed, because the task of justifying the

meaningfulness of theological discourse is largely overlooked from the religionist perspective. Furthermore, it is unclear whether or not there is indeed something unique about 'religion' that constitutes sufficient reason to hold it as necessary for meaningful living, as opposed to achieving meaning through a simplified constellation of scientific, moral, and aesthetic experiences. Theologians can appeal to philosophers of religion to offer such an account; however, as I intend to show in the next chapter, the limitations of theological discourse in responding to the meaning challenge also extend to the dominant modes of contemporary philosophy of religion as well: analytic philosophy of religion, and empirical philosophy of religion.

What is it about the meaning challenge—and the three challenges in general—that indicates a limitation in these discourses? To answer this question requires taking a step back from "the God Debate" itself, and considering the conditions that shape it—its goals, its conceptual framework, terms of art, etc. This requires both a consideration of contemporary literature (which will take place in the first two chapters of this essay) as well as a deeper historical genealogy of modern ways of thinking about religion (chapter 3). By considering the forces and ideas that shape the discursive space *between* religious and non-religious traditions, more light can be shed upon the three challenges. At the same time, this will enable a meta-analysis of the nature of philosophy of religion itself, and what mode (or modes) of philosophical discourse are appropriate in a philosophy of religion that can capture the meaning and sense of religion in its present form.

Chapter 2: Contemporary Philosophy of Religion vs. The Threefold Challenge

In chapter 1, I contended that the New Atheism's controversial claims that religion is untrue, immoral, and unnecessary constitute a threefold challenge that threatens to further erode religious beliefs, practices, and institutions in the 21st century Anglophone world. These challenges not only coincide with shifting demographics away from traditional forms of religious affiliation; they also represent the culmination or decadence of a hyper-modern expression of atheism. Theistic rejoinders in popular counter-literature meet these challenges in two ways. On the one hand, theistic writers seek to correct what they see as misperceptions of the nature of religious belief and practice. These corrections appeal to insider knowledge of particular traditions (typically from some form of Protestant Christianity) to debunk misinterpretations of religious teachings and practices, as well as to differentiate what is proper to "religion" from what is proper to "culture." This debunking also involves appealing to counter-examples, especially when it comes to refuting the claim that religion contributes disproportionately to the violence experienced in the world today and throughout history. The other way these theistic thinkers respond to the New Atheists' three challenges is to point out their scientism and its accompanying assumptions about the nature of knowledge, truth, and morality.

As I pointed out in the last chapter, these theistic rejoinders are somewhat constrained in their responses to the questions engendered by the three challenges. When it comes to the consequences challenge, the theistic counter-literature focuses upon providing non-violent interpretations of sacred texts, as well as examples of moral virtue. They also ask that examples of purely secular

violence in the 20th century be weighed in the balance of overall violence in the Modern age. These arguments are largely empirical and anecdotal, leaving open the prospect of further investigation into the nature of the relation between religion and violence. In the first section of this chapter, I will draw upon the work of William Cavanaugh to pursue such an investigation, in hopes of coming quickly to a more complete resolution of the consequences challenge.

Theistic arguments responding to the truth challenge also leave room for further exploration. One key question that prompts further inquiry is how religious claims can be "true" in some sense connected to "knowledge." A thorough answer to this question requires clarification of the meaning of both 'truth' and 'knowledge'. In this chapter, I will push towards this more thorough answer by exploring analytic philosophy of religion and empirical philosophy of religion—the two dominant modes of contemporary philosophy of religion in the United States and England.

By surveying some of the key figures in these fields, I intend to show what philosophical resources are available within them for responding to the truth challenge. Early logical positivists like A.J. Ayer, for instance, claimed that religious language is not truth-functional, but rather expresses emotional values, not unlike moral and aesthetic language. This undermines the truth challenge as an argument against religion, but it also renders claims to "true" religious "knowledge" problematic.

At the extreme other end of the spectrum of analytic philosophy of religion are those philosophers who center the task of demonstrating the rationality of specific religious ideas. In something of a throwback to the medieval conception

of philosophy, these philosophical projects often act as "handmaidens" to theology. These approaches rely upon what William Hasker calls a "hermeneutic of trust."[1] For example, Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, John Haldane, and Eleanore Stump use an analytical approach in rearticulating the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Thomism saw a resurgence in its influence after a papal encyclical in 1879 identified Aquinas as *the* foundational philosopher (the "Sacred Doctor") of the Catholic church. "Analytic Thomism" or "Neo-Thomism" was paralleled in the work of protestant Christian philosophers as well, including Richard Swinburne (whose work is a kind of analytic apologetics for a form of Anglican Christianity) and Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga's effort to establish the absolute truth of Christian theism through what has come to be called "Reformed Epistemology" turns out to be internally consistent. However, because the truth about God's existence is rendered as something accessible to God alone, Plantinga's approach fails to articulate how Christian beliefs actually contributes to a meaningful life. Much like St. Anselm's ontological argument, Plantinga's philosophy of religion is operative only within the discursive domain of Christian belief where it establishes the conditions for the rationality of religious claims.

This limitation of analytic philosophies that completely "buy in" to conducting their analysis within one specific religious domain reflects the influence of ordinary language philosophy. Wittgenstein and his successors in the philosophy of religion approached the truth of religious claims in terms of their respective vocabularies, their relation to a particular discursive community, and

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[1] William Hasker, "Analytic Philosophy of Religion," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), p. 441.

their function in religious praxis. This approach yields thorough descriptions about the meaning of religious language, but those meanings are intrinsically bound to their discursive setting. A kind of monadic view of religious discourse develops, setting the truth of religious claims at a distance from the truths of, say, a purely secular form of public discourse. It also indicates a question as to whether it is even possible to translate the truth-functional meanings of religious claims between different religious vocabularies. These difficulties were alluded to at the close of Chapter 1; here, I claim that simply describing the conditions under which religious claims can be treated as true is not sufficient to provide a thoroughgoing sense of their meaningfulness.

A similar objection can be raised against empirical philosophy of religion, which takes itself with providing a robust, thorough synthesis of the empirical scientific findings about how religion functions. Empirical philosophy of religion relies heavily upon Darwinian theories and cognitive science to provide an explanation for the origins, operations, and commonalities of religion in the world. These empirical studies, however, often suffer from a tendency to reduce religion to a "side-effect" (albeit a "dramatic" one)[2] of what are essentially biologically and culturally conditioned mental processes. Whether these descriptions are accurate, it is unclear if they establish the "truth" of religious knowledge or not. Different thinkers also draw radically different conclusions about what the neuropsychological and sociological explanations of religious phenomena imply for the future of religion, with some claiming that religion will

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[2] Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), p. 379.

always be with us, while others assert the need to double-down on overcoming the deeply entrenched, even innate modes of religiosity that continue to persist in human experience. In both cases, the debate seems to be pointlessly mired in suppositions and evaluative principles uncritically admitted into the fray.

Analytic and empirical philosophies of religion (broadly construed) can also provide arguments that respond to the consequences and meaning challenges. I will highlight these aspects of various thinkers' work on religion throughout the chapter as well. I will conclude the chapter by focusing especially upon the open questions in the truth and meaning challenges. I take Owen Flanagan's theory of meaning, as it is presented in *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World*, as well as Wesley Wildman's approach to philosophy of religion as "multidisciplinary comparative inquiry" as gestures in the right direction for providing a proper response to the meaning challenge. Both Wildman' and Flanagan's theories illustrate the ways in which both empirical and analytic philosophies of religion benefit from their methodological orientation towards *description* and *assessment*. At the same time, this orientation also leads to a certain impotence when it comes to articulating a *justification* for religion. If a response to the meaning challenge requires a widely accessible acknowledgment of the unique and necessary contribution of religion to a meaningful life, then these philosophical paradigms ultimately do not seem well-suited to provide arguments that meet that challenge.

The Mythology Behind the Consequences Challenge

In his book, *The Myth of Religious Violence*,[3] William Cavanaugh troubles the notion that lays at the root of the consequences challenge: 'religious violence' itself. Through a philological study, Cavanaugh traces the origins of this idea to the early Modern period, identifying its first real appearance in accounts of the violence of the Thirty Years War. Prior to this time, the term *religio* referred to the "duty" of "reverence" that is expressed in cultic practices in Ancient Rome and pre-Modern Christianity. *Religio* was also as a way of describing the specific duties and practices of different clerical and monastic orders in the high middle ages in Europe. Hence, a Franciscan and a Dominican may differ in their *religio* while at the same time holding essentially the same set of Christian beliefs. Cavanaugh charts the progress of the meaning of 'religion' in the Modern period as one of increasing emphasis upon interiority and individualistic belief, rather than civic practices and social order. This shift in meaning began in the 15th century, in the works of Nicholas Cusa and Marsilio Ficinio. Cusa was the first to claim that "there is, in spite of many varieties of rites, but one religion"[4]—that is, Cavanaugh explains, one "interior impulse that is universal to human beings and therefore stands behind the multiplicity of exterior rites that express it."[5] Ficino similarly argued in *De Christiana Religione* (1474) that Christianity is but one form (albeit the most genuine form or expression) of the "one universal *religio* [worship of God] implanted in the human heart...In Ficino's eyes, any faith can be 'Christian' religion, even with no connection to the historical Christian

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[3] William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009).
[4] Qtd. in Ibid.
[5] Ibid.

revelation,"[6] insofar as that faith is a "genuine" expression of an inward orientation towards the divine. This description of religion as a common, inwardly focused form of expression was further codified by French humanist Guillaume Postel in 1544, when he listed 67 propositions "common to all religions" that could provide the basis for a global concord, if only people would "shed the superfluous externalities of rite and practice."[7]

The effect of this "new conception of religion" was to "help to 'purify' the church of powers and claims that were not its proper function."[8] The social and political activity of Christian institutions in medieval Europe were increasingly ceded to secular authorities during this period as new political configurations began to take shape. The view of religion as an inward state of being was then treated as a fixed, natural, and transhistorical truth that could be identified and articulated on the basis of propositional beliefs that are presumably shared in common across time and space. Cavanaugh's own philological investigation indicates that this understanding of the meaning of *religio* was importantly *different* from its prior meanings. Based upon this discrepancy, he concludes that "The very claim that the boundaries between religion and nonreligion are natural, eternal, fixed, and immutable is itself a part of the new configuration of power that comes about with the rise of the modern state."[9]

A thorough historical analysis indicates that the Thirty Years War was not simply a matter of disputes among Calvinists, Lutherans, and Catholics over the

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[6] Ibid., p. 71.
[7] Ibid., p. 72.
[8] Ibid., p. 83.
[9] Ibid.

nature of the sacraments or teachings on justification. It was rather the

cataclysmic outcome of the newly formed nation-states on the European

continent jockeying for power and prosperity. Describing the Thirty Years War

primarily in terms of "religious violence" or as a "war over religion" obscures the

political and economic reality of the time. Such a description, trades on a

transhistorical definition of religion as a matter of individual belief, further

justifying the creation of the modern state and its attendant redistribution of

power and monopolization of politically-legitimate violence in the state

apparatus, rather than individuals or the church. In light of what was considered

irrational and indiscriminate bloodshed over theological differences of opinion,

this strengthening of secular political institutions in the wake of the Thirty Years

War appears to be a reasonable and prudent course of action. The "myth of

religious violence," Cavanaugh concludes, "has foundational purpose for the

secular West, because it explains the origins of its way of life and its system of

government."[10]

One of the implications of the myth of religious violence is that "Violence

labeled religious is always reprehensible; violence labeled secular is often

necessary and sometimes praiseworthy."[11] Cavanaugh points out that claims

about religion causing irrational and indiscriminate violence continue to operate

in Western societies as justifications for non-religious "legitimate" violence

against societies and nations that are dangerously religious. In the myth of

religious violence, "Religion is seen as potentially problematic at all times and all

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[10] Ibid., p. 123.
[11] Ibid., p. 121.

places."[12] Religion is both transhistorically and transculturally defined in terms of individual belief. In the non-Western world, especially predominantly Muslim countries, the presence of "religion" in the public sphere is therefore problematic. "In foreign affairs, the myth of religious violence contributes to the representation of non-Western and non-secular social order as inherently irrational and prone to violence."[13] The myth is not necessarily anti-religion, Cavanaugh claims, but anti-public religion.

In the end, though, the idea that "religion" can be defined transculturally is as dubious as that it can defined transhistorically. Cavanaugh points out that attempts to provide a transcultural definition of religion usually fail, either by betraying a Western bias in the interpretation of non-Western religious phenomena only in terms of personal belief, or by taking a functionalist approach (religion is what religion does) that broadens the definition of religion so much that practically any kind of cause or larger loyalty—including loyalty to one's country—can be considered "religion." On a functionalist approach, "the indictment of religious violence" cannot simply be limited to Islam or fundamentalist Christianity. It would also apply to "U.S. nationalism and Marxism" as well.[14]

Cavanaugh concludes that the sharp dividing line between religious and secular violence upon which indictments of religious violence are based is neither a natural feature of human sociality present throughout history. Because of the difficulty of differentiating between beliefs and practices that are "religious" and

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[12] Ibid., p. 85.
[13] Ibid., p. 226.
[14] Ibid., p. 118.

those that are "secular," where to draw this dividing line is contested even within contemporary Western societies.[15] Cavanaugh further shows that the notion of specifically "religious" violence is a myth that justifies and enables Western aggression towards non-Western states. These two conclusions reveal the incoherence of the consequences challenge.

The consequences challenge is rooted in the claim that the quantity of properly "religious" violence vastly outweighs that of "secular" violence. But Cavanaugh's argument indicates the difficulty in distinguishing between these two kinds of violence. Furthermore, the motivation to draw a clear line between "religious" and "secular" violence is a part of the mythology concerning the foundation of the modern Western liberal nation-state. This mythology legitimizes violence, economic exploitation/colonialism, and paternalism/imperialism towards non-Western countries. 'Religious violence' is a concept that grows of out this mythology, and functions as a dog-whistle for Western imperialism. Such a description of the meaning of 'religious violence' lends further credence to criticisms of the New Atheism for its anti-Muslim rhetoric.[16]

Attributing violent consequences purely to religion is ultimately an oversimplification that certainly does not lead to the strong conclusion of the consequences challenge (i.e. that religion must be eliminated). The challenge

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[15] In the United States, this contest is evident in the "culture wars" over issues like abortion rights, school prayer, creationist curricula in public schools, the death penalty, LGBT rights, etc.
[16] Harris is the standout in terms of his anti-Muslim writings, though he has tempered this somewhat more recently: see Harris and Maajid Nawaz, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015). Most of the New Atheists are guilty of expressing anti-Islamic views to some extent.

relies upon a false confidence in our ability to define and identify "religion" in a transhistorical/transcultural way. It is also disingenuous, in Cavanaugh's view, because it fails to address the elephant in the room: namely, the hypocrisy of pluralistic, secular societies devoted to the principle of religious liberty failing to be tolerant of societies where religion is not only allowed, but actively encouraged by the state. Such intolerance is in keeping with the paradigmatic othering of majority-non-white nations by Anglophone countries, as well as military and economic exploitation for the sake of global capitalism (the benefits of which largely redound to the global north, and especially the United States). This web of racism, capitalism, militarism, and cultural imperialism is woven seamlessly into the consequences challenge. It is latent in the mythology of religious violence that persists in the hyper-modern culture of the West in the 21st century. Identifying this mythology as such reveals the incoherent and nefarious reasoning of those who call for the wholesale elimination of religion—even by force—based on so-called "religious" violence.[17]

Though Cavanaugh's argument that 'religious violence' is a dog-whistle for motivating Western imperialism is a strong one, it may, in fact, be too strong.

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[17] In his book *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2005), Hector Avalos describes a theory developed by Paul Davis and Brian Jenkins that, just as the United States successfully utilized deterrence during the Cold War to prevent nuclear attacks from the Soviet Union, so too should the threat of nuclear attacks against Islamic sacred sites (Mecca, in particular) be used against terrorist groups like al Qaeda. Avalos, however, suggests that rather than merely threaten an attack, invoking the "Mecca Option" and actually destroying the sacred city may be the most prudent course of action. He points out that Mecca could be evacuated prior to its destruction, since it is the space, the buildings, the sacred relics, and not the people, that are the target. This "cost-effective" solution requires "very little military force or loss of American lives." "The cost, of course, is enmity of the Muslim world," Avalos goes on to say. "Ultimately, such strategists will need to weigh the cost of Muslim enmity against the potential destruction of our society" (p. 376). While not directly advocating for this solution, Avalos seems to hint that the Mecca Option is a legitimate use of force to counter religious violence against the West.

What are we to say of those who openly claim religious motivations for engaging in violence? Are we to refuse to take them at their word? Or ought we be skeptical of anyone who claims to know better the intentions driving the actions of another than they themselves can attest? What is needed, it seems, is a standard for differentiating religious from secular violence. It may not ultimately be transhistorical or transcultural standard, but this does not imply that a relative, fallibilist, contingent standard cannot be discerned, articulated, and applied in a specific context. Taking this more careful approach, one is still left with the difficult work of assessing whether religion is ever the true and sole motivation of a violent act, or if religious violence does disproportionately contribute to the overall quantum of violence in the world. These questions require empirical answers, it would seem, rather than philosophical ones.

<p style="text-align:center">The Truth Challenge and Analytic Philosophy of Religion</p>

Theistic responses to the truth challenge—that religious claims are untrue or irrational, and should thus be abandoned—in the 21st century reflect Cavanaugh's observation that religion is primarily viewed as a set of beliefs. Whether religious beliefs are capable of being genuine "knowledge" or not is a question that lies at the heart of any adequate rejoinder to the truth challenge. If religious beliefs are *a priori* incapable of being warranted and true, then the very idea of "religious knowledge" seems incoherent. If, on the other hand, the warrant and truth conditions for specifically *religious* claims can be described and assessed, then we have some basis to address the original question of the truth challenge: namely, whether or not religious beliefs (e.g. the existence of

God) are, in fact, true. From the perspective of the dominant modes of contemporary philosophy of religion, these questions are best answered from the perspective of a linguistical analysis of religious discourse. Such analyses can be supplemented by empirical studies and descriptions of the epistemic conditions that pertain to religious experience. Analytic and empirical philosophies of religion thus aim to explain *how* religious beliefs are operative, and in doing so, establish that such beliefs *are true.*

William Zuurdeeg, a mid-twentieth century analytic philosopher, writes in his introduction to *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*: "it is the function of philosophy to analyze languages....philosophy of religion is simply a branch of philosophy in general. Religious language is one of the languages which Western man of the twentieth century speaks. It must be analyzed lest the work of philosophy remain unfinished."[18] Zuurdeeg's description of analytic philosophy of religion is helpful for two reasons: first, it establishes the uniting element in a diverse group of thinkers (namely, the concern with language) and the basic motivation behind analytic philosophy of religion (namely, the completeness of an analysis of language in Western civilization). This desire for completeness does not entail a judgment upon the origins and merits of the observation that religious language is among the languages of the 20th (and 21st) century. The use and meaningfulness of such language is taken as given; it is not the task of philosophy of religion to establish it. "Philosophy of religion is not a branch of theology...Its task is not to broaden a faith...questions and answers about the

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[18] Willem F. Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion* (New York/Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), pp. 13, 14.

meaning of life and the nature of God are perfectly meaningful, but belong to a realm of meaning to be analyzed by philosophy, and not to philosophy itself."[19] The primary goal of an analytic philosophy of religion is to exhaustively describe the concepts of religion via an analysis of religious langue. Its task does not focus upon providing any justification for the significance or value of these concepts. This is an important methodological caveat, one which contributes to the weakness of analytic philosophy of religion when it comes to the meaning challenge.

Zuurdeeg's *Analytical Philosophy* is an important text in the history of analytic philosophy of religion for still another reason: it occupies a middle position, both methodologically and chronologically. Methodologically, Zuurdeeg sets out from the premise that religious language (broadly understood) is meaningful in important ways, but not in a way that is dependent upon philosophical analysis for its establishment. "Questions and answers about the meaning of life and the nature of God are perfectly meaningful, but belong to a realm of meaning to be analyzed by philosophy and not to philosophy itself."[20] Zuurdeeg identifies this "realm of meaning" with "the language of conviction," which expresses a reality that is objective and certain "for the believer." Such expressions of convictional certainty, Zuurdeeg goes on to say, are importantly different from scientific claims to certitude: "convictional certitude is something different in kind from scientific certitude, something *sui generis*."[21] Zuurdeeg's assertion is in keeping with his methodology for philosophical analysis, insofar as

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[19] Ibid., pp. 14-15.
[20] Ibid., p. 15.
[21] Ibid., p. 27.

he is taking seriously the content of his analysis. It is also reminiscent of Keith

Ward's hard and fast distinction between "objective" and "personal knowledge,"

discussed in the previous chapter.[22]

At the same time, philosophical analysis is a form of scientific reasoning,

and so does not (and ought not) trade in the language of conviction or in

convictional certitude. "Analytical philosophy," Zuurdeeg concludes, "means an

approach which can analyze and *only* analyze, and which *cannot* apologize,

evaluate, prescribe, witness, persuade, convince, or preach. In other words, there

exists an inner tension, if not a contradiction between analytical philosophy and a

philosophical theology which wants to render Christianity plausible."[23] According

to Zuurdeeg, taking religious language seriously and not crossing over into

apologetics are the two key principles guiding any analytical philosophy of

religion. To a certain degree, one can arrange the field of analytic philosophy of

religion along a spectrum based upon the degree to which these principles are

recognized or disregarded.

Ayer on Religion

Zurdeeg's description of the limits upon what analytic philosophy of

religion can and cannot say reflect the influence of A.J. Ayer, and his trenchant

critique of metaphysical and theological propositions in *Language, Truth, and

Logic*. In that work, Ayer argues that not only can the certain existence of God

not be deduced from *a priori* propositions, even the *probable* existence of God

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[22] See "The Truth Challenge Revisited," above.
[23] Ibid., p. 16.

cannot be demonstrated on rational grounds. "If the existence of such a god were probable, then the proposition that he existed would be an empirical hypothesis."[24] If the existence of God were an empirical hypothesis, however, it would be subject to the principle of verification—that is, its truth or falsity would have to be established through empirical verification. This would either mean that 'God' named the regularity of natural phenomena—Ayer states that "no religious man would admit that this was all he intended to assert in asserting the existence of God"—or "the term 'god' is a metaphysical term," which means that "to say that 'God exists' is to make a metaphysical utterance which cannot be either true or false."[25] This is not, according to Ayer, an endorsement of atheism; rather, "if the assertion that there is a god is nonsensical, then the atheist's assertion that there is no god is equally nonsensical, since it is only a significant proposition that can be significantly contradicted." Thus, Ayer goes on to explain, the theist can take solace in the fact that "His [sic] assertions cannot possibly be valid, but they cannot be invalid either. As he says nothing at all about the world, he cannot justly be accused of saying anything false, or anything for which he has insufficient grounds."[26] "The theist…may believe that his experiences are cognitive experiences," Ayer concludes: "but, unless he can formulate his 'knowledge' in propositions that are empirically verifiable, we may be sure that he is deceiving himself."[27]

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[24] A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1946), p. 115.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 116.
[27] A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), p. 120.

This is not to say that religious language is *wholly* without significance. Ayer's discussion of religious language takes place in a wider ranging discourse on what he refers to as the "emotive theory of values." Ayer holds that normative and aesthetic claims are, for the most part, usually claims about whether preconceived notions about values are being abided by in practice. To argue about the morality of a thief stealing bread to feed his or her family, or about the superiority of Caravaggio's depiction of the Holy Family to that of Rembrandt, is not to quibble over what 'justice' or 'beauty means. Rather, the argument represents a difference of opinion about whether the facts of a given situation correspond to preconceived standards of justice or sacred beauty. On the other hand, in the rare case that there is a disagreement about the meaning of justice or beauty, Ayer asserts that "We do not and cannot argue about…the validity of these moral principles. We merely praise or condemn them in the light of our own feelings."[28] Normative or aesthetic claims, Ayer concludes, merely communicate an emotional state, one that may be described by a psychologist or social scientist, and investigated as to their causes and effects in experience. However, these claims do not constitute a distinct domain of propositional knowledge, because in principle they cannot be verified. "Since the expression of a value judgment is not a proposition," Ayer concludes, "the question of truth or falsehood does not here arise."[29]

In this way, Ayer pushes past the truth challenge by acknowledging that just as the meaning of normative and aesthetic statements is essentially

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[28] Ibid., pp. 111-12.
[29] Ibid., p. 22.

sentimental and non-rational, religious claims about a transcendent, non-empirical being are likewise not truth-functional ("not literally significant"[30]). This is in keeping with "what many theists are accustomed to say themselves. For we are often told that the nature of God is a mystery which transcends the human understanding...This may be nothing more than an admission that the existence of God must be taken on trust, since it cannot be proved."[31] Religious knowledge is thus impossible; the truth of a religious belief cannot be the same as that of a scientific one. In this, then, Ayer seems to endorse the basic thrust of the truth challenge.

Religious language is nonetheless meaningful, and still yields substantial linguistic productions and consequences insofar as it appeals to emotions, and rests upon an inherent trust in the value of deeply held theological principles. Religious statements are non-rational, because they cannot be true or false—but they are not non-meaningful. In this sense, Ayer's description of religious language in terms of his emotive theory of value indicates what the potential consequences of holding religious beliefs may be, as expressed through emotional and affective states. That these emotional states convey meaning is once again akin to how the New Atheists describe the comforting aspect of religion—an aspect that they do not see as exclusive to religious language or experience.

The meaning challenge calls into question the emotional significance of religious language and practice. According to this challenge, religion's emotional power is an arbitrary accident of culture at best, or a spurious maladaptation at

[30] Ibid., p. 118
[31] Ibid.

worst. Whatever comfort, purpose, or moral guidance that religion offers is available from other sources, and so religious sources of emotive significance are superfluous.

One could reasonably come to this very conclusion if one accepted Ayer's emotive theory of religious language. By lumping religious claims in with ethical and aesthetic assertions under the broad category of value-statements-expressing-emotion, he follows in a common practice in the philosophy of religion of categorizing religious language as a subset of another kind of discourse. Religious categories tend to be understood derivatively from a broader and presumably more foundational schema, such as ethics or aesthetic, or some confused combination of both. On Ayer's account, religious language is described as somewhat distinct from ethical and aesthetic discourses...but, nonetheless, all three are taken under the broader rubric of "emotive value." There is a kind of interchangeability, then, between these categories, all of which have a certain emotive significance.

Rather than providing a rejoinder, Ayer's evaluation of religious language is something like a precondition for the meaning challenge, because religion is taken to be one among many discursive practices that can only be understood in terms of their emotional significance. The meaningfulness of religion, then, is not its own, but is something it shares with ethics and aesthetics. There is no independent justification for the meaningfulness of religion available, because its meaning is emotive, and emotive significance is not unique to religious discourse. Hence, the meaning challenge stands unanswered (and even reinforced) by Ayer's emotive theory of religious, moral, and aesthetic language.

Ayer's passing allusion to psychologists and social scientists being the only ones suited to the task of evaluating the meaning of religious language would become a first principle of empirical philosophy of religion in the latter half of the twentieth century. Additionally, Ayer's contention that ethical, aesthetic, and religious disagreements usually redound to the question of whether preconceived principles are being abided by in practice indicates that if there were a place where analytic philosophy of religion could focus its energies, it would be at the intersection of language and context: that is, upon the function of language in the context of religion.

<div align="center">Wittgensteinian Philosophy of Religion</div>

There is still further reason to analyze religious language in terms of its function within a discursive community. Ayer's firm distinction between empirical and emotive propositions (the former of which is truth functional, based upon the principle of verification, while the latter merely express values based upon convention) relies upon the assumption that individual propositions can be confirmed in and of themselves. W.V.O. Quine called this claim of the logical positivists into question in his famous essay on "The Two Dogmas of Empiricism." In that essay, Quine points out the difficulty of distinguishing between analytic and synthetic statements, the former of which are judged true or false purely in terms of their formal character, while the latter are judged based upon the principle of verification. Quine concludes that the positivist view of empiricism is overly reductionist, because "The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science"—that is, because any single statement, be it analytic

synthetic, has a "double dependence upon language and experience" that "is not significantly traceable into the statements of science taken one by one."[32] In the case of statements with religious import (e.g. "Jesus saves"), their sense cannot be wholly determined by their relation to some particular state of affairs, but must also be understood in terms of their relation to the wider system of signs and concepts—what Quine calls the "web of knowledge"—in which they are a member.

Quine's criticism of positivism's dogmatic verificational reductionism indicated that the future of analytic philosophy of religion would have to follow one of two paths. It could either focus primarily on the way in which religious language functions as a system of signs; or analytic philosophy of religion could become more self-conscious in articulating its metaphysical assumptions (i.e. what constitutes the "core" of the web of religious knowledge). This would mean acknowledging philosophy of religion's role as a part of the science of religion more generally, or as a resource for clarifying and explaining the claims of a particular religious tradition (i.e. the classic medieval formulation of philosophy as the "handmaiden" to theology).

Between these two options, the former approach is grounded in the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Taliaferro identifies Wittgenstein's trenchant critique of the "picture theory of meaning" in *Philosophical Investigations* as one of his key contributions to analytic philosophy of religion.[33] Wittgenstein argues there that the meaningfulness of language is not completely captured by thinking

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[32] W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View*, 2nd Ed. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1964), p. 42.
[33] Taliaferro, *Evidence and Faith*, pp. 362-3.

of it as a way of composing representations or reproductions of a given situation. The meaning lays, rather, in the way in which languages function, and the rules according to which they function well or not. The "picture theory" is only one type of "primitive language," a single function among many that language can afford. Wittgenstein calls these primitive languages "language-games,"[34] and states that the meaning of language is conditioned by the "rules of the game"—that is, the use and function of language. This functional orientation would become foundational for the work of later thinkers, including Zuurdeeg, Frederick Ferré, and D.Z. Phillips.

Ferré's *Language, Logic, and God* begins with Ayer's conclusion that religious language is essentially meaningless, and that recognizing this may, in fact, be a boon to the faithful, who no longer need to seek rational justifications for their religiosity. Ferré takes a rather different view when he charts the practical implications of the loss of meaningful religious language: "Abandoning language would be tantamount to dismissing religion as an important human activity and substituting, not the mystic's high ecstasy forged in discipline, contemplation, and study, but the formless 'rosy glow' of 'positive thinking'—without even the thought to think positively!"[35] He lists the loss of public worship, the possibility of conversion, interfaith discussion, even private prayer as direct consequences of religious language ceasing to be meaningful. Unlike

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[34] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), I.23.

[35] Frederick Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1961), p. 37.

Ayer, Ferré recognizes the basis of what I have been calling the meaning

challenge, calling it "a powerful philosophical attack."[36]

Ferré goes on, however, to critique verificational analysis, pointing out its

limited understanding of what constitute "facts" in experience. "The single-

minded devotion...to the verification principle of meaning"—that the meaning of

a proposition is a corresponding, empirically verifiable[37] fact—"has resulted in an

unfortunately narrow concept of the nature and function of perfectly significant

language. In this, verificational analysis has restricted itself by its dogmatic

apriorism."[38] Having pointed out the irony of so-called empiricists failing to note

the manifold ways language makes meaning *besides* statements of fact, Ferré

argues for a "functional analysis" of religious language, following Wittgenstein in

his critique of the reductionist "picture theory of meaning." "For an

understanding of theological discourse," he concludes, "we listen to the

explanation offered by theologians themselves concerning their language. While

listening we must keep our critical wits about us, of course...but we cannot afford

to be without the insights concerning theological discourse which those most

concerned about its use can offer."[39] In so doing, Ferré acknowledges the first

imperative of analytic philosophy of religion (identified by Zuurdeeg, above): to

take its subject matter seriously. At the same time, Ferré is somewhat critical of

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[36] Ibid.
[37] Ayer distinguishes between "strong" and "weak" verification, claiming that the strong sense of verification is when the content of a proposition corresponds to a corroborating personal experience. The weaker sense of verification is when the content of a proposition is either corroborated by a remote personal experience (i.e. one taken on authority), or it can be verified *in principle* (i.e. it is possible to imagine the conditions under which the proposition would be proven either true or false in experience). See *Language, Truth, and Logic*, pp. 9-12.
[38] Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, p. 55
[39] Ibid., p. 66.

Zuurdeeg's second imperative—to keep philosophical analysis out of convictional claims altogether, lest it become a form of mere apologetics—because he sees it as an attempt to dodge the real work of analytic philosophy of religion: namely, to provide an account of the inner workings of religious language.

In the concluding chapter of *Language, Logic, and God*, Ferré tries to bring together just such a robust account of the "Manifold Logic of Theism." He argues that a complete functional analysis of language must cover three levels: the syntactic (i.e. the function of language at the level of grammar and logical entailment); the interpretic (i.e the ways in which language is interpreted, and the relation between language and user-interpreter); and the semantic (i.e. the content to which language refers). "One of the major sources of confusion concerning the analysis of theological discourse," Ferré writes, "is a failure to distinguish the three dimensions of the signification-situation as they arise in the full, concrete functioning of theological language."[40] The most common mistake of analytic philosophers of religion is focusing solely upon a single dimension (e.g. the interpretic[41]) of religious language. Ferré, on the other hand, concludes that the "multidimensional logic" of religious discourse necessitates gladly accepting "help from every quarter."[42] So his theory of theological language addresses the syntactic level (particularly in his discussion of the logic of analogy employed in theological discourse), the interpretic level (in his analysis of the logic of religious encounter, and his critique of the reductionism of the emotive

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[40] Ibid., p. 149.

[41] Zuurdeeg provides a good example: his description of theological language as fundamentally "convictional" reduces its significance to the relation between the language and the user-interpreter (i.e. how using the language affects the user, and vice versa).

[42] Ferré, *Language, Logic, and God*, p. 150.

theory of value[43]), and the semantic level (in his description of theological discourse as a tool of "conceptual synthesis" and, fundamentally, a "metaphysical language"[44]).

Ferré comments that "It is not my purpose here to evaluate Christianity in particular or theism in general...my task has been simply to display accurately the logical anatomy of the process."[45] In so doing, Ferré hopes to present an accurate picture of the conditions under which religious beliefs and ideas hang together as a coherent, logical web of knowledge. This, in turn, provides a set of evaluative standards for the logic of religious ideas. These ideas become truth-functional in the context of these standards, meaning that any claim to the truth or falsity of a particular religious claim (i.e. about the existence of God) must be adjudicated upon the basis of the logic of the religious discourse.

Here, then, is the functional analytic response to the truth challenge: the truth or falsity of religious ideas can only be assessed within the particular religious discourse in which they emerge, because these discourses have their own internal logic that establishes and demands certain conditions for knowledge. One implication of this view is that the truth of religious ideas is radically relative, constrained to the particular domain of religious discourse. In the context of the modern divide between religious and non-religious discourse, the truth conditions of one domain are incommensurable with the other.

These monadic discourses complicate the practical matter of providing a coherent rejoinder to the truth challenge. On the one hand, the challenge

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[43] See Ibid., p. 156.
[44] See Ibid., pp. 161, 163.
[45] Ibid., p. 164.

claiming the falsity of religious ideas issues from a non-religious discourse. On the other hand, the rejoinder expressing the truth-functionality of religious ideas issues from a religious discourse. A functional-analytic rejoinder thus creates a new wrinkle in the quest to respond effectively to the truth challenge: on what shared basis can the truth-conditions for religious knowledge be established across the secular/religious discursive divide?

Ferré's emphatic claim that his functional analysis is simply descriptive enables him to demur on the more radical question of whether religious discourse is worth taking up in the first place (i.e. the question posed by the meaning challenge). Nonetheless, he does choose to address this question in the closing moments of his book.

> *Theological* statements are not the only ones which provide a possible model for the oblique understanding of the nature of things. Many rival conceptual syntheses are urged from different quarters. All, including theism, suffer apparent weakness; each, including theism, promises that continued refinement plus further experience will reveal that *it* best survives the "truth-criteria" of metaphysics. In the meanwhile, one is left to choose. There is no question of remaining aloof, taking no position on the character of reality…Every sane disposition for behavior is based on what is thought to be the case; every "forced option" which life thrusts on one has profound implications for one's implicit (or explicit) choice of a model in terms of which to conceive the ultimately real.…Daily challenges to action—when inaction may be a culpable choice—make agnosticism in life an absurdity. And the choices which one does make, whether to

worship a God of love or to refrain from it, whether to treat others as "means only" or in some other way, and so on, have their influence on the mind. In any but the most disintegrated personality, these choices will have a pattern of at least some stability; and study of this pattern can often disclose what model a man unconsciously has adopted as most true to reality.

Then "agnosticism" becomes a bland mask covering an uncritical practical decision to accept one or another metaphysical view...A decision that goes beyond the security of sufficient reason is in any case required; and by pretending not to recognize the language of this decision—which many Christian call "the leap of faith"—one is denying himself the right to look before (and after) he leaps.[46]

I have quoted Ferré at length for two reasons: first, because the passage makes clear the connection between the semantic content of religious language (understood as a metaphysical system) and concrete, living experience. The semantic dimension of religious discourse is not a systematic abstraction, but is both constituted by the "daily challenges to action," and constitutive of the decisions one makes in response to those challenges. In making this claim, Ferré freights his "anatomical" description of religious language with the added imperative that "a decision" in this matter is "required." Whence this requirement?

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[46] Ibid., pp. 165-6.

This question brings me to the second reason for highlighting this passage: Ferré's repeated references to psychology. Ferré couches his imperative in terms of what a "sane disposition" requires, what "in any but the most disintegrated personality" would be the case. Such references, along with his invocation of the notion of a "forced option" and explicit critique of agnosticism on matters of ultimate significance, bear a striking resemblance to the pragmatic philosophy of religion of William James. By appealing to the experience of meeting "daily challenges" with decision, as well as the "sane disposition" or "disintegrated personality" to clarify the ultimate significance (read: meaningfulness) of the semantic dimension of religious language, Ferré also tacitly indicates the limit beyond which a functional analysis of religious *language* cannot pass. Ferré's inability to abide by his own methodological constraints—that is, his failure to limit himself to anatomical description, rather than medical diagnosis—indicates that functional analysis leads almost inexorably beyond the boundaries of language in its pursuit of true religious knowledge.

According to D.Z. Phillips, the movement of philosophy beyond merely dissecting language to the contemplation of "the world in all its variety" is an oft-overlooked part of the Wittgensteinian legacy. He points out that Wittgenstein's original call to understand "language games" was a call to take seriously the way in which language functions in specific situations and communities. Analyses aiming at understanding *why* religious language is meaningful requires engaging in a "contemplative" form of philosophy that "is born of wonder at the world and a readiness to combat our confusions concerning it." "For Wittgenstein," he goes on to say, "there is a fundamental vocational difference between a philosopher

who is not a citizen of any community of ideas and a philosopher whose use of philosophy subserves such a community. The difference is shown in *the kind* of sensibility we find in Wittgenstein's work, particularly in doing justice to perspectives that are not his own."[47] This sensibility is described by Taliaferro as a commitment to "attend to the practice of religious persons and communities…This approach recognizes a role of religious practice that is profoundly different from the positivist disdain for religious life."[48] Functional analytic philosophy of religion thus does not attend to religious language in the abstract, but always in service to making the religious life of real religious communities a little bit clearer—to "do conceptual justice" to the way in which religion affects peoples' lives, as Phillips puts it.[49]

Abiding by the principle of "doing justice" to the nature of religious praxis and the function of religious language, one would have proper grounds upon which to criticize the New Atheists for their overly simplistic interpretations of the significance of religious language (something the theologians and other theistic responders chided the New Atheists for). Such an analysis would at least seem necessary in the consideration of the consequences challenge, if not in the truth challenge (because, as has already become clear, the kind of "evidence" involved in functional linguistic analysis would not necessarily hold up as "scientific enough" to weigh in on the question of the truth and falsity of claims).

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[47] D.Z. Phillips, "Wittgensteinianism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, p. 465-6.
[48] Taliaferro, *Evidence and Faith*, pp. 366-7.
[49] Phillips, "Wittgensteinianism," p. 365.

What, then, does this approach yield in terms of a rejoinder to the meaning challenge? The answer to this question is not straightforward, because as I have pointed out already, the methodological principles of functional analysis impose a limit in theory that gets crossed in practice. Insofar as Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is properly analytic, it is merely descriptive, and so is not concerned about justifying the meaningfulness of religious categories in the first place. The meaning of religious language is taken as a given from experience; the focus of functional analysis is the subsequent dissection and re-presentation of that meaning to the world in the form of a cogent grammar (a la Ferré).

However, Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion is not "purely" analytic. Insofar as the work of Ferré, Phillips, and others in this school of thought[50] bear the marks of pragmatist philosophy of religion—particularly in their emphasis upon the function of religion in practice, and providing a more robust account of how language is a part of the more complex *modus operandi* of religion—they indicate the beginnings of an answer to the meaning challenge: namely, that religious language is necessary to respond to the "daily challenges to action" and to provide "sanity" and "integration" for persons navigating the quotidian world.

Plantinga's Realism and Reformed Epistemology

So far, I have indicated the way in which different analytic philosophers of religion fall on a spectrum based upon the degree to which they "join the language game" of religion. Where they fall on this spectrum also significantly

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[50] See Rush Rhees, *Without Answers* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969); F. Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); and B.R. Tilghman, *An Introduction to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

determines whether their philosophy provides the basis for a rejoinder to the truth challenge. At one extreme is Ayer, who, rather than join the game at all, dismisses religious language as non-truth-functional, and, hence, a non-subject for philosophical analysis. Ayer's emotive theory of the value of religion describes the meaning of religious language, even as it deflates the question of the "truth" of religious beliefs. At the same time, the emotive theory undermines the possibility of having anything like genuine religious "knowledge," substituting "religious *judgments*," which can only be evaluated on the basis of further descriptions of religious phenomena provided by psychology and social science.

Moving toward the middle of the spectrum, I showed how Ferré's functional approach provided a more robust sense of the meaningfulness of religious language. Rather than merely reducing religious language to its emotional content, Ferré offered a multidimensional account of the grammar of religious language, and, hence, the discursive and logical conditions for the possibility of articulating religious knowledge. That this description ultimately brings one to a point of decision as to whether to take up religious language or not seems to be a pragmatic implication of "joining the religious language game" in this way—what Phillips calls the "contemplative" mode of philosophical investigation. I would now like to move on to the far end of the spectrum, to examine the philosophy of Alvin Plantinga, who represents the class of analytic philosophers who self-consciously locate their contemplative work in a specific religious tradition.

In *Warranted Christian Belief*,[51] Plantinga takes on the question of whether what he calls "Classical Christian belief"[52] is intellectually or rationally acceptable or not. To put it in terms of the challenges to religion, Plantinga is responding to a sort of combination of the truth and consequences challenges. This is because the rational acceptability of Christian belief, according to Plantinga, must overcome two sorts of objections characteristic of Enlightenment rationality from the 18th century onward: *de facto* objections and *de jure* objections. The truth challenge, at its core, is essentially a *de facto* objection—the claim that religious beliefs (and in this case, specifically, Christian beliefs) are false. Plantinga notes that the problems of suffering and evil represent the most common *de facto* objection, putting the lie to Christianity's claim of the existence of a loving and merciful God. Other *de facto* objections to Christian doctrines, such as the incoherence of the doctrine of the trinity or of atonement, all come down to the idea "that Christian belief must be false (or at any rate improbable), given something or other we are alleged to know."[53]

De jure objections, on the other hand, hold that "Christian belief, *whether or not true*, is at any rate unjustifiable, or rationally unjustified, or irrational, or not intellectually respectable, or contrary to sound morality, or without sufficient evidence."[54] Rather than contend over the truth or falsity of specific claims or

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[51] Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).
[52] Plantinga identifies the basic tenets of "Classical Christian belief" as (1) that God is a person, and has all the qualities of a person (knowledge, intentions, affections) to a maximal degree (basic theism); (2) that human beings are mired in sin and require salvation, which comes through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, who is both a man and the second member of the divine trinity (what is specific to *Christian* theism). Plantinga asserts that these are the ideas that are "common to the great creeds of the main branches of the Christian church" (p. vii).
[53] Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, p. ix.
[54] Ibid, emphasis added.

beliefs (or, to put it in more analytic terms, to argue that certain propositions expressing Christian belief are false), *de jure* objections are concerned with what Plantinga calls "warrant." Warrant is what distinguishes genuine knowledge from mere true belief. I may believe that it will rain tomorrow, and that belief may turn out to be true, but what would "further quality or quantity"[55] is needed for that true belief to constitute genuine *knowledge* that it will rain tomorrow?

Plantinga argues that "a belief has warrant only if it is produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly…construed as including absence of impedance as well as pathology."[56] Warrant requires a pre-established "design plan" that governs the functioning and purpose of cognitive processes. The warrant for a belief is further influenced by environmental conditions, as when circumstances are changing rapidly (what Plantinga calls the "maxienvironment), or when imbibing alcohol slows cognitive functioning (affecting what Plantinga calls the cognitive "minienvironment").[57] So a belief has warrant if (a) it is based upon proper functioning of cognitive processes (b) in an environment (maxi and mini) that does not interfere with that proper functioning (c) all of which is judged according to a "design plan that is successfully aimed at truth."[58]

Returning to Plantinga's original list of *de jure* objections to Christian belief, note that each of these is an appeal to some dimension of the conditions for warranted belief. The objection that Christian belief is "rationally or intellectually unacceptable" is a way of saying that Christian belief violates

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[55] Ibid., p. 153.
[56] Ibid., pp. 153-4.
[57] Ibid., pp.
[58] Ibid., p. 156.

"proper functioning" of cognitive functioning. Similarly, stating that Christian belief is "contrary to sound morality" indicates a violation of some settled and "sound" notion of morality that may, on the one hand, be considered a part of the "design" of human cognitive processes, or a feature of the maxienvironment in which cognitive functioning takes place. A "lack of sufficient evidence" similarly is either an appeal to some predetermined principle of verification taken as central to the "design" of cognition, or it is a claim about the incompatibility of Christian belief with the environment. In making the connection between *de jure* objections and warrant, Plantinga hopes to bring the assumptions about what constitutes "proper cognitive functioning" into the conversation about the acceptability or unacceptability of Christian belief. In so doing, he is able to point out that the *de jure* objections which identify Christian belief as a "pathology" or "delusion"[59] are based upon a set of presumptions about the need for a specific kind of empirical evidence to warrant belief (as in the classical evidentialism of Locke or Hume). These presumptions are "foundational" (i.e. taken as basic to one's "structure of beliefs"[60]), and are bound up with a deontological obligation to be abided by.[61] From this perspective, Christian belief violates the rules of proper, even *good*, rational thinking. Hence the connection between the truth challenge—that religion is false and irrational—and that consequences challenge—that

[59] He specifically attributes this line of *de jure* objection to Marx and Freud (see pp. 136ff).
[60] Ibid., p. 83.
[61] Again referring to Locke, Plantinga explains "It is Locke's idea that we have a duty, an obligation to regulate opinion in the way he suggests. We enjoy high standing as rational creatures, creatures capable of belief and knowledge. *Noblesse oblige*, however; privilege has its obligations, and we are obliged to conduct our intellectual or cognitive life in a certain way. Our exalted station as rational creatures, creatures with reason, carries with it duties and requirements" (p. 86).

religious belief leads one to do immoral (in the deontological sense) things (i.e. to act upon some other basis besides rational thinking).

Given the presumptions of Enlightenment rationality (foundationalism, evidentialism, and deontology), Christian belief does appear to be unwarranted. "The claim is that [Christian] belief doesn't originate in the proper function of cognitive faculties successfully aimed at producing true beliefs."[62] In response to this objection, Platinga offers what he calls the "Aquinas/Calvin [A/C] Model" of warrant as an alternative way to understand "proper cognitive functioning." On this model, human beings are endowed with a cognitive function called the *sensus divinitatis* ("sense of the divine"). This function is natural (i.e. God-given, on the theistic view) to human beings, though it is vulnerable to corruption and damage (just as other cognitive functions are) by the effects of sin. This damage can be ameliorated by another cognitive function—faith—which, along with the *sensus divinitatis*, produces theistic belief that "is (1) taken in a basic way and (2) so taken, can indeed have warrant, and warrant sufficient enough for knowledge."[63] Plantinga concludes that theistic belief, if it be *true,* is warranted, based upon the understanding that the belief was produced via the proper functioning of the *sensus divinitatis*. If, on the other hand, theistic belief is *false*, then it is not warranted, precisely because if there is no God, then there would be no *sensus divinitatis* in human cognition in the first place.[64]

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[62] Ibid., pp. 167-8.
[63] Ibid., p. 186.
[64] Ibid., pp. 187-9.

In arriving at this conclusion, Plantinga points out that the *de jure* objection to Christian belief is intimately connected to the *de facto* objection that such belief is false.

> This is important: what it shows is that a successful atheological objection will have to be to the *truth* of theism, not to its rationality, justification, intellectual respectability, rational justification, or whatever. Atheologians who wish to attack theistic belief will have to restrict themselves to objections like the argument from evil, the claim that theism is incoherent, or the idea that in some other way there is strong evidence against theistic belief. They can't any longer adopt the following stance: "Well, I certainly don't know whether theistic belief is true —who could know a thing like that?— but I do know this: it is irrational, or unjustified, or not rationally justified, or contrary to reason or intellectually irresponsible or . . ."[65]

The broader implications of Plantinga's argument about objections to Christian belief help clarify what the truth challenge can responsibly call into question—or, at least, what kind of objection the truth challenge constitutes.

Plantinga does not dismiss the possibility that the facts of evil and suffering in the world may constitute a genuine and basic refutation of theism. "Something like this, I think, is the best version of the atheological case from evil. The claim is essentially that one who is properly sensitive and properly aware of the sheer horror of the evil displayed in our somber and unhappy world will simply see that no being of the sort God is alleged to be could possibly permit it.

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[65] Ibid., p. 191.

This is a sort of inverse *sensus divinitatis*: perhaps there is no good antitheistic argument from evil; but no argument is needed."[66] This line of thinking is evident in the vitriol of the New Atheists' formulation of the consequences challenge, which is, at bottom, an empirical appeal to the fact of evil to argue against religion.

Plantinga answers this challenge, however, by pointing out that on the A/C Model, one whose *sensus divinitatis* is functioning properly will never be able to experience evil in this way. "She would have an intense awareness of [God's] presence, glory, goodness, power, perfection, wonderful attractiveness, and sweetness; and she would be as convinced of God's existence as of her own. She might therefore be perplexed by the existence of this evil in God's world...but the idea that perhaps there just wasn't any such person as God would no doubt not so much as cross her mind."[67] To experience evil as a basic refutation of theism is, on this model, a cognitive malfunction—a "failure of rationality" in one's "noetic structure (perhaps...with respect to the *sensus divinitatis*)."[68] Atheism, then, is neither true nor warranted. Plantinga concludes:

> Of course, this is all from the perspective of Christian theism... But is it
> true? This is the really important question. And here we pass beyond the
> competence of philosophy, whose main competence, in this area, is to
> clear away certain objections, impedances, and obstacles to Christian
> belief. Speaking for myself and of course not in the name of philosophy, I

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[66] Ibid., p. 484.
[67] Ibid., p. 485.
[68] Ibid., p. 491.

can say only that it does, indeed, seem to me to be true, and to be the

maximally important truth.

This conclusion indicates the methodological limitation of treating philosophy as

a tool for "clearing away objections, impedances, and obstacles." Plantinga's final

appeal for the meaningfulness of Christian theism is a solipsistic one, because

that is all he feels he can responsibly offer.

Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief* shows what analytic philosophy of

religion (in the epistemological key, so to speak) looks like when it

conscientiously but completely "buys in" to the view of a specific religious

tradition. In so doing, Plantinga generates arguments in opposition to the truth

and consequences challenges; however, as in the theological responses examined

in Chapter 1, Plantinga's methodology leaves him hamstrung in his justification

for the necessity of religion more generally (i.e. the meaning challenge). *If* theism

be true—*if* the A/C model is accurate—then there is warrant for Christian belief.

But warrant is simply a property distinguishing belief from knowledge, entailing

no necessity, unless one holds the further deontological presupposition that

human beings *ought* to act rationally. The upshot of Plantinga's argument is that

there *can* be such a thing as "religious knowledge," but nowhere does he argue

that such knowledge *must* be. Even then, it would be fairly easy to persist in the

claim that, until the A/C model can be shown to be accurate, there is no reason to

endorse the possibility of "religious knowledge" in Christianity at all.

Whereas Ayer described the meaningfulness of religion in terms of

emotive value, lumping it in with aesthetics and ethics, Plantinga's appeal for the

meaning-making capacity of Christian faith is ultimately predicated upon a

deontological commitment to rationality. Christian belief is of value, but its value

is ultimately in its service to the proper functioning of reason (if it is true, that is).

In both cases, religion is not justified upon its own terms, but only in terms of

wider discourse, of which it is a mere part. In some sense this seems to be an

unavoidable feature of analytic philosophy of religion. Given Quine's assertion

that any proposition only finally makes sense within a larger discourse or science,

it is natural for analytic philosophy of religion to seek to situate the

meaningfulness of religion in ever-wider discursive structures.

Conclusion on Analytic Philosophy of Religion

Analytic philosophy of religion encompasses a wide range of philosophical

work aiming at the clarification of religious discourse. I have argued that this

range ought to be understood in terms of a spectrum, based on the degree to

which different philosophers "buy in" and "join" in the discursive practice of a

particular religion. At one extreme, Ayer provides an example of an analytic

philosopher who does not even recognize religion as a domain for philosophical

analysis. Religious language has its significance only in terms of the emotive

value of religious speech. This does not refute the truth challenge—religious

language is not truth-functional—but it does indicate that the challenge is not

well-suited to addressing religious language *per se*. Furthermore, the reduction of

the meaning of religious language to emotion clears away any opportunity to offer

an independent argument for the uniquely meaningful quality of religious

language. This view rather reduces the meaningfulness of religion to emotive

value, a category shared with moral and aesthetic language as well. There is no reason, on Ayer's account, to argue that religion is anything but superfluous, given that moral and aesthetic language has the same emotive value religious language does.

At the other extreme of the spectrum, Plantinga argues aggressively for including the religious discourse of Basic Christian Belief under the auspices of rationally warranted belief. At the same time, Plantinga's argument for the warrantability of Christian belief is a conditional one, in which the truth or falsity of Christian belief is undecidable on purely rational terms. This view is shared by the Analytical Thomists as well. On the one hand, this has the disadvantage of providing no straightforward answer to the challenge that religious claims are untrue. On the other hand, the meaningfulness of religious language is justified— however, it is, once again, only so within a pre-ordained religious paradigm.

Regardless of one's position on this spectrum, analytic philosophy of religion (properly speaking) is only ever concerned with religious language as it is given. Religious discourse is also typically treated as its own monadic domain, set over against non-religious discourses. The philosophical analysis of this discourse can shed light upon its internal operations, but it will yield little in terms of justification for religious' discourse's primordial significance—why there is some religious discourse rather than nothing, as it were.

Insofar as analytic philosophers of religion depart from these principles in practice and embrace a more pragmatic grounding for their work—as I have argued is the case in functional analytic philosophy of religion—these forms of analysis come closer to providing a response to the meaning challenge. By

treating religious discourse as clear and distinct from non-religious discourse, however, functional-analytic philosophy of religion introduces a new question into the truth challenge: namely, under what conditions can religious claims and religious knowledge be "true" beyond the discursive limits imposed for the sake of analytic clarity? That is, can philosophy of religion yield a conception of religious knowledge that transcends the secular/religious divide that supposedly characterizes the late-Modern West?

The New Atheist response would be a curt "no." The fictive quality of religious ideas means that religious discourse will always have a self-reinforcing quality, one that would never need to be adopted, so long as a robust enough scientific model exists as a worthy counterpoint. However, I believe that Plantinga's criticism of confusing the *facts* of religion with the *warrant* of religious knowledge has some purchase. Unless a scientific materialist can offer definitive evidence (in their own sense of that term) of the falseness of the A/C model, then there is no reason why religious knowledge based upon that conceptual framework would not be warranted—save any potentially immoral consequences that may flow from it. But that would be a separate matter. Part of the difficulty of resolving this debate, however, is the intractable limitation of science to prove counterfactuals (i.e. to prove what is *not* the case). So long as there is no evidence disproving the existence of God (and only alternative, naturalist accounts that can be offered as "more compelling"), I believe that Plantinga's argument for the epistemic warrant for Christian belief holds up.

Empirical Philosophy of Religion

The other dominant trend in contemporary philosophy of religion is empirical philosophy of religion. This is philosophy of religion in the key Dennett called for in *Breaking the Spell*—that is, philosophy that relies upon empirical scientific and social scientific studies' data to generate an explanation for religion. This "explanation" is typically thought of in terms of "origins"—as in Pascal Boyer's *Religion Explained*—but it can also just refer more generally to a description of the cognitive and cultural functions operative in religions the world over.

The key markers of difference within the field of empirical philosophy of religion are the degree to which specific disciplines studying religion (such as cognitive science, neuropsychology, anthropology, history, evolutionary psychology, sociology, and comparative religious studies) are highlighted. Cognitive science of religion and comparative religious studies are probably the two most important disciplines in contemporary empirical philosophy of religion: cognitive science, because the results of scientific studies of brain function over the past quarter century are provide fresh fodder for philosophical interpretation, and comparative religious studies, because the plurality of religious traditions, beliefs, and practices remains one of the most confounding challenges in the quest to describe "religion" *per se*. This is not to say that empirical philosophy of religion can be reduced to any one of these disciplines. As Joshua Thurow argues,[69] philosophy plays an important and distinct role from that of cognitive

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[69] Joshua C. Thurow, "Does cognitive science show belief in god to be irrational? The epistemic consequences of the cognitive science of religion" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (August 2013), p. 77-98.

science of religion. Whereas cognitive science is concerned merely with the description of cognitive or neuropsychological "belief-forming" and "belief-sustaining" processes, philosophy of religion stands over and against such descriptions to adjudicate the rationality or irrationality of such beliefs.

Empirical philosophy of religion affords similar opportunities to respond to the three-fold challenge that religion is untrue, immoral, and unnecessary as analytic philosophy of religion. Like analytic philosophy of religion, empirical philosophy of religion aims at clarification and explication—providing a more accurate picture of what is going on in religious phenomena. Empirical philosophy goes further than analytic philosophy, insofar as it incorporates non-linguistic data points (e.g. cognitive maps, social-science research, historical analyses, etc.) into its descriptive apparatus. In this sense, empirical philosophy of religion can provide an assessment of the rationality of religious claims based upon descriptions of the "proper functioning" of human reason. This does not necessarily indicate that there is such a thing as "true religious knowledge." As such, it does not provide a straightforward response to the truth challenge.

Unfortunately, in doing so, empirical philosophy still runs afoul of the meaning challenge, because an open question lingers concerning whether or not the *explanation* of religious phenomena is enough to justify the *necessity* of religion. Empirical philosophy of religion may be able to establish that religion is a "naturally occurring" part of human experience, but, for the most part, it overlooks the question of whether religion specifically provides a unique and necessary contribution to human experience that one simply cannot live without.

Wesley Wildman understands philosophy of religion slightly differently, arguing that it is not one discipline among (or above) many studying religion, but that it is itself "a field of diverse but related inquiries." "The academic study of religion *needs* philosophy," Wildman writes, "and philosophy *needs* the academic study of religion. Both are better when they work together."[70] He concludes that philosophy of religion cannot simply be concerned with adjudicating the claims of religion on the basis of some pre-determined theory of late-modern Rationality (in the mode of the most austere and doctrinaire analytic philosophy). Instead, Wildman argues for a pragmatic approach to engaging in "religious philosophy" ("in parallel with the phrase 'religious studies'"),[71] which he puts into action in his book *Religious and Spiritual Experiences*.[72] Insofar as Wildman's approach embraces a pragmatic grounding for empirical philosophy of religion, his work represents a gesture in the right direction. However, just as empirical philosophy of religion more broadly suffers from the open question argument, so too does Wildman's work come up short in giving a proper answer to the meaning challenge.

<center>"Explaining" Religion—Naturally</center>

Cognitive science of religion has pride of place in empirical philosophy of religion, no doubt because in many ways it represents the height of techno-scientific decadence in late-Modern Western civilization. Since Lawson and

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[70] Wesley Wildman, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), pp. xi-xii.
[71] Ibid., p. xiii.
[72] Wildman, *Religious and Spiritual Experiences* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010).

McCauley's groundbreaking study *Rethinking Religion*[73] was published in 1990, cognitive science of religion has become one of the key explanatory media for describing religious phenomena. Harvey Whitehouse followed the lead of Lawson and McCauley by studying the cognitive processes involved in religious rituals in New Guinea,[74] before developing his own full blown theory of different cognitive "modes of religiosity" in the early 2000s.[75] J.L. Barrett's *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?*[76] was another significant contribution to cognitive science of religion. In that work, Barrett argued that the belief in supernatural agency is a by-product of a cognitive feature he calls the "hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD)." Barrett's claim that the belief in spirits or gods was a side-effect of an evolutionarily adaptive cognitive process meant to help human beings avoid predators echoed the work of Michael Shermer, who chronicled a whole host of evolutionarily adaptive cognitive functions that had been "hijacked" by religion in his books *Why People Believe Weird Things* and *How We Believe*.[77] While these examples of cognitive science of religion operate upon materialistic, naturalistic assumptions, Mario Beauregard argued in *The Spiritual Brain*[78] for a non-reductionist, non-materialist neuropsychology to describe the function of religion.

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[73] E. Thomas Lawson and Robert C. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990).
[74] Harvey Whitehouse, *Inside the Cult: Religious Innovation and Transmission in Papua New Guinea* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995).
[75] See Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons: divergent modes of religiosity* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000); *Modes of Religiosity* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2004).
[76] J.L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2004).
[77] See Michael Shermer, *Why People Believe Weird Things* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997), and *How We Believe: Science, Skepticism, and the Search for God* (London: W.H. Freeman, 1999).
[78] Mario Beuregard and Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

Pascal Boyer, in his book *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought*,[79] brings together many of these themes in an attempt to describe the "origins" of religion. How, he asks, is it possible to account for the fact that so many people are religious, and in so many different ways? Common explanatory scenarios involve isolating a core contribution of religion to human life—comfort, for example, or an explanation for the origins of human life or the universe. The common denominator in all of these explanatory scenarios, Boyer argues, is that they all have a cognitive dimension. Given this common cognitive denominator, the tendency is to "explain a phenomenon (religion) that is so *variable* in terms of something (the brain) that is *the same* everywhere."[80] Boyer argues that this genealogical account of the origins of religion is backwards: that rather than trying to explain the diversification of religion from a few basic cognitive processes, "the many forms of religion we know are not the outcome of a historical *diversification* but of a constant *reduction*. The religious concepts we observe are relatively successful ones selected among many other variants."[81] Attempting to locate some historical "point of origin" for religious ideas misses the point, Boyer claims. Religion is a cultural feature; religious ideas take shape through transmission and acceptance or rejection between different human beings over a lengthy period of time. Understanding the cognitive systems that are necessary for such cultural development to take place will not provide a

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[79] Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
[80] Ibid., p. 2.
[81] Ibid., p. 32.

"magic bullet" to explain whence religious ideas come. Rather, religion develops

through the complex interplay of multiple cognitive processes:

> Some concepts happen to connect with inference systems in the brain in a
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> way that makes recall and communication very easy. Some concepts
>
> happen to trigger our emotional programs in particular ways. Some
>
> concepts happen to connect to our social mind. Some of them are
>
> represented in such a way that they soon become plausible and direct
>
> behavior. The ones that do *all* this are the religious ones we actually
>
> observe in human societies. They are most successful because they
>
> combine features relevant to a variety of mental systems.[82]

A cognitive scientific account of the origins of religion in specific brain functions

must take into account the fact that, as with any cultural product, religion cannot

be reduced to a single function (e.g. an explanatory function, or an

emotional/comforting function, or the function of creating social cohesion).

Instead, Boyer concludes that religious ideas are the result of a process of cultural

selection that involves a matrix of interconnected cognitive systems.

Boyer's analysis is premised upon two empirical claims: first, that there

are common features of religion across different cultures, and second, that these

common features reflect cognitive systems that are shared by all normally-

functioning human minds.[83] Boyer draws upon his background in anthropology,

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[82] Ibid., p. 50.
[83] Boyer summarizes the common, cross-cultural features of religious ideas as follows: they are counterintuitive; they concern what is not directly observable; they concern agents who have access to information that is worth knowing; this information has to do with social interactions, and so pertains to morality. These "counterintuitive agents" will be associated with ameliorating misfortune, the presence of death and dead bodies, ritual acts, and religious "specialists," who expert opinions will often be at odds with the "spontaneous [religious] inferences" going on in

evolutionary theory, the memetic theory of culture popularized by Dawkins, and

cognitive scientific research to support these claims, that he may arrive at a

slightly more sophisticated explanation for religions' origins. "There is no

religious instinct, no *specific* inclination in the mind… no special religion center

in the brain, and religious persons are not different from nonreligious ones in

essential cognitive functions." Instead, "religion is portrayed here as a mere

consequence or side effect of having the brains we have." Boyer goes on to say

that critics of religion tend to seek a "*single* source of what is for them such

egregious error," that it may be rooted out or given some sort of targeted

treatment.[84] Religion is a diffuse cognitive phenomenon, though, so much so that

attempting to "excise" it would be something akin to performing a lobotomy,

rather than, say, removing a small tumor.

Boyer's explanation of religion in terms of the "specific human capacities

(an

intuitive psychology, a tendency to attend to some counterintuitive concepts, as

well as various social mind adaptations)" that "get recruited" and "contribute to

the features of religion that we find in so many different cultures" avoids what he

sees as the problematic reductionism in cognitive science of religion.[85] He points

out that the ease with which religious concepts "recruit" mental systems (both

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most people's minds (see pp. 326-8). These common features of religious ideas reflect a few basic cognitive systems: "a set of intuitive ontological expectations, a propensity to direct attention to what is counterintuitive, a tendency to recall it if it is inferentially rich, a system for detecting and overdetecting agency, a set of social mind systems that make the notion of well-informed agents particularly relevant, a set of moral intuitions that seem to have no clear justification in our own concepts, [and] a set of social categories that pose the same problem" (p. 328). Boyer concludes that religious ideas "just happen to be optimal in the sense that they activate a variety of systems in a way that makes their transmission possible" (ibid).

[84] Ibid., pp. 329, 330.

[85] Ibid., p. 311.

individual and social) makes religion "a *likely* thing."[86] The fact that religious

ideas are easier to pick up on helps to account for the conflict between religion

and science as well. Drawing upon the work of biologist Lewis Wolpert, Boyer

states that the cognitive functions involved in science intentionally depart from

spontaneous intuitions—that is really the whole point of science, after all—and

involve a complex secondary system of theorization and communication, all of

which contributes to making "scientific activity…both cognitively and socially

very *unlikely*."[87] From this perspective, it is easy to see how embracing scientific

activity can seem to imply the necessity to abandon or even openly refute

religion.

  This topic received a book-length treatment from Robert McCauley,[88] who

concludes that the "cognitively awkward representations" of science "appear

metaphysically hobbled…from the standpoint of popular, commonsense

conceptions of the world."[89] Religions tend to fit their ideas closer to these

"commonsense" metaphysics—that is, metaphysics that better schematize the

intuitions generated by basic cognitive systems. "The downside," McCauley goes

on to say, "is that ease of swallowing from a cognitive standpoint does not

guarantee ease of digestion from an intellectual standpoint."[90] McCauley wishes

to caution against thinking that just because religious ideas are more intuitive,

they are either "simpler" or "truer." "Theological incorrectness," he claims, is

inevitable, because of the individual spontaneity of theological thinking. This

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[86] Ibid., p. 321.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Robert C. McCauley, *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011).
[89] Ibid., p. 223.
[90] Ibid., p. 224.

presents a challenge to those attempting to refute theological claims: they must hit a moving and inconsistent target.

The upshot of McCauley's book is that such polemics will never be able to unravel religion writ large, because religious ideas will continue to be "cheap, easy, and inevitable," whereas "science is costly, difficult, and rare."[91] In fact, he concludes that because science is counterintuitive and costly, it requires greater institutional support, and so is in a much more precarious position as a human practice than religion. As the historical epochs of "Renaissance" and "Enlightenment" imply, "science was one lost and had to be reinvented" in Western thought. "Nothing about human nature," McCauley concludes, "would ever prevent the loss of science again."[92] Rather than wasting time with futile antireligious polemics, McCauley would urge scientists to advocate for cultural and institutional support, in order to make up for the lack of "natural" bulwarks. Both McCauley and Boyer argue that the "naturalness" of religious concepts—that is, the fact that they seem to be amenable to a number of basic cognitive systems, including systems generating ontological expectations, detecting agency, and creating prosocial interactions (i.e. generating morality)—makes them both ubiquitous and unlikely to disappear, no matter how strong the challenges raised against them.

This fatalistic interpretation of the empirical data is, in a sense, one way to respond to the question of the *necessity* of religion in human life. These thinkers seem to believe that religion is indeed necessary as a byproduct of the

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[91] Ibid., p. 251.
[92] Ibid., p. 286.

machinations of evolutionary biology and neurophysiology. Indeed, this fatalist sense of the omnipresence of the religious is part of why the New Atheists are so adamant about the need to intentionally and actively articulate that it need *not* be the case that religion be a part of a meaningful life. But this already gets to the deeper question of whence comes meaning: is it through the phenomena of the natural world in an objective sense, via subjective experience, or through some mediated interaction of individuals with the world? This last seems closest to the way meaning is made. This topic will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

Conclusion on Empirical Philosophy of Religion and the Three Challenges

This description of religion as a natural outgrowth of human cognitive systems addresses the threefold challenge that religion is untrue, immoral, and unnecessary in an interesting fashion. When it comes to the truth challenge, this approach makes the case that whether or not religious claims be true or not, they are warranted by the way in which human cognition operates. This is along the line of the argument Plantinga offers in *Warranted Christian Belief*, in the sense that he too argued that Christian belief is warranted if it is true—that is, if its claims about the way in which human cognition is "designed" to detect God are true.

Boyer and McCauley make a similar claim, but one that is grounded in an empirical claim based upon anthropological and cognitive inquiries into the "design" of cognition. They conclude that, if their model is accurate, then religious ideas are warranted (at least to a certain degree) by the natural functioning of normal human minds. Boyer's grounding in an evolutionary

account of cognitive systems being selected for means that to the extent that religious ideas are "adaptive," they will persist. This importantly does not mean that religious ideas are justified or "true" in any sense. But, then again, Boyer's aim is not the justification of religion, but its explanation.

In response to the consequences challenge, Boyer discusses the way in which prosocial moral intuitions get mixed up with religious ideas (e.g. construing gods or spirits as omnipresent moral examiners). In this sense, Boyer (like Ayer, for instance) concludes that religion is based upon a pre-existent cognitive system for morality. Religious morality merely adds additional content and extends the scope of moral intuitions to encompass wider and wider domains of value.

When it comes to explaining religious violence and fundamentalism in particular, Boyer argues that "fundamentalism is a *modern* phenomenon and mostly a *reaction* to new conditions."[93] The most relevant "new conditions," Boyer claims, are cultural and religious diversity, and the competition between different worldviews and communities which they generate. What is at stake in fundamentalism is not a reaction to modernity *per se*, but to the fact that in modern Western society, one can embrace "other ways of living…or feel unconstrained by religious morality…*without paying a heavy price*."[94] Fundamentalism is a reaction to the fact that "*defection is not costly* and is therefore *very likely*" in particular religious communities.[95] It is "neither religion

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[93] Boyer, *Religion Explained*, p. 292-3.
[94] Ibid., p. 293.
[95] Ibid., p. 294.

in excess nor politics in disguise."[96] The violence that religious fundamentalism precipitates is, on Boyer's account, the inevitable outgrowth of regulating the behavior of those within a fundamentalist community, in an effort to bolster mutual trust and morale within the group to stave off the possibility of defection and dissolution.

On the one hand, Boyer does not want to be overly reductionist in his account of religious violence by attributing violence *solely* to the religious doctrines of a fundamentalist community. On the other hand, it is clear that fundamentalist religious communities—insofar as they operate out of the prosocial cognitive systems of normal human minds—seek to preserve group identity and make defection more costly through the threat and execution of violence. The potential for defection and the dissolution of the religious community is historically contingent, however, meaning there are no guarantees that eliminating such communities (or encouraging them to be more tolerant of defectors) will necessarily yield an overall or long-term decrease in violence (i.e. what is sought in the consequences challenge). Thus, Boyer takes a skeptical view of the hard and fast conclusions of the consequences challenge, for similar reasons as Cavanaugh, but supported by a greater attention to parsing the details of the specific pro-social behaviors that motivate violence.

What, then, of the meaning challenge? I have tarried over the other two challenges, because I think that in many ways, the explanations offered in empirical philosophy of religion (understood beyond the bounds of overly-

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[96] Ibid., p. 296.

reductionist pure cognitive science of religion) do a satisfactory job of addressing some aspects of the truth and consequences challenges. When it comes to the meaning challenge, however, one runs into two problems. First, the meaning challenge posits that religion is superfluous, and so can be easily cast off. While Boyer's evolutionary explanation of how religious concepts have proven themselves to be well-adapted to human cognitive systems indicates that religious concepts are functional, his claim that religious concepts will continue to be adaptable is pure speculation.

One of the limits of arguing based upon a theory of evolutionary selection (be it evolutionary psychology or the meme theory of culture) is that one may only conclude that such and such a notion *has worked so far*, but can only speculate that it *may continue to work*, provided conditions remain relatively similar. While this goes some way to reassuring the religious person that his or her religion may continue to be "adaptive," that assurance rings somewhat hollow, given that one of the motivations behind the meaning challenge is the "progress" of civilization—i.e. moving on to a new stage of human existence that is different and better than where we find ourselves currently. McCauley's argument for additional support for science if it is to overcome its "unnaturalness" also reflects this motivation.

The second issue with using empirical philosophy of religion to respond to the meaning challenge is that empirical philosophy of religion conceives of its project as essentially *descriptive*, rather than prescriptive. This is a feature, not a bug: Thurow points out that cognitive science of religion is "so interesting and potentially powerful" because "it does not take religion to be a metaphysically

basic aspect of human nature."[97] If religion were a "metaphysically basic aspect of human nature," Thurow claims, its necessity would be indisputable. Since this is not the case, one is left wondering whether describing the cognitive or historical processes that "shape" and "recruit" religious concepts and practices could every yield such necessity.

A variation of G.E. Moore's "Open Question Argument" can clarify how empirical descriptions fail to adequately address the meaning challenge. This argument is based upon a semantic distinction between naturalistic, empirical definitions of "good" in terms of observable phenomenon, such as pleasure or progress, and the true, analytic meaning of the term. Suppose one were to define good by either of these terms: "pleasure is good," or "progress is good." How would one then describe pleasure or progress? By asserting "pleasure is pleasure," or "progress is progress" (i.e. using analytic statements). Moore contends that these tautologies do not capture the same ideas as "pleasure is good" and "progress is good," because "good" has some further meaning than is present in either of these. He explains that

> Every one does in fact understand the question 'Is this good?' When he
> thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he
> asked 'Is this pleasant, or desired, or approved?' It has a distinct meaning
> for him, even though he may not recognize in what respect it is distinct.
> Whenever he thinks of 'intrinsic value,' or 'intrinsic worth,' or says that a

[97] Joshua C. Thurow, "Does cognitive science show belief in god to be irrational? The epistemic consequences of the cognitive science of religion" *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (August 2013), p. 7.

thing 'ought to exist,' he has before his mind the unique object—the unique

property of things—that I mean by 'good.'[98]

Moore concludes that naturalistic descriptions of what good is cannot sum up the

true analytic meaning of the term, since whatever "intrinsic value" that 'good'

denotes is not quite captured in the secondary naturalistic descriptors. It is for

this reason that the question "is it Good?" remains open and unanswered in

natural accounts of goodness.

While Moore's argument concerns naturalistic and empirical approaches

to morality, it can be applied equally to in the case of religion. The meaning

challenge calls into question the "intrinsic value" of religious phenomena—the

unique property that makes such phenomena "religious." The meaning challenge

holds that religious phenomena have no intrinsic value, or that that value can be

interpreted in other more suitable ways (e.g. as ethical, aesthetic, or emotional

value). But just as one is left asking of "progress" or "pleasure" if it is in fact

"good," so too is one left wondering if what is "ethical" is "religious," or if what

constitutes proper cognitive function is "religious." Where in these descriptions is

the intrinsic value of religion specifically articulated for its own sake?

One may counter that religion is not like goodness—that it is not, as Moore

claimed of 'the Good,' a unique property of things. But this is precisely the point

upon which the meaning challenge turns. To adequately address this challenge,

one must find a way to show that the term 'religion' does in fact denote

something unique, something that cannot be overlooked or ignored or brushed

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[98] George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica* (London: Cambridge UP, 1922), 16-7.

aside. Empirical descriptions of cognitive processes or philological explications of the development and deployment of the notion of "religion" rely upon the categories dictated by the disciplines and methodologies upon which they draw. As a mode of philosophical discourse, empirical philosophy of religion is beholden to the wider discursive patterns of fields like cognitive science, neuropsychology, sociology, and anthropology. For empirical philosophy of religion to make claims about the meaningfulness of religion requires appealing to these other realms of discourse, none of which offers the basis for claiming religion's uniqueness and necessity for a meaningful life.

Gestures in the Right Direction for Addressing the Meaning Challenge

In *The Really Hard Problem*,[99] Owen Flanagan asserts that one of the most challenging philosophical questions of living in the purely naturalized, materialistic world of the 21st century is "What makes life meaningful?" Answering this question in terms of a single "space of meaning" such as science or religion is, in Flanagan's opinion, an oversimplification. In fact, holding that both science and religion together constitute the only two spaces of meaning in the late Modern world is also too simplistic. Flanagan argues that there are at least a "sextet" of spaces that together constitute the "Space of Meaning[Early 21st Century]": "art, science, technology, ethics, politics, [and] spirituality."[100] "Most contemporary people," Flanagan says, "interact with all six of these spaces."[101] He

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[99] Owen Flanagan, *The Really Hard Problem: Meaning in a Material World* (Cambridge MA: Bradford Books, 2007).
[100] Ibid., p. 11.
[101] Ibid., p. 12.

makes a substantial caveat in this claim, however, by asserting that fully 20

percent of the world's population lives in conditions of poverty that render these

spaces inaccessible. The conditions of global capitalism and discriminatory

practices keep certain populations in this condition of being "spiritually worse off

than their compatriots in virtue of social practices that circumscribe how they are

permitted to interact with the Space of Meaning[Early 21st Century]."[102]

Flanagan calls the Space of Meaning[Early 21st Century] "a useful abstraction,"[103]

insofar as it provides a conceptual scheme in which individual or communal

patterns of meaning-making can be understood. Recognizing that not everyone

will value each of the spaces making up the sextet equally, Flanagan nonetheless

holds that living a meaningful life in the 21st century world requires at least some

engagement with all of the spaces—including that of "spirituality."

While people interact with all or most of the six spaces, Flanagan claims

that most folks tend to value one space over the others. The musical genius, for

instance, will expend the most energy in the space of art. The scientist will devote

themselves to that particular space of meaning. In cultures where family honor is

prized, the ethical space will dominate, and for some in democratic societies,

political engagement will be of utmost importance. "The space of spirituality and

religion," on the other hand, "is designed, it seems, to function comprehensively

for those to whom it is designed to appeal—in principle to everyone in the

vicinity."[104] This space interacts closely with the aesthetic, eliciting strong

emotions. It is a space of striving, but one that need not exceed the bounds of the

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[102] Ibid., p. 13
[103] Ibid., p. 18.
[104] Ibid., p. 186.

material conditions of the world: "Aspirations to locate our selves in the vicinity of what is true, good, and beautiful are noble and worthy...Naturalism, as I conceive it, is plenty broad enough to make room for robust conceptions of the sacred, the spiritual, the sublime, and of moral excellence."[105] Flanagan's main concern is for those spiritual conceptions and moral dogmatics that become exclusive (what he calls "Assertive Theism"). "Finding one space especially important for meaning is not all that uncommon," Flanagan explains: "But finding that same space enough for all one's meaning-in-life needs is very rare."[106] To allow religious beliefs about the existence of God or the creation of the universe to become dominant jeopardizes the meaning-making potential of the non-spiritual spaces of meaning.

The solution Flanagan arrives at is a kind of hybrid view of Ayer and postmodernism:

> Although naturalism is unopinionated about what, if anything, caused the universe to exist, this does not mean that anything goes when it comes to spinning origin stories. Because they are untestable, such stories can be said, expressed, even embraced, but they cannot be asserted as worthy of true belief. They are not evaluable in terms of the "true" and the false." But you can like your story so much you treat it as true...something like this might be the best way to describe the self-understanding of the persons who tell a certain story that they conceive mythically: They do not believe

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[105] Ibid., pp. 189-90.
[106] Ibid., p. 188.

their story to be true (they can't responsibly do so), but they believe that

belief in their story is beneficial.[107]

Flanagan's assessment echoes that of Dennett, but what he draws from that

assessment is different. Unlike Dennett, Flanagan does not want to break the

spell of "belief in belief." On the contrary, this is a central aspect of the spiritual

space of meaning.

The other key aspect is that of "transcendence," which Flanagan describes

as a kind of innate human impulse that answers questions like "why be moral?"

and "what matters?" and "how is my life a part of something larger?"[108] He calls

this impulse towards transcendence the basis for both questing after "the

meaning of life" and the "moral glue" that adds integrity to "a moral (and perhaps

even a political and economic) conception."[109] These aspects of the spiritual or

religious space of meaning, Flanagan concludes, constitute its particular

contribution to the Space of Meaning[Early 21st Century].

Flanagan's theory of meaning represents a naturalistic, empirically-

oriented and analytically rigorous way of accounting for the features of religion

that he takes to contribute to a meaningful life. But this theory also raises

questions about whether he has sacrificed too much of religion's claim to the

possibility of truth and knowledge for the sake of its meaningfulness—and done

so in a radically question-begging way. After all, he enjoins the faithful to find

meaning in believing in their *belief*, rather than in believing *what* they believe.

Along these lines, he provides no clarity about whether religion's value derives

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[107] Ibid., p. 193
[108] Ibid., p. 199.
[109] Ibid., p. 205.

from its contribution to the ethical sphere. This is feature, on his view, because it shows how the spiritual and ethical spaces of meaning overlap one another. (Flanagan certainly cannot be accused of holding to a sharp divide between secular and religious domains of meaning). That overlap is, ultimately, what justifies the persistence of the spiritual space of meaning in the 21st century.

But where Flanagan sees innovation, I see an attempt to describe a collection of phenomena as "natural" and "meaningful" without providing any overarching criteria for why these phenomena and not others ought to be classified as "spiritual." I do not believe that what Flanagan offers in his assessment of the spiritual effectiveness and meaningfulness of naturalistic/non-theistic religious "impulses" constitutes a strong refutation of the meaning challenge, insofar as his model of religious meaning fails to adequately capture the full weight and meaning of 'religion.'

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Wesley Wildman describes his approach to "religious philosophy"[110] as encompassing "multidisciplinary forms of theological and philosophy reflection on religion that prize impartial analysis and refuse institutional religious bias." He argues that religious philosophy and theology are both concerned with "inquiry into ultimacy, in the double sense of matters that are ultimately religiously important and of ultimate reality itself."[111] Wildman also goes out of

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[110] Wildman does not consider "religious philosophy" to be anything but "philosophy of religion;" however, in attempting to reconstruct mainstream understandings of "philosophy of religion" as a certain kind of discourse focused upon a small subset of problems, Wildman offers "religious philosophy" as an alternative formulation, to mark off his approach to understanding religion philosophically from other, more dominant modes of philosophy of religion.

[111] Wildman, *Religious Philosophy*, p. 26.

his way to repeatedly assert that religious philosophy ought not be enthralled to any one particular religious tradition, but that insofar as it is both multidisciplinary and comparative, religious philosophy "involves investigation…into every kind and degree of religious phenomena" in various registers (e.g. metaphysical, ethical, aesthetic, etc.) and through diverse styles of inquiry (e.g. phenomenological, comparative, analytic, etc.).[112] One engages in these inquiries "to generate interpretations of every kind of religious phenomena, from the mundane to the sublime and from individual experiences to social practices, with due attention to social and cultural context, and with concern for the questions of meaning, truth, and value, which properly belong to philosophy."[113]

Above all, Wildman claims that religious philosophy acknowledges "the integrity of religion while engaging questions of meaning and truth that are vital for religious people and groups."[114] This engagement with meaning and truth is couched in a conception of rationality that is "fallibilist, hypothetical, [and] pragmatic."[115] In laying out this program for religious philosophy, Wildman gestures in the direction of a pragmatic reconstruction of empirical philosophy of religion.

The similarities between Wildman's approach and those of other empirical philosophers of religion become more evident in his book, *Religious and Spiritual Experiences*,[116] in which he puts his multidisciplinary approach to work

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[112] Ibid., p. 35.
[113] Ibid., p. xv.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid., p. xvi.
[116] Wildman, *Religious and Spiritual Experiences* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011).

in an attempt to understand the nature of "religious and spiritual experiences" (RSEs). Wildman begins by laying out a whole host of motivations for studying RSEs—everything from natural curiosity, to the desire for spiritual transformation, to legitimating group identity and securing social power dynamics. Most of all, however, Wildman argues that RSEs constitute a source of ultimate spiritual meaning, and this alone is sufficient to warrant inquiry. Furthermore, unlike Dawkins and the other New Atheists (whom Wildman addresses specifically in his first chapter), Wildman is not willing to surrender the significance of RSEs to a supranatural or otherwise non-naturalist view, nor is he willing to overlook or deny the "vital place" of RSEs "within the grand adventure of human life" as anti-religious naturalists tend to do.[117]

Wildman goes on in the book to discuss neuroscientific studies on RSEs, complemented by phenomenological accounts, as well as a discussion of what he calls "intense instincts." He concludes the book by offering an "integrative interpretation of religious and spiritual experiences,"[118] one that collects both ongoing controversies and the affirmative claims that come out of the empirical study of RSEs.

Wildman's text is significant because he manages to execute his intended purpose of engaging in multidisciplinary comparative inquiry into the nature of a religious phenomenon (RSE), while simultaneously situating that inquiry in terms of the larger significance and meaningfulness of religion itself. He concludes,

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[117] Ibid., p. 25.
[118] Ibid., p. 244.

I have been describing a new world of understanding, in which the causal factors powering RSEs are understood, in which their cultural conditions and social effects are recognized, and in which ignorance of the cognitive liabilities that produce mistaken interpretations of RSEs is no longer needed…We find meaning in RSEs not because of what they supposedly reveal about other spiritual worlds, but because they open up to us the value-laden depths of this world.[119]

One could plausibly read Wildman's text as a response to the meaning challenge as it pertains specifically to RSEs. The meaningfulness of these experiences constitutes what is ultimately significant in the world.

At the same time, however, Wildman's philosophy suffers from a lack of an overarching theory of interpretation, one that would indicate how this comparative inquiry constitutes a "new world of understanding" RSEs. For this, it is necessary (as I will show in the last chapter) to turn to earlier pragmatist philosophers, and particular the theory of interpretation developed by Josiah Royce in his later works in philosophy of religion.

In *A New Biology of Religion*,[120] Michael Steinberg arrives at similar conclusions to those of Wildman, but about religion more generally (not just RSEs). "What flowers in spiritual and religious practices…isn't a need for transcendence. It's a need for reality."[121] Steinberg has pointed words for the New Atheists, whom he claims

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[119] Ibid., p. 264.
[120] Michael Steinberg, *A New Biology of Religion* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012).
[121] Ibid., p. 187.

have no sense that reality evades their tools…All these can do is help us

describe with greater and greater delicacy and accuracy how the universe

appears to an "outside observer." But the observer isn't actually outside

the universe that she's trying to describe. Her results are always partial

because everything that she comes up with depends on the betrayal of

reality—the sundering of the unity of observer and observed.[122]

Steinberg's argument, like that of Wildman, comes down to the claim that

religion is about connection with the deep reality of the universe, whereas science

is about description. Description, however, sets one at a distance from reality.

The implication seems to be that the only way to understand the meaningfulness

of religion is to understand how its practices function—how they create the

conditions for genuine contact with the deep reality from which values and

meaning surge up.

In both Wildman and Steinberg, we have evidence of empirical philosophy

that takes on a more pragmatic orientation towards understanding the meaning

of religion in concrete experience. This is ultimately the direction one must go in

order to adequately address the meaning challenge. I intend to elaborate on this

point in the last chapter of this essay.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the dominant modes of contemporary

philosophy of religion provide adequate resources to address the truth and

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[122] Ibid., pp. 187, 183.

consequences challenges. At the same time, both analytic philosophy of religion and empirical philosophy of religion have shortcomings with regard to the meaning challenge. For analytic philosophy of religion broadly, the situation of religion into a larger discursive framework robs it of its unique quality. Functional-analytic treatments of religion also limit the truth-functionality of religious knowledge to a particular domain of discourse that stands apart from other non-religious discourses. This raises the question of whether this incommensurability can be overcome to provide a complete and coherent rejoinder to the truth challenge.

A similar dilution of the unique significance of religion and its claims to knowledge occurs in empirical philosophies of religion. As was shown, explanations and descriptions of religious phenomena lead to ambivalence about the persistence of religion. The naturalistic and materialistic bent of these philosophies also open up a concern about whether or not what is uniquely valuable in religion is being accurately or adequately described. This question recurs with Flanagan's theory of meaning, which offers a promising argument for the inclusion of religion in the Space of Meaning[Early 21st Century]. Wildman and Steinberg provide an initial gesture towards closing the question by not only engaging in a multidisciplinary study of religion, but pragmatically attending to the questions raised by the meaning challenge and the problem of religious meaning in concrete experience.

Chapter 3: The Modern Genealogy of Contemporary Challenges

Up to this point, I have primarily focused upon discussing the three

challenges in the context of contemporary theological and philosophical

discourses, without devoting much attention to tracing the genealogy of these

ideas in the history of Euro-modernity's philosophical engagement with religion.

In the opening section of the previous chapter, however, I showed how

Cavanaugh's genealogy of the myth of religious violence unmasked the

incoherence of the consequences challenge. In critiquing the development of a

mythic transhistorical/ transcultural definition of religion that supports the

secular/religious divide in liberal Western nation-states, as well as dividing the

"Enlightened" West from the "religious" Orient, Cavanaugh showed that concerns

about specifically *religious* violence are founded upon murky assumptions and

imperialistic pseudo-justifications. Given the forcefulness of this critique of the

modern notion of religion in its relation to violence, it seems prudent to engage in

a similar genealogy of the truth and meaning challenges, and to trace the

development of the ideas and questions they engender in modern philosophy of

religion. Doing so will hopefully clarify Gavin Hyman's claim (highlighted in

Chapter 1) that the New Atheism is a "vociferous example" of "full-blown

modern" thinking. Identifying the distinctive marks of "modern" philosophical

thinking about religion will also provide additional context and depth to the open

question about the nature of religious "knowledge" pointed out at the end of the

previous chapter. Lastly, this historical excursus will indicate a good deal of the

conceptual inheritance that contemporary continental philosophy of religion

receives, critiques, and deconstructs. These contemporary continental responses will subsequently be considered in Chapter 4.

Describing modern philosophy of religion schematically is a notoriously complex task. Peter Anstey[1] provides one model that arranges domains of concern in six semi-overlapping categories: (1) reinterpreting classical theistic proofs; (2) the relation between God and nature; (3) the relation between faith and knowledge (also construed as the relation between revelation and reason); (4) moral and political philosophy, with special attention to the Euthyphro dilemma (i.e. whether the binding nature of morality is by virtue of reason or revelation) and the origins of sovereignty; (5) the nature of history and creation; and (6) the redefinition of traditional Aristotelian metaphysics, along with implications of such redescriptions for theology. The complex interplay of philosophical and religious ideas in the thought of Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Boyle, Hume, Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, et al. during the early modern period, Anstey claims, yielded "terms of reference and argument forms" that are "still very much a part of the contemporary philosophical landscape."[2]

For the purposes of this essay, a genealogy of the truth and meaning challenges in modern thinking about religion involves tracing the particular constellation of concerns and questions they represent to the thought of a handful of representative figures. In the first section, I outline Lord Herbert of Cherbury's system of common notions of religion, as well as Hume's skepticism

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[1] Peter Anstey, "Early modern Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction," in *Early modern Philosophy of Religion : The History of Western Philosophy of Religion, Volume 3*, Eds. N.N. Trakakis and Graham Oppy (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 1-18.
[2] Ibid., p. 18.

of any empirical claims to grasp the "essence" of religion in what I identify as the primordial "dialectic of essentialism and skepticism" that characterizes modern philosophy of religion. By this, I mean the relation in the early modern period between a growing sense of the effectiveness of techno-scientific empiricism for providing sure and certain knowledge about the world, and the concomitantly deepening dissatisfaction with medieval metaphysical paradigms. In the dramatic tension between skepticism of metaphysical foundations and confidence in empiricist methods, the question of the truth or falsity of religious beliefs emerges as a matter of either rehabilitating metaphysics or determining what constitutes empirical evidence that would warrant religious knowledge. These two options provide relevant context for understanding why and how the truth challenge takes the form it does, both in terms of its metaphysical assumptions (i.e. naturalism and materialism) and its objection (i.e. to the possibility of true religious knowledge).

In the second section, I briefly highlight the role religion was understood to play in the social contract, which indicates its social value, beyond any epistemological claims. I then consider Immanuel Kant's philosophy of religion in depth. Kant is the central figure in this genealogy, as he synthesized what came before and was hugely influential on those who followed after him. In his philosophy of religion, Kant sought to articulate the conditions for the possibility of a rational faith (what he called "religion within the boundaries of mere reason"), as well as describe the ways in which religion enhances morality and provides for the possibility of a teleological interpretation of history. This latter point is critical in its relation to Kant's articulation of the Enlightenment ideal,

which is taken up (mistakenly, in my view) by those who argue that religion is doomed to obsolescence.

Finally, I turn to two post-Kantian philosophers of religion: Friedrich Schleiermacher and G.W.F. Hegel. In their own unique ways, both figures contribute to the truth and meaning challenges by either undermining claims about the possibility of genuine religious knowledge, or collapsing the meaning of religion into the aesthetic or philosophical domains, or attributing religion to a selective population, thereby excluding any argument for its universal significance or necessity. By providing this historical overview, I hope to further elucidate the stakes of the truth and meaning challenges in the modern world. Additionally, I hope to clarify how these challenges come to be in a way that is not tied to the vociferous and hyperbolic expression they receive in the works of the New Atheism. By taken a more measured and philosophical approach, I hope to set the stage for a discussion of postmodern and deconstructive responses to these challenges in contemporary continental philosophy of religion, which I believe bear fruit as responses to the truth and meaning challenges.

Essentialism and Skepticism in Modern Philosophy of Religion

In 1624, Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury, an Oxford-educated British nobleman published *De Veritate*, in which he set out to "establish the fundamental principles of religion by means of universal wisdom."[3] This stated purpose marries two essential features of modern thinking: a concern with

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[3] Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, "De Veritate," in *Deism: An Anthology*, ed. Peter Gay (Princeton: Von Nostrand Co. Inc., 1968), p. 31.

fundamental/universal principles that account for how some aspect of human experience operates (*a la* Newton's law of motion or Smith's laws of capitalism), and a desire to exorcise that concern by drawing solely upon the use of natural/universal modes of reason. Cherbury shared the concern of his contemporary Francis Bacon for establishing a sound methodology for the proper use of natural reason when it came to the study of religion. As in Bacon's *Novum Organum*, where Bacon lays out the "idols" that distract and mislead the scientific process, Cherbury is concerned with escaping "deception" from "cunning authorities" who "declare their inventions to be heaven-born, though in reality they habitually confuse and mix truth with falsehood."[4]

Again, following Bacon, Cherbury claims that the truth of ideas is a function both of the continuity of natural reason with objects in the natural world, as well as the common consent of humankind, arrived at via scientific investigation. What establishes the "truth" of religious ideas are the "Common Notions" of religion: that is, fundamental ideas that, when articulated, provide criteria by which religious phenomena can be judged to be genuinely "religious" or not. These Common Notions include (1) there is a Supreme God; (2) God ought to be worshipped; (3) the most important part of piety is moral virtue; (4) human beings are wicked and stand in need of expiation of their sins; and (5) there are divinely imposed punishments and rewards in an after-life. "It is not what a large number of men assert," Cherbury concludes, "but what all men of normal mind believe, that I find important. Scanning the vast array of absurd

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[4] Ibid.

fictions I am content to discover a tiny Common Notion. And this is of utmost importance, since when the general mass of men has rejected a whole range of beliefs which it has found valueless, it proceeds to acquire new beliefs by this method."[5] By outlining these five Common Notions, Cherbury hopes to provide a standard "which comprehends all places and all men,"[6] providing them with a method of testing the truth or falsity of religious ideas, including ecclesial doctrines, ritual practices, and even personal revelations. "If...anyone receives some truth by revelation... he should reserve it to himself," Cherbury explains. "For it is not likely that what is not evident to the faculties of all, can have any bearing on the whole human race."[7] The final arbiter of the truth, utility, and warrant of revelation is whether or not it coheres with the *sensus communis* of the "whole human race." In this, Cherbury's view of religion anticipates that of Kant.

Cherbury's early work in the field of modern philosophy of religion is emblematic of the emphasis upon identifying universal, fundamental features of religious phenomena. Just like the phenomena of motion or biology or political machinations, fundamental patterns in religion can be discovered and checked against a wide array of human experience. "By no other method," Cherbury claims, "could the existence of Divine Universal Providence...be proved by the principles of common reason."[8] In a posthumously published work, *De Religione Gentillium* (1663), Cherbury applies these "principles of common reason" to

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[5] Ibid., p. 39.
[6] Ibid., p. 40.
[7] Ibid., p. 41.
[8] Ibid.

indicate how the Common Notions of religion show up in classical Roman religion, as well as early Christianity. *De Religione Gentillium* is one of the first works of "comparative religion" published in the modern period. Despite the shortcomings of Cherbury's empirical work (namely, his Eurocentric and Christocentric comparisons, as well as his limited access to accurate information about the "general mass of men" and their religious beliefs), one can see that it indicates a methodological pattern for modern philosophy of religion: namely, the attempt to establish a set of fundamental criteria based upon empirical descriptions of religious beliefs and behaviors. These criteria are then taken to be normative, having epistemic import in their application to different concrete instances of religious phenomena.

Despite these paradigm-setting contributions, Cherbury is not often accorded a place of prominence in the origin stories for modern philosophy of religion. This may be because Cherbury still held to a view akin to that of Thomas Aquinas, in that he believed that all knowledge of divine matters, whether it could be described philosophically or through the specialized discourse of revelation (i.e. theology), is the result of Divine providence. Cherbury differentiates between "universal providence" (the Common Notions), "special providence" (particular "movements of conscience and prayerful impulses") and "genuine revelation" (data about the divine that "lies beyond the scope of general providence"—the notions, Cherbury warns, one ought to keep to oneself as much as possible). All three modes of providence involve divine agency, and so Cherbury's account of religion redounds to something closer to "natural theology" than "philosophy of religion." Because of this, his essentialist account still operates upon supernatural

metaphysical assumption. In turn, this renders Cherbury's views incommensurate with more contemporary essentialist accounts of religion, which largely rely upon materialist or linguistic ontologies (cf. analytic and empirical philosophies of religion). Nonetheless, Cherbury's essentialist approach becomes paradigmatic in the modern period. Emphasizing a well-defined articulation of essential features of religion, this methodological orientation informs the hard-and-fast denial of the truth challenge that religion can be "true," or even epistemically warranted as a site of genuine knowledge. Such a denial is only possible if one is clear about what precisely (read: essentially) 'religion' names.

Later thinkers supplemented Cherbury's approach with a more robust empirical method, borrowed from the developing "new sciences" of the modern period. This orientation becomes especially prominent in the British empiricists, including Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, but it is also a feature of philosophers of religion on the European continent, such as Descartes, Leibniz, and Spinoza. At the same time, these philosophers often conclude that the true worth and meaning of religion cannot be established by reason alone. In his *Enquiry into Human Understanding*, for example, Hume writes against "those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian religion who have undertaken to defend it by principles of human reason." He asserts that "Mere reason is insufficient to convince us of [Christianity's] truth; and anyone who is moved by faith to assent to it is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person—one that subverts all the principles of his understanding and gives him a

determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience."[9]

Hume's conclusion is double-edged, striking those who would persist in offering

"proofs" for the truth of religious doctrine, as well as those who believe (Cherbury

included) that Christianity is representative of a broader trend or common

pattern of religion that accords to "custom and experience." Religion, Hume

claims, is fundamentally *not* a set of beliefs and practices that can be established

or bulwarked by reason, nor is it a commonplace or natural phenomenon.

Religion is rather a name for the exceptional, the miraculous—that which

"subverts all…understanding"—that has no warrant besides the individual

experience, which is, itself, further contradicted by the natural course of things.

Hume's skeptical conclusion is that religion is personal, individualistic, and,

hence, beyond the bounds of common sense and the common rationality that

Cherbury claimed could account for its inherent, unquestionable value.

Hume's skepticism marks a dialectical counterpoint that is just as

"modern" as Cherbury's religious essentialism. Unlike Cherbury, who forecloses

all possible meanings for 'religion' with a set of Common Notions, which, in turn,

provide the criteria for marking beliefs or experiences as properly "religious",

Hume seeks to check the fervor of empiricists claiming to have captured the

miraculous and personal character of religious phenomena. This back-and-forth

between essentialism (i.e. the description of "essential" features of religious

experience that in turn constitute normative criteria for marking phenomena

[including knowledge] as properly 'religious') and skepticism about the limits of

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[9] David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Jonathan Bennett (Online Publication: earlymoderntexts.com, 2004), pp. 68, 69.

reason in religious matters persists in modern philosophy of religion. In the first place, if religious "knowledge" is limited by culturally-conditioned normative criteria to bounded situations, then religious claims can hardly purport to be "rational" in any objective sense.

This is expressed in the truth challenge, which holds that religion is essentially irrational, on the basis of this skepticism that reason can be brought to bear in judging the truth or falsity of religious knowledge claims. Lacking appropriate empirical evidence, religious "experiences" cannot provide the basis for genuine "knowledge," but may nonetheless retain some other sort of non-rational significance. This leaves the door open for a rejoinder to the meaning challenge, since it may still be possible to argue that there is some unique and necessary significance of religion.

At the same time, the growing emphasis upon reason and empirical rationality as the sole source of knowledge during the modern period forecloses a certain kind of significance for religious ideas. If religious beliefs cannot rise to the level of genuine "knowledge" in the modern age, when, as the old Baconian adage goes, "Knowledge is power," then it seems to follow that the power of religion (broadly construed in terms of institutions, social relations, epistemic import, and moral weight) is or ought to be severely curtailed. This implication—which comes to its fullest expression in the meaning challenge's claim that religion is simply not necessary in the post-Enlightenment world—is something that modern philosophers of religion wrestled with: can the significance and power accorded to religion, which is part of its essential meaning and

importance, be preserved despite skepticism about humans' capacity for true religious knowledge?

This back and forth between essentialism and skepticism reaches its apogee in the work of Immanuel Kant, who seeks to settle the debate once and for all via a thoroughgoing critique of reason that (famously) "limits knowledge, so as to make room for faith." In doing so, Kant also seeks to articulate the transcendental conditions for genuine religious knowledge. Kant's parsing of religious knowledge has important implications for understanding and responding to the truth and meaning challenges.

The Social Dimension in Modern Philosophy of Religion

Another feature of modern philosophy of religion is that it plays an important role in political philosophy as well. In the work of Hobbes, Locke, and particularly Rousseau, the role of religion in civil societies governed on the basis of a social contract is crucial. In the concluding part of *The Social Contract*, Rousseau describes religion's relation to social life in three ways. First, there is religion that is "limited to inward devotion to the supreme God and the eternal obligations of morality." Rousseau calls this "true theism" and "the divine natural law." He contrasts this with "the religion of the citizen," which is religion that has "its external forms of worship laid down by law; and to the one nation which practices this religion, everything outside is infidel, alien, barbarous." Lastly, there is a kind of religion that requires obligations to "two legislative rulers, two

rulers, two homelands."[10] Rousseau believes that there is some merit in the first

two kinds of religion, but that the last (which he identifies with Roman

Catholicism, for example) is too confused to have social utility.

Rousseau claims that the religion of the citizen is good for society, insofar

as it helps reinforce the social contract which forms the basis for a liberal

government. At the same time, he cautions against the narrow parochialism that

this kind of religion breeds. No doubt with the Thirty Years War and similar

European conflicts fought along sectarian lines, Rousseau argues that the true

theism, with its attention to the universal "divine natural law" more properly

ensures peace between nations. At the same time, this form of religion (which he

identifies with a kind of primordial Christianity[11]) does not necessarily contribute

to civic and liberal self-expression. "Christianity preaches only servitude and

submission," Rousseau writes: "Its spirit is too favourable to tyranny for tyranny

not to take advantage of it."[12] Additionally, this emphasis upon servitude makes

for bad soldiers, in Rousseau's opinion: "since the Gospel never sets up any

national religion, holy war is impossible among Christians."[13] Because "the

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[10] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 181.
[11] "There remains the religion of humanity, or Christianity, not the Christianity of today, but that of the Gospel, which is altogether different. Under this holy, sublime, and true religion, men, as children of the same God, look on all others as brothers, and the society which unites them is not even dissolved by death" (p. 182). Rousseau describes this society as both "perfect" and "imagined," as an ideal that is "not of this world," because "Being perfect, it would be without bonds of union; its ruinous defect would lie in its very perfection" (p. 183). Based on Rousseau's understanding of the origin of the social contract in the attempt to mitigate the harm of a violent "state of nature," it follows that a wholly non-violent society would have no need of such a contract. Without a contract, however, it would make no sense to describe this community as a society in the first place, since (lacking a common agreement upon conditions for things like owning property, determining legislation, or going to war) it carries no obligations to any of its members.
[12] Ibid., p. 184.
[13] Ibid., p. 185.

Gospel" is essentially inward and individualistic, Rousseau concludes, this kind of religion is antithetical to the social welfare of a liberal nation-state.

Based upon these observations, Rousseau concludes that "It is very important to the state that each citizen should have a religion which makes him loves his duties, but the dogmas of that religion are of interest neither to the state nor its members."[14] Rousseau adds a caveat that the morals which a religion engenders are a concern of the state, insofar as they affect other members of the society who do not share the same religious beliefs. The state's only duty, then, to regulate the dogmas of religion is to insist upon religious tolerance, since "Wherever theological intolerance is admitted, it is bound to have some civil consequences."[15] Rousseau argues that on the basis of the primacy of social order and civic duty, religious teachings that, for instance, condemn those who hold different beliefs must not be expressed in the public sphere. This codifies both the interpretation of religion as a set of doctrines, propositions, or principles with effects upon the inner life of an individual, as well as the separation of the realm of social and political power from that of religion—that is, the religious-secular distinction.

As Mark Cladis points out, however, the goal of this separation is not to vitiate the religious life; rather, Rousseau insists upon the need for a civic religion that flows from "our natural spirituality," which he describes in *Emile* as "the religion of the heart" that "opposes self-interest"[16] and promotes prosocial

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., p. 187.
[16] Mark Cladis, "Rousseau and Durkheim: The Relation between the Public and the Private," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring 1993), p. 19.

behaviors like charity. There is a kind of productive tension between civic and individual religion, but it is a tension that is firmly located in the individual and which no social legislation can relieve. On Rousseau's account, it is imperative that inward religion be prevalent in a secular, liberal nation-state. But this inward religion only ever properly comes to expression in prosocial behavior. The content of religious *beliefs* is not inherently significant nor a matter of public concern. Religion's significance is only ever *practical*, interpreted through the social obligation and moral duty that are not derived *from* religion, but rather constitute normative criteria for "genuine" religious praxis. The utility of religion for a liberal society rises to the level of necessity due to the inherently self-interested nature of human beings, which must be overcome by whatever means necessary—including using the carrot and stick of religion—to promote, sustain, and enforce the social contract.

In this way, Rousseau indicates a practical answer to the meaning challenge, one that subsequently comes into play in Kant's philosophy. The meaning challenge asserts that religion is superfluous for moral and/or meaningful human existence. But because of Rousseau's low anthropology, he does not consider religion superfluous. In fact, recognizing that human beings are naturally self-interested and prone to violence and confrontation for the sake of that interest, liberal societies will require some sort of "religion" to maintain the social contract. Rousseau is not concerned about the specific dogmas, so long as whatever "religion" is, it motivates folks to fulfill their duty to society.

At the same time, Rousseau is critical of anything like religious "knowledge" being brought to bear in the public domain. This is because

whatever that "knowledge" is, it comes out of a specific religious context that is not necessarily shared in the society as a whole. Indeed, if a society were to share a single religious creed and adhere to a firm set of doctrines and dogmas, there would be no need for a social contract. The contract would be subverted by a religious covenant. This is not the case in liberal societies, however, where a plurality of individuals will undoubtedly hold a plurality of religious beliefs. Rousseau acknowledges both the fact and the need for diversity and pluralism in such societies, insofar as he affirms the autonomy and liberty of individuals *uber alles*. He is willing to grant the practical/political value of a religious orientation, insofar as it contributes to altruism and a capacity for thinking beyond oneself. But religion has no epistemic import in the public sphere, and so cannot attain anything like the status of objective truths, as, for example, the findings of scientific investigation, or the consensus of a democratic polity.

In this way, one can see Rousseau's view as surrendering to the truth challenge, for the sake of the meaning challenge: that is, Rousseau agrees to forgo the possibility of claiming (in the public square) that religious beliefs are true, and that religion can yield genuine true knowledge, while nonetheless also affirming that religion has this emotional, motivational quality that is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of a just human society. Such a conclusion is in keeping with liberal values of liberty, tolerance, and self-determination. It is also in keeping with Rousseau's skepticism about people's capacity for prosocial behavior.

This view leads to a novel way of addressing the meaning challenge, by asserting the political necessity of religious motivations. At the same time,

Rousseau toes the line on the truth challenge, not because he seeks to actively

refute the content of religious beliefs, but because what is significant about

religion for him is *not* its content, but its social effects. In ducking the blow of the

truth challenge (by denying the significance of religious knowledge except in the

radically constrained context of an individual), Rousseau's philosophy of religion

sacrifices any rejoinder to this challenge for the sake of asserting the

meaningfulness, utility, and, indeed, *necessity* of religion for a well-functioning

society.

Kant's Philosophy of Religion

Kant followed Rousseau in recognizing the moral and social role religion

plays; that being said, he wanted to maintain the possibility of something like

religious knowledge—that is to say, of a religion that could be practiced "within

the boundaries of reason." This is crucial to Kant's larger critical project. In his

introduction to *The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*, Edward Caird argues

that "Criticism…has its source ultimately in the antinomy between the principles

of physical science and that unscientific consciousness of spiritual reality which is

expressed in religion and morality…It is an attempt to solve this antinomy by

seeking out the sources of it or the unity that transcends it."[17] Caird describes

Kant's philosophical project as criticism—that is, as being concerned with this

antinomy centered on the limit of scientific thinking in experience. Thinking

through this antinomy requires not only the critique and analysis of scientific

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[17] Edward Caird, *The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* (Glasgow: J. Maclehose & Sons, 1909), p. 38.

thought, but an attempt to account for what lays on the other side of that line of demarcation. As Caird puts it, "Like the healthy eye, [Kant's] thought will embrace much more than that which is the immediate object in the focus of clearest vision. The world will be for him a *continuum*, and not a mere collection of independent and externally related objects."[18] Religion, despite its peripheral position relative to the "clear vision" of scientific intelligence, is still a part of this continuum of experience . For this reason, religion still warrants engagement, if the project of criticism is to come to fruition.

In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, he provides a taxonomy for what Caird describes as the continuum of experience in the "Canon of Pure Reason" (Doctrine of Method, Chap. 2). The canon is a set of three interrelated questions, which summarize Kant's overall philosophical project and indicate his priorities. "All interest of my reason (the speculative as well as the practical) is united in the following three questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What should I do? 3. What may I hope?"[19] Kant delineates the questions as follows: The first question is speculative or theoretical; the second is practical; and the third is "simultaneously practical and theoretical."[20] The previous 800 pages of the *Critique* have been almost exclusively devoted to answering the first question. Kant's transcendental analysis in the first *Critique* indicates the rational grounds for a critically-purified use of reason in the world. Kant's subsequent works on

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[18] Ibid., p. 45.
[19] Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, eds. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), A804-5/B832-3, p. 677.
[20] Ibid., A805/B833, p. 677.

practical reason answer the second question of the canon. The third question, "What may I hope?" is ultimately where Kant addresses religion.

In his discussion of the question of hope in the "Canon of Pure Reason," Kant begins with happiness, which he describes as the empirical *telos* of morality. Pure practical reason supplies the moral laws that rational beings must obey, even as the principle of freedom leaves open the possibility of their coming up short. Happiness does not determine the content of moral laws in advance: that is the duty of pure practical reason. Instead, happiness is the empirical standard by which moral laws are to be judged as realized or not realized in history. What ought to happen is conceived in pure practical reason; but being so conceived, the integrity of pure reason itself rests upon the objective reality of happiness as well. In short, moral laws cannot dictate the actions of a free rational being unless those actions lead to *actual* good (read: happiness). Here, "ought" is not derived from "is;" rather, action that *is* good is transcendentally implied in what one *ought* to do. Hence rational agents understand themselves to be at least transcendentally associated with a pure and totally moral world.

Concluding that "we must necessarily represent ourselves through reason as belonging to such a world," Kant asserts that we could not totally subordinate our freedom to moral maxims "if reason did not connect with the moral law, which is a mere idea, an efficient cause which determines for the conduct in accord with this law an outcome precisely corresponding to our highest ends, whether in this or another life."[21] The submission of one's individual will to the

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[21] Ibid., A811-2/B839-40, p. 680-1.

speculatively-intelligible moral world often flies in the face of sensible standards of well-being. Yet, while the sensible world has its upsides, it offers no systematic rational unity to undergird the notion of happiness. "Happiness alone is far from the complete good for our reason;" rather, "happiness in exact proportion with the morality of rational beings, through which they are worthy of it, alone constitutes the highest good of a world."[22] The synthesis of these conclusions is the basis for Kant's moral theology: "Thus without a God and a world that is not now visible to us but is hoped for, the majestic ideas of morality are, to be sure, objects of approbation and admiration but not incentives for resolve and realization."[23] Freedom is the first possibility for reason to act for itself. But God and the actual moral world are the objective, transcendental conditions that oblige freedom to limit itself, in order to win the greater prize for which we genuinely hope.

That human freedom is an essential transcendental condition for morality indicates one of the key inheritances of Kant from Rousseau. As David Pacini points out, Kant shared "Rousseau's unwavering belief in the unbroken human being and in the divine instinct that expresses itself through conscience, his impassioned pleas for direct vision and natural feeling, and his denunciation of the artificial social roles civilization forces the race to play against its true ends." Kant went beyond Rousseau, however, insofar as he "opened the prospect for a theoretical grounding, altogether missing in Rousseau, for the experience of

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[22] Ibid., A813-4/841-2, p. 681-2.
[23] Ibid., A813/B841, p. 681.

freedom. This conception of religion…marked the modern age."[24] Instead of giving up on the possibility of religious beliefs having epistemic import, Kant sought to provide a theoretical grounding (primarily grounded in practical reason) for the possibility of some form of religious knowledge.

Kant's "moral theology," however, is not yet a full-fledged philosophy of religion, but only one aspect of its theoretical basis. Kant seeks to clarify this basis in terms of its practical realization in experience: "What sort of use can we make of our understanding," Kant asks, "if we do not set ends before ourselves?"[25] Pure reason is contingent upon the active free agency of rational beings. But pure freedom and pure reason do not mix: freedom must be constrained by a concrete end if reason is to function. Hence, "the transcendental improvement of our rational cognition is not the cause but rather merely the effect of the practical purposiveness which pure reason imposes on us."[26] By virtue of this imposition, Kant claims, practical reason (and *not* speculative reason) has "produced a concept of the divine being that we now hold to be correct…in perfect agreement with the moral principles of reason."[27]

Kant thoroughly explains the shortcomings of speculative theologies in chapter three of the second division of the Doctrine of the Elements in the *Critique*. The first of these speculative theologies is transcendental, involving the hypostatization of an original or "highest" being, by virtue of which all being is regulated as such. "All of this does not signify the objective relation of an actual

[24] David Pacini, *The Cunning of modern Religious Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 99,, 100.
[25] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A816/B844, p. 683.
[26] Ibid., A817/B845, p. 683.
[27] Ibid., A818/B846, p. 683-4.

object to other things," Kant notes, "but only that of an idea to concepts, and as to the existence of a being of such preeminent excellence it leaves us in complete ignorance."[28] He ridicules this use of an ideal "being of beings" as "a mere fiction" for which "we have no warrant," precisely because "none of the consequences flowing from such an ideal have any bearing, nor even the least influence, on the thoroughgoing determination of things in general, on behalf of which alone the idea was necessary."[29] The lack of any synthesis between this transcendental God-concept and objective, empirical reality is also the basis for Kant's dismissal of both the classical ontological and cosmological proofs for God's existence.[30] So too does Kant fault what he calls "physico-theology" (natural theology, or the design argument) for its arguments by analogy between the intricacy and elegance of the universe and divine omnipotence. Such analogies, Kant asserts, are offered without any determinate understanding of the proportion upon which a comparison between the finite universe and infinite deity is predicated.[31]

The failure of speculative theology ultimately redounds to its lack of synthetic clarity: "it is entirely impossible to go from a concept by itself out beyond it and, without following its empirical connection...to attain to the discovery of new objects and transcendent beings."[32] Kant concludes that speculative theology can offer no positive account of any ultimate reality, but only provides a negative, regulative limit, constraining reason to seek out divinity elsewhere within its domain. Later thinkers and enthusiasts of the truth

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[28] Ibid., A579/B607, p. 557.
[29] Ibid., A580/B608, p. 558.
[30] Cf. Ibid., A615-20/B643-8, pp. 575-8.
[31] Ibid., A628/B656, p. 582.
[32] Ibid., A639/B667, p. 588.

challenge would come to rely upon Kant's critique of speculative theology to argue for the irrationality of traditional theistic claims.

Kant's theological conclusions are not dogmatic in any concrete, empirical sense. Theological claims do not pick an object that can be cognized according to the proper functioning of reason. Rather, Kant's understanding of the "inner practical necessity" of moral theology is that it expresses how practical reason is operative for itself. "So far as practical reason has the right to lead us," Kant affirms, "we will not hold actions to be obligatory because they are God's commands, but will rather regard them as divine commands because we are internally obligated to them."[33] Rather than establish a "theological morality," Kant's philosophy of religion emphasizes how the very nature of morality indicates a certain kind of theological orientation.

Kant elaborates these points in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In the preface to this work, Kant picks up where he left off in the *Critique*, writing that "On its own behalf morality in no way needs religion (whether objectively, regarding willing, or subjectively, regarding capability) but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason." Analytically speaking, morality is a self-contained system of laws justifying itself. However, insofar as its subjective manifestation in free rational agents is contingent upon the setting of objective ends, "it cannot be a matter of indifference to reason how to answer the question, *What is then the result of this right conduct of ours*?" The answer to this question, as we have already seen, leads reason to the ideal of the moral

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[33] Ibid., A819/B847, p. 684.

world, which serves as the ultimate *telos* of moral action. "Morality thus inevitably leads to religion," Kant infers; "through religion it extends itself to the idea of a mighty moral lawgiver outside the human being, in whose will the ultimate end (of the creation of the world) is what can and at the same ought to be the ultimate human end."[34] So religion is the practical vehicle for the propagation of universal, rational morality in history.

Picking up his criticism of speculative theology, Kant writes that theoretical statements "regarding the mysteries of divine nature...must eventually be transformed into moral concepts if they are to become intelligible to everyone."[35] The moral quality of religion is its defining objective feature; so, too, is its subjective character for individual people: "*Religion* is (subjectively considered) the recognition of all our duties as divine commands."[36] Whether considering the subjective character of various historical religious faiths or articulating the objective concept of pure rational religion, for Kant, a critical, philosophical doctrine of religion is always a matter for practical reason.

In *Religion*, Kant articulates distinctions between "*religion of rogation* (of mere cult) and *moral religion*, i.e. the religion of *good life-conduct*;"[37] between "*merely statutory*" divine commandments and "*purely moral* laws;"[38] between the "several kinds of *faith*" and the "only *one* (true) *religion*;"[39] between

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[34] Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 6:3-6, pp. 57-60.
[35] Ibid., 6:14, p. 65
[36] Ibid., 6:154, p. 177.
[37] Ibid., 6:51, p. 95.
[38] Ibid., 6:104, p. 137.
[39] Ibid., 6:108, p. 140.

"*revealed* religion" and "*natural religion*;"[40] and between employing "*means of grace*" in "*fetish-faith*" and "true (moral) service to God…a *service of the heart*."[41] In each case, the former term indicates an instance where religion has stepped beyond the bounds of critical practical reason. The latter terms indicate the positive standard for religious claims, based upon practical reason and the pure standard of morality. There is no theoretical or speculative "truth" to be had in religion; the only truths of religion are moral duties.

This is especially evident in the distinction between *revealed* and *natural* religion. Natural religion is grounded in the systematic practical reasoning of rational beings, whereas revealed religion, with its historically and geographically contingent statutory practices and doctrines, operates purely in the empirical realm and gives rise to all sorts of speculative claims. Kant differentiates the "Christian *religion*" from the "Christian *faith*" along these lines, arguing that "Neither side can stand in the Christian church on its own, separated from the other." The doctrinal organization of the visible church "cannot by any means begin with an *unconditional faith* in revealed propositions (of themselves hidden to reason) and then have erudite cognition follow behind."[42] In light of the modern need for such "erudite cognition," Kant concludes that "universal human reason must be recognized and honored as the supreme commanding principle" of Christianity, if it is to be a universal, natural religion (he believes it can be such). At the same time, "the doctrine of revelation…must be cherished and cultivated as a mere means, though a most precious one, for giving meaning,

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[40] Ibid., 6:154 p. 177.
[41] Ibid., 6:192-3, pp. 208-9.
[42] Ibid., 6:164, p. 185.

diffusion, and continuity to natural religion even among the ignorant."[43] In this way, the evaluation of religious experience becomes a matter of distinguishing the means of meaning-making, diffusion, and continuity "among the ignorant" to the one, true, natural, and moral religion. To the extent that religious practices overly rely upon revelatory facts or demand cultic service unrelated to the moral maxims given by pure practical reason, such a faith can be considered a degenerate form of religion. On the other hand, if a religious community is governed first by practical reason, and only secondarily by the revelatory facts that fill out the concrete aspects of morality in a given historical moment or context, then Kant considers it authentic religion. Once again, Kant's emphasis upon the *practical* character of genuine religious knowledge and criticism of speculative, metaphysical, or dogmatic historical claims about religious phenomena resonates in the truth challenge's skepticism about the veracity of religious claims and explanations. The truth challenge holds that religious claims about the nature of the world are untrue. If religion is purely a matter of practical reason, this lends further credence to the assertion that religion has no business making factual or empirical claims about natural phenomena.

In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant defends his conclusions in *Religion* against the charge that he was making a mockery of German piety. He insists that his philosophic treatment of religious matters did not demean the common religiosity of Germany. "I make no *appraisal* of Christianity," he writes; "it is only natural religion that I appraise."[44] As a philosophic investigation of religion,

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[43] Ibid., 6:165, p. 186.
[44] Ibid., 7:8, p. 241.

Kant claims that his book passes no judgments upon specifically *Christian* dogma. This defense is somewhat disingenuous, however, since *Religion* contains a philosophical doctrine for religion in general, which contains implications for lived Christian experience. Kant explains in the preface to the second edition of *Religion* that he was merely seeking to show that a "pure *rational system* of religion" could be found within the "*historical system*" of Christianity, such that "we shall be able to say that between reason and Scripture there is not only compatibility but also unity, so that whoever follows the one (under the guidance of moral concepts) will not fail to come across the other as well."[45] This apology for rationalism (and its appearance of impiety) subordinates the means of religious experience to its essentially moral ends.[46]

In so doing, Kant recalls the place of the philosophy of religion in the canon of pure reason; it is the answer to the question "What may I hope?" For Kant, religion names that aspect of rational experience in which the maxims of pure practical reason are synthesized into the concrete concept of the moral world and its omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and eternal overseer. Religion names both the means *and* the ends of this synthesis. For the most part, this takes place within the domain of practical reason. Consequently, Kant's philosophy of religion can be seen to fall in for critique for reducing religion to morality.

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[45] Ibid., 6:112, p. 64.

[46] Kant's view of Christianity was not wholly negative; as Gary Dorrien points out in *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2012) Kant thought that "the Christian idea" that "a God-like human prototype might lift human beings to holiness by descending into their life and providing a perfect moral example" was a worthy explanation and propaedeutic for grasping the possibility of realizing morality in one's life (Dorrien, p. 52). Kant's strongest critiques of religion were directed against what he saw as the superfluous ritualistic trappings attached to the essential Christian idea in his day (when pietism was a powerful cultural force in his native Prussia).

As I pointed out in chapter two, describing religion purely in terms of morality, or as a form of aesthetic experience diminishes its uniqueness. By subsuming religion under another category, it no longer constitutes a distinct and independent domain. Reducing religion to form of morality or aesthetic experience clears the way for the meaning challenge, and its claim that religion is an unnecessary or superfluous addendum. As was discussed in chapter one, the meaning challenge is a kind of extension of the consequences challenge, in that it claims that religion is not necessary for the possibility of a rational morality: that is, one can be "good without God." The challenge lies in explaining or justifying the unique and necessary role of religion in experience. If religion is only significant insofar as it contributes to morality, and morality can be conceived *without* religion, then it does become superfluous. This is not the case in Kant's philosophy, since Kant is explicit that religion *does* play an important role in the canon of pure reason. However, by subsuming religion under purely practical consideration, Kant's take on religion represents a crucial first step towards treating religion as superfluous and unnecessary.

This reduction seems to appear in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* as well. In an appendix to the final section on teleology, Kant discusses the difference between a theology grounded in a teleological interpretation of nature (a la Aquinas's fourth demonstration of God's existence in the *Summa Theologiae*)[47] and that of a teleology of morality. While Kant commends "physicotheology" for attributing to God "many of the important properties that

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[47] See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.2.3co.

are requisite for the establishment of a nature corresponding to the greatest possible ends, but not all of them," he concludes that what accounts for this attribution is not some force of nature. The *teloi* found in the natural world are various, and have varying degrees of generality and capaciousness in what they account for. However, the final *telos* of nature itself—the "Highest Good"—cannot be accounted for in the same way these many *teloi* can (i.e. empirically). The end of nature physicotheology seeks "lies in us *a priori*...resting on a very different use of reason (its practical use), which drives us to amplify physical teleology's defective representation of the original ground of the ends of nature into the concept of a deity."[48] In this way, the teleology of nature is tied up with the teleology of morality.

Physicotheology, when it stakes a claim to God's necessary existence, oversteps into the domain of moral theology. At the same time, to claim that the Highest Good of moral theology is the same as the Highest Good of nature indicates what Adina Davidovich describes as the "frightening possibility that a philosophy of history might be implied according to which the Highest Good will be realized in history irrespective of the moral decisions of human agents."[49] Kant concludes that "If one asks why it is so important to us to have a theology at all, then it becomes clear that it is not necessary for the expansion or improvement of our knowledge of nature and, in general, for any sort of theory, but is necessary in a subjective respect strictly for religion, i.e., for the practical, that is, the moral

[48] Kant, *Critique of Pure Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 5:438, p. 305.
[49] Adina Davidovich, *Religion as a Province of Meaning: The Kantian Foundations of Modern Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 118.

use of reason."[50] In the closing lines of the appendix, he reaffirms that morality is founded upon *a priori* grounds for the possibility of reason (i.e. freedom), rather than some "divine spark" or revelation. It is possible to be good without God—but only so far. The teleological quality of morality taken to its logical extreme—the Highest Good that proves itself necessary to allow for the judgment of vice and virtue in accordance with the teleology of history—indicates that "The final purpose that morality imposes upon us cannot exist without theology."[51]

From this, it appears that for Kant, religion is simply another way of talking about moral duty. It is different from the more run-of-the-mill notion of moral duty, however, because duty to God (the highest moral being, whose existence is the condition for the possibility of teleological morality itself) involves an experience of the sublime. "Sublimity is not contained in anything in nature, but only in our mind, insofar as we can become conscious of being superior to nature within us and thus also to nature outside us."[52] In religion, reverence for God as the transcendent, morally perfect being *and* the *telos* of nature/history begets a feeling of the sublime: namely, an uncanny (and somewhat unpleasant) sense of the insufficiency of the understanding and even the imagination to account for the *object* of religious worship, even as aesthetic judgment, in its push to comprehend the end to which religion calls, enables a kind of pleasure and joy.

Kant goes on to explain that, insofar as its object can only be comprehended as sublime, religion affirms not only the moral perfection of God,

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[50] Ibid., 5:482, p. 344.
[51] Ibid., 5:484, p. 346.
[52] Ibid., 5:264, p. 147.

but also "the capacity that is placed within us for judging nature without fear and thinking of our vocation as sublime in comparison with it."[53] Hence, there is an inscrutable excess that Kant calls "sublime" that is "found in our own mind" that is pertinent to religion.[54] In religion, this excess is experienced in exercising one's freedom towards the *telos* of morality, which passes beyond the mechanical workings of the natural world.

Davidovich clarifies the meaning of this conclusion by describing this experience as a "reflective reference to the…supersensible substrate,"[55] providing for the unity of reason and nature that can only be appreciated through the power of judgment. She indicates that what is at stake in the Third *Critique* is not the primacy of practical reason, but rather the unity of theoretical and practical reason in *judgment*, and, indeed, the possibility of the unity of reason and nature in *theology*.

> Only the reflective possibility of the unity of nature and rational purpose enables us to pass moral judgment on historical events, an ability that, in turn, allows us to hope for an ultimate attainment of the historical ideal of the Highest Good…The interests of Reason, which motivate its functions as Theoretical and as Practical, can only be satisfied through contemplation of the worlds of nature and of freedom in light of the idea of a universe purposively ordered by a Reason that transcends our discursive

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[53] Ibid., 5:264, pp. 147-8
[54] Ibid., 5:261, p. 145.
[55] Davidovich, *Religion*, pp. 66,70.

limitations. The interests of Reason lead us then to contemplate the world
as a divine creation embodying a moral purpose.[56]

Kant concludes in the *Critique* that "**moral** teleology makes good the defect of
physical teleology, and first establishes a **theology**."[57] By theology, however,
Kant does not mean to indicate "knowledge" of God. Rather, theology "provides
moral agents a principle from which they can contemplate spatio-temporal
events as purposive…Armed with the reflective principle, moral agents have the
means to judge whether and to what extent history progresses towards the reality
of the Kingdom of God on earth"[58]—an idea Kant develops more concretely in
Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason.

Kant's philosophy of religion begins in the consideration of the function of
practical reason and the contemplation of the highest moral good, but its
consummation lies in the teleological unity of freedom and nature that provides
for the possibility of reflection upon the hope of perfecting moral duty—that is,
the "coming of the Kingdom of God." The Kingdom, however, is not Augustine's
City of God or the apocalyptic New Jerusalem of Christian Revelation. It is rather
the realization of freedom and morality, the revelation of the spirit of
Enlightenment, which Kant famously describes as "the human being's
emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity, primarily in terms of *religious
matters*."[59] Kant's critical project was never merely constrained to reigning in

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[56] Ibid., p. 134.
[57] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:444, p. 310.
[58] Davidovich, *Religion*, p. 121.
[59] Kant, "Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" in *Toward Perpetual Peace and
Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld, trans. David L. Colclasure
(New Haven: Yale UP, 2006), p. 22.

speculation and correcting the overreaches of reason. His philosophy of religion reflects a shared skepticism with Hume of natural theology and speculative metaphysics. But it is finally about liberating what he calls "natural religion" from the historical and cultural encumbrances that distort it, to make explicit the reflective conditions for the possibility of realizing a just and moral human society on earth, as it is in heaven. Thus, Kant's philosophy of religion parsed out the limits of essentialism and skepticism that characterize modern philosophy of religion. At the same time, Kant also indicated how religion provides a space for synthesizing the speculative, practical, and historical aims of human beings, all for the sake of providing a means of judging the progress of humankind toward its emancipation into a more just, cosmopolitan society.

Post-Kantian Philosophy of Religion: Schleiermacher and Hegel

Insofar as Kant was able to synthesize the insights of Hume and Rousseau in his criticism of speculative theology and advocacy for seeing religion as the site for the expression of the Highest Good in light of the power of judgment, his philosophy of religion is representative of the spirit of modern philosophy more generally. Traditional religion, associated as it was with ritual and institutional accretions came under sharp critique in the modern period, even as philosophers and theologians sought to extract a "pure," "natural" form of religion. As Pacini argues in *The Cunning of Modern Religious Thought*,[60] the modern age is often characterized "as apostate, as secular, and as ahistorical." "The modern outlook,"

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[60] David Pacini, *The Cunning of modern Religious Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).

he goes on to say, "appeared not only as the abandonment of religious faith but also as a movement into the darkness in which religious presence progressively dissolves."[61] Pacini concludes that in modernity, religion does not disappear, as those who endorse the secularist thesis assume. "Religious forms" are instead "disguised" and "insinuate themselves into more fundamental levels of experience, where they survive."[62] The "cunning" of modern religion involved slipping out unnoticed from the institutional superstructure of pre-modern Western civilization into the cultural infrastructure of modernity. This attempt at a seamless transition is especially evident in Kant, who both shook up the traditional doctrines of Christianity with his reconstruction of religion in terms of morality and the teleology of history, even as he tried to toe the line and avoid censure from the pietist Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm II.[63]

Seeing Kant's philosophy of religion as paradigmatic of how philosophers approached religion in the modern period helps to make sense of the challenges, reinterpretations, disagreements, and general intellectual trajectory of philosophy of religion into the 19th century. Gary Dorrien remarks in *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit* that Kant "had barely a moment in the sun by himself…The thinkers that boosted him to prominence were adamant critics of his idealism and scholasticism. He had not even finished his third *Critique* when post-Kantian idealism began to be conjured."[64] Kant's hyper-rational idealism

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[61] Ibid., pp. 11-12.
[62] Ibid., p. 3.
[63] His efforts were unsuccessful; after *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant took a hiatus from writing explicitly about religion until after Friedrich's death. See Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p. 61.
[64] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p. 84.

appeared in the rich milieu of late-18th century German philosophy, where thinkers of Romanticism and Pietism offered significant and influential works that would also shape different post-Kantian philosophies of religion.

These philosophies fall along two general lines: one that shows the influence and admixture of romanticism, and the other that seeks to extend Kant's synthesis of religion and rationality. The former line can be traced in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose 1799 treatise *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*[65] was a refutation of rationalist attempts to monopolize the meaning of religiosity. The latter trajectory of modern philosophy of religion passes through the work of Fichte to Hegel, who sought to correct the missteps of his predecessors and temper what he saw as "Romantic excesses"[66] in Schleiermacher's description or religion. He accomplished this by undermining the assumption of a firm boundary between reason and faith by claiming that these two seeming-opposites both issue from an original unity in spirit [*Geist*]. Along with Schleiermacher, Hegel read Kant as relegating religion to the domain of morality in a reductive way. Hegel sought to rehabilitate the teleological aspect of religion, arguing that religion must ultimately be an expression of the truth of the world as a whole, not just the moral order of an enlightened human society. In so doing, Hegel collapsed philosophy and religion into the logical and historical unfolding of Spirit (*Geist*) in the world.

Unlike Hegel, who broke off his theological education before he became a minister, Schleiermacher was a pastor and theologian by trade. When he

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[65] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958).
[66] Gary Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p. 176.

published *On Religion*, he was working as a chaplain at Berlin's main hospital, even as he spent his free time associating with the romanticist intelligentsia, and particularly his friends Arthur Schlegel and Henriette Merz.[67] Schleiermacher saw himself as someone on the outside of modernity, looking in with a sympathetic but critical eye. His book was, after all, addressed to "the cultured detractors of religion,"[68] who, despite Kant's assurances to the contrary, believed they could adopt a rational and moral Kantianism without religion. The specific target of his critique in the first speech ("Defense") was Kant's claim that morality *inevitably* leads to religion. On the contrary, Schleiermacher points out that "From of old faith has not been every man's affair...Now especially the life of cultivated people is far from anything that might have even a resemblance of religion."[69] Schleiermacher is willing to grant that morality is of universal concern to humankind. But he also asserts that religion brings something new to the table, something that cannot be reduced to a mere logical extension of morality. In Schleiermacher's late 18th century European context, the view that the advance of enlightenment reason implied the marginalization and ultimate irrelevance of religion was ascendant. Rather than make a fundamentalist appeal to "old time religion," Schleiermacher sought to answer enlightened agnostics on their own terms.

Schleiermacher begins by claiming that religion is only superficially understood by the dogmatic moral commandments and conclusions about divine providence of a perfectly moral world and immortal life (which Kant took to be

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[67] Ibid., pp. 89-90.
[68] Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, p. 1.
[69] Ibid.

the objects of human hope and the necessary extension of morality to its limits).

Metaphysical argumentation (i.e. speculative theology) *as well as* Kantian moral

reasoning are dogmatically rational: thinkers in this vein "believe that the

salvation of the world and the light of wisdom are to be found in a new vesture of

formulas, or a new arrangement of ingenious proofs." Such philosophical

doctrines of religion aim too high, Schleiermacher claims, either inadvertently

making religion superfluous in the attempt to make it hyper-rational, or thickly

veiling genuine religion with theoretical abstractions, completely hiding its

significance for human life. Schleiermacher avers that "Religion is as far

removed, by its whole nature, from all that is systematic as philosophy is

naturally disposed to it."[70] On this view, by giving morality pride of place in the

canon of reason, Kant, whether intentionally or not, had already indicated

religion's obsolescence.

Schleiermacher's indictment of hyper-rational systematicity may have

come off as a merely polemical defense of piety against Deism and Rationalist

agnosticism had he not proceeded to offer an alternative approach of his own.

"Religion is of such a sort and is so rare, that whoever utters anything of it, must

necessarily have had it," he writes: "I ask, therefore, that you turn from

everything usually reckoned religion, and fix your regard on the inward emotions

and dispositions, as all utterances and acts of inspired men direct."[71] Rather than

a metaphysical or moral grounding for religion, Schleiermacher appeals directly

to a particular kind of "religious experience." The modern rationalist must not

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[70] Ibid., p. 17.
[71] Ibid., pp. 9, 17.

neglect the scientific analysis of experience. Those who have dodged this analysis

by focusing upon the dogmatic, metaphysical aspects of religion must at least ask

the question "What is genuine religious experience?" before handing down a final

verdict concerning the nature of piety. A scientific appreciation for religion can be

cultivated in this way; however, the pious character is something one either has

or does not. Schleiermacher is not willing to allow, as Kant does, that religion can

be reached through an increase of rational rigor—i.e. in following morality to its

speculative limit. It must instead spring from a source independent of morality

and theoretical speculation. Religious experience must have its own primordial

basis.

Why is religion so highly prized, after all? Is it because religion is the

rational site of moral reason's perfection? This view relegates the moral aspect of

religion to the eschaton. In Kant's moral teleological view, the moral world is

ultimately something to be hoped for, but never realized in this life. So religion is

not necessary for morality (i.e. for acting morally), but rather provides a useful

teleological propaedeutic.[72] Schleiermacher contends that "To recommend

[religion] merely as an accessory is too unimportant. An imaginary praise that

vanishes on closer contemplation, cannot avail anything going about with higher

pretensions."[73] Religion is superfluous, Schleiermacher concludes, if it is

construed solely as a pragmatic extension of morality.[74] If religion is to stand on

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[72] Kant essentially says as much in the preface to *Religion*: "on its own behalf morality in no way needs religion (whether objectively, as regards willing, or subjectively, as regards capability) but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason" (6:3, p. 33).
[73] Ibid., p. 21.
[74] Schleiermacher's argument can be analogized by thinking of the difference between the academic grading criteria for an A and an A+. If an A is meant to indicate excellence, presumably the highest praise one can give a student, then what meaning does the A+ have? It is essentially a

its own as a necessary feature of human experience, it must have "a province of its own in the mind…in which it has unlimited sway," so that "it is worthy to animate most profoundly the noblest and best and to be fully accepted and known by them."[75] On this view, for religion to be religion, it must be rooted in a particular kind of aesthetic experience, one that transcends the boundaries of pure practical reason. Religion is more than a useful accessory to moral reasoning, dependent for its meaning upon the requirements of the wider rational system. Religious experience is engendered autonomously from morality or theoretical reason, depending only upon the unique capacity for a certain kind of aesthetic activity, which Schleiermacher lays out in the speeches that follow.

The activity associated with religious experience, according to Schleiermacher, is *piety*. Piety cannot be reduced to wisdom, for "Quantity of knowledge is not quantity of piety."[76] Neither can it be reduced to morality, for "morality always shows itself as manipulating, as self-controlling" on the basis of "the consciousness of freedom." Piety, on the other hand, "has also a passive side," appearing "as a surrender, a submission to be moved by the Whole that stands over against man."[77] There is no uncritically passive feature of rationality in modern, subjective epistemology. The world-as-whole is only constituted as such by active subjectivity; reason provides the appearance of objective necessity, but only on the logical strength of a critique of rational subjects. The dependent,

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tautology: "excellent excellence." Similarly, if morality is capable of achieving excellence independent of religion, what significance does religion add? It can only add value if it is a different *kind* of value.
[75] Schleiermacher, *On Religion*, p. 21.
[76] Ibid., p. 35.
[77] Ibid., p. 37.

passive quality of piety indicates the nature of religion as a non-moral

affectation, rather than an articulate, proprietary intuition that may be folded

into a rational schema. "Religion is not knowledge and science, either of the

world or of God," Schleiermacher explains. "Without being knowledge, it

recognizes knowledge and science. In itself, it is an affection, a revelation of the

Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God."[78]Because religion

generates no knowledge, one cannot have *false* piety: only disingenuous piety. On

Schleiermacher's view, religion bakes no rational bread, so to speak. Yet insofar

as "true religion is sense and taste for the Infinite,"[79] piety is the basis for

knowledge, knowledge which goes beyond what is analytically comprehensible to

grasp the indeterminacy of experience as a whole. Piety begins in the

acknowledgement that in experience, there is some indeterminate ground to be

surveyed in the first place.

Rationalists often refer to this infinite and indeterminate wellspring of

activity as the source and means for art and culture. Schleiermacher argues,

however, that the capacity for human beings to be *both* scientific and artistic rests

in the primordial unity of the two in religious experience. "Only in an interchange

of knowing and activity can your life consist."[80] Genuine human living must be

able to draw upon this synthetic core of art and science, activity and passivity,

investigation and contemplation, self-identification and self-sublimation.

Religion names this process of the emergence of the living subject. It is not a

mere extension of "the pure impulse to know," but rather "to take up into our

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[78] Ibid., p. 36.
[79] Ibid., p. 39.
[80] Ibid., p. 45.

lives and to submit to be swayed by them, each of these influences and their consequent emotions, not by themselves but as a part of the Whole...Anything beyond this, any effort to penetrate into the nature and substance of things is no longer religion, but seeks to be a science of some sort." "Religion is certainly a system," Schleiermacher concludes, but the interconnection of its concepts is not a rational one. It is the living synthesis of finitude with the Infinite world-ground manifested through piety.[81]

A science of religion can elaborate the many ways in which this process expresses itself.[82] It is hardly scientific in the Kantian sense, though, in that the systematic character of reason is its disregard of systematization. Religion "knows nothing of deducing and connecting. There is no single fact in it that can be called original and chief."[83] though there are infinite exemplary facts which may be documented. Each of these instances of religious feeling may be elaborated into religious teachings: "Whence do those dogmas and doctrines come that many consider the essence of religion? ...The conceptions that underlie these propositions are, like your conceptions from experience, nothing but general expressions for definite feelings. They are not necessary for religion itself...but reflection requires and creates them."[84]The deductive, reflective activities of reason are always secondary to experience. This is especially true of

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[81] Ibid., pp. 49-50.
[82] Schleiermacher notes that religion "fashions itself with endless variety, down even to the single personality" (p. 51). The pious individual "must be conscious that his religion is only part of the whole; that about the same circumstances there may be views and sentiments quite different from his, yet just as pious" (p. 54). This is the main topic for the fifth speech, "The Religions" (pp. 210-53).
[83] Ibid., p. 53.
[84] Ibid., p. 87.

religious experience, Schleiermacher claims, because it is the most fundamental, most infinitely determinable wellspring for thought. Religious experience illuminates the infinite ground of possibility for reason and culture: "The sum total of religion is to feel that, in its highest unity, all that moves us in feeling is one."[85]

Philosophy of religion must not be confused with religion itself. One does not grow more religious through systematic understanding; one cannot be "taught" via practical reason to be pious.[86] Morality is not piety, though the latter is essentially determinative of whether or not the former will ever occasion genuine human living. Hence, Schleiermacher advises, "While man does nothing *from* religion, he should do everything *with* religion."[87]That is, religion's affective openness to genuine reality must be neither neglected nor dismissed outright as a condition for rational activity.

The critical evaluative work of a philosophy of religion, then, is to ensure that the articulation of religious experience is *appropriately religious*, not whether its principles are universally valid, true, or moral. Schleiermacher's philosophy of religion is meant to remove pretensions to systematic rigor when it

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[85] Ibid., p. 49-50.

[86] "Instruction in religion," Scheleiermacher writes in the third speech on "The Cultivation of Religion," "meaning that piety itself is teachable, is absurd and unmeaning. Our opinions and doctrines we can indeed communicate, if we have words and our hearers have the comprehending, imagining power of the understanding. But we know very well that those things are only the shadows of our religious emotions, and if our pupils do not share our emotions, even though they do understand the thought, they have no possession that can truly repay their toil" (p. 122). The fanatical evangelism of rationalism endangers religion not by replacing it with a systematic understanding of the world, but by convincing the pious that this is what religion is too. "The good people believe that their own activity is everything and exhausts the task of humanity, and that, if all would do what they do, they would require no sense for anything except for action" (p. 129). As we have already seen, Schleiermacher avers that piety cannot be reduced to morality: its fundamental activity is passive contemplation of the relation of the Infinite and finite within human life.

[87] Ibid., p. 59, emphasis added.

comes to the religious aspect of experience. There will be no universal *concept*

that a philosophy of religion can come to, for religious experience is irreducibly

plural. "Nothing is more irreligious than to demand general uniformity in

mankind,"[88] Schleiermacher concludes in the closing moments of his treatise.

Philosophy cannot succeed in generating a common wisdom of religious truth

that is any more lasting or extensive than a single moment of religious

experience.

The study of religion must therefore consist in the empirical description of

these moments, so that in disseminating one example of piety or another, each

person may seek "religion in the form best fitted to awake the germ that lies

asleep in him" (p. 212).[89] Schleiermacher's critical philosophy of religion consists

entirely in identifying the speculative overreaches of reason with regard to

religious experience. In expanding the domain of experience to include this

peculiar and primordial "affection," he has not limited reason "to make room for

faith," but has rather put faith into its proper place, beyond the clutching grasp of

rationalism.[90]

Schleiermacher's decision, however, to give up on the very idea of building

a positive "philosophy of religion" of any kind seemed to Hegel at least to betray

the aims of philosophy of religion by ceding its essential, determinative function

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[88] Ibid., p. 252.

[89] In the fourth speech (on "Associating in Religion"), Schleiermacher seems dubious of any attempt to communicate the significance of religious experience outside of rather small, insular community. Early attempts at religious ethnographies evinced the kind of prejudgments about the character of religion that Schleiermacher warns against. If there is to be a scientific understanding of religion, it should be appropriated limited to the description of a small, inter-related set of religious experiences (Cf. pp. 150-5).

[90] In this, Schleiermacher finds an unlikely bedfellow in Hume, who similarly asserts that religion is what "subverts all understanding"—the domain of the miraculous and unknowable.

to the non-rational domain.[91] In other words, Schleiermacher had sacrificed the possibility of objective religious *knowledge* for the sake of articulating religious *meaning* in its purest sense.

On the contrary, Hegel avers in the introduction to his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* that "The object of religion as well as of philosophy is eternal truth in its objectivity, God and nothing but God, and the explication of God. Philosophy is not a wisdom of the world…but is knowledge of that which is eternal….Philosophy, therefore, only unfolds itself when it unfolds religion, and in unfolding itself, unfolds religion."[92] Both philosophy and religion have the same object: namely, the understanding of spirit, in which subjective knowledge ceases to be merely subjective, but becomes objective in the unfolding of the dialectic of recognition.

From early on in his life, according to Richard Kroner,[93] Hegel held that religion "should be a living power…should be not otherworldly but humane…[and] should appeal to the senses and natural emotions rather than the intellect."[94] This view (which was associated with a love for ancient Greek religion) was challenged by exposure to Kant's moral philosophy, and to his moral interpretation of the true nature of religion. Kroner claims that Hegel's

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[91] Dorrien notes that Hegel went out of his way to criticize Schleiermacher's systematic theology and description of Christian piety in the 1820s. This, in spite of the fact that there is a great deal the two share in common when it comes to their understanding of religion. Dorrien writes that "Hegel hated that Schleiermacher elevated piety over reason, the real source of his animus against him" while "Schleiermacher puzzled over Hegel's fixation with putting him down" (*Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p. 217.).

[92] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1, trans. R.F. Brown, Peter Hodgson, J.M Stewart, and H.S. Harris, ed. Peter Hodgson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 113.

[93] Richard Kroner, "Introduction: Hegel's Philosophical Development," in *Early Theological Writings*, by G.W.F. Hegel, ed. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) pp. 1-66.

[94] Ibid., pp. 3-4.

early theological writings, and particularly *The Spirit of Christianity* (1796)

culminated in the synthesis of these two competing views of religion (as highly

aesthetic and subjective on the one hand, as well as rational and moral on the

other). "It was an attempt to reconcile the ideal of Hellenic humanism with

Kantian moralism. This reconciliation, Hegel believed, was foreshadowed by the

message of Jesus."[95] That message was, essentially, that the divine is grasped

through love. In *Spirit of Christianity*, Hegel writes:

> In love, man has found himself in another. Since love is the unification of
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> life, it presupposes division, a development of life, a developed many-
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> sidedness to life. The more variegated the manifold in which life is alive,
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> the more places in which it can be reunified; the more places it can sense
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> itself, the deeper does love become.[96]

As early as 1796, the dialectical quality of being that will become what Hegel is

best known for is already present in his theological writing.

But he was not content to limit his arguments to a theological

presentation. His subsequent development of a proper philosophy of religion

grew out of his sense that "Philosophy is called upon to do what faith alone can

never achieve: the absolute reconciliation of absolute opposites…Only thus can

'the supreme totality rise in all its seriousness and out of its deepest ground…into

the joyous freedom of its true form.'"[97] This desire for "seriousness" and reaching

the "deepest ground" of the truth of being motivated Hegel to return to the

philosophy of religion again and again throughout his later works. This is

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[95] Ibid., pp. 10-11.
[96] Hegel, "Spirit of Christianity," in *Early Theological Writings*, pp. 278-9.
[97] Kroner, "Introduction," p. 38.

because, in the end, the "deepest ground" is shared by religion and philosophy, and is experienced in the life of the mind/spirit: "Human reason, human spiritual consciousness or consciousness of its own essence, *is* reason generally, is the divine within humanity."[98] This life is initially experienced subjectively via faith; it is an uncanny, emotional awareness of the true depth of reality. But Hegel concludes that, as with any initially uncanny experience, reason seeks to understand it. When it comes to understanding this particular kind of *religious* experience, nothing less than a full-blown speculative exposition of the dialect of Spirit's unfolding is required.

Hegel presents such an exposition in his lectures of 1824, claiming that "The concept of God…is the concept of the idea…the exposition of the philosophy of religion displays nothing but the development of the concept of the idea…as the absolute unity of the spiritual and natural."[99] In the exposition of the philosophy of religion, 'God' names the unity of the spiritual (that which has to do with the life of the mind) and the natural (what is experienced as Other). Philosophy of religion, then, comes to understand God insofar as it generates a concept adequate to the idea of such a unity. At the same time, religion properly speaking is "the self-consciousness of absolute spirit," which Hegel claims is not something different in kind from what philosophy of religion hits upon, but is merely a "diversity in form."[100] This diversity means that in religion, the connection of spirit and nature need not be fully explicated; it is experienced in a different way (i.e. via faith). This does not mean that it *cannot* be accounted for

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[98] Hegel, *Lectures*, p. 130.
[99] Ibid., pp. 324-5.
[100] Ibid., p. 333.

by reason: on the contrary, the unity of spirit and nature in the self-consciousness of absolute spirit—"what lies at the basis of faith"—"can only be apprehended speculatively."[101]

Though this seems like a great departure for Schleiermacher (and, indeed, from Kant as well), Dorrien points out that there is actually a great deal that Hegel's philosophy of religion shares in common with his pietist nemesis. "For Schleiermacher, to be absolutely dependent was to be freed from dependence on all finite things, exactly in the sense of Hegel's 'casting off all dependence and abandoning oneself in the absolute self.' Schleiermacher and Hegel had the same panentheist concept of how the world process operates and how God saves the world...In Content, though not in style, there was no difference between Hegel and Schleiermacher in this area."[102] The stylistic difference between the two—and what it indicates about what they understood the role and goal of philosophy of religion to be—is crucial. For Schleiermacher, he sought to maintain and even extend the critical project of Kant. By drawing strict boundaries around how religious experiences are affective and constitute a uniquely meaningful part of life, he sought to ensure that religion was not reduced to a superfluous "add-on" to morality. In so doing, Schleiermacher sought to explicate the grounds for theology, which he took to be completely distinct from theology. He considered the systematic conception of Christian piety expounded in his *Christian Faith*[103] to be thoroughly modern and in keeping with the spirit of the times. This was by

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[101] Ibid., p. 343.
[102] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p. 217.
[103] See Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 2 vols., trans. Catherine Kelsey, Terrence Tice, and Edward Lawler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

virtue of its philosophical underpinnings, he thought, even as it bore the outward marks of counter-modern or pre-modern traditionalism and dogmatism. Though Schleiermacher's theology was groundbreaking and proved influential, his work was open to attacks on both sides for being *too* modern and philosophical for pietists or *too* reliant upon an appeal to subjective, non-rational feeling for philosophers (like Hegel).

Hegel, on the other hand, saw the goal of philosophy of religion as inclusive rather than exclusive. Instead of taking philosophy of religion to be primarily concerned with the critical task of drawing clear and necessary boundaries, he sought to collapse the meaning of religion back into a single system of universal reason, understood as the movement of Spirit that is grasped by the mind in a way that goes beyond apprehension or feeling. This development built upon the Kantian insight about the transcendental unity of reason and experience, but it a way that construed the meaning and function of religion completely differently from Kant. For Hegel, religion comes under the domain and is even justified by reason, though not simply as a matter of morality or judgment (as in Kant). Rather, the truth of religion can be unfolded in philosophy through the use of speculative reason, because the truth of religion is the truth of Spirit itself.

Hegel sought to overcome the limits of Kantian/Fichtean idealism by returning reason (via Spirit) into a determinate and dynamic integration with the world. As is evident both in his description of various world religions in *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel was about as well-informed about the different concrete practices of religions

around the world as a scholar in Germany could be at the time. This emphasis

upon including history in the dialectical unfolding of spirit reflected the modern

emphasis upon observational rationality and historical criticism. It would become

pivotal for the so-called "Left Hegelians" who succeeded Hegel, as well as in

Marx's response to Hegel's idealism. At the same time, however, the combination

of all of these in the dialectic of spirit, in Dorrien's words, "solved the clash of

idealism by taking absolute idealism as far as possible: Everything is an

appearance of the idea, the structure of reality in general."[104] Religion—and

Christianity in particular, by virtue of its centering *love*, which encapsulates the

dialectical dimensions of self-consciousness[105]—is another expression of that

same integration of idea and concrete reality through Spirit.

Lest one be confused by this equivalence, Hegel affirmed that religion is

"distinct and indispensable,"[106] because "Religion is for everyone. It is not

philosophy, which is not for everyone. Religion is the manner and mode by which

all human beings become conscious of truth for themselves."[107] Based upon

comments along these lines in an unpublished fragment from around 1800,

Kroner claims that Hegel thought philosophy was "destined to replace religion" in

the unfolding of spirit in the modern/Enlightened age. This is because

"Philosophy is called upon to do what faith can never achieve: the absolute

reconciliation of absolute opposites. Speculation must comprehend 'the absolute

suffering.'"[108] In the end, philosophical speculation that uncovers the fraught

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[104] Dorrien, *Kantian Reason and Hegelian Spirit*, p. 17.
[105] See note 98, above.
[106] Ibid., p. 223.
[107] Hegel, *Lectures*, p. 180.
[108] Kroner, "Introduction," p. 38.

reality of absolute idealism provides the basis for a response to the problem of suffering. In absolute reality, suffering does not cease to be suffering, but it is "sublimated" in the synthesis of the overall Idea of reality—or, to put it in religious terms, in the person of God.

Coming to self-consciousness in religion is a speculative matter that is not simply mystical union with the divine. Such a pure, immediate union is not sufficient to rise to the level of consciousness and knowledge; this requires difference. "The religious relationship is unification," Hegel explains in the *Lectures*: "but it contains the power of judgment [*die Kraft des Urteils*]."[109] Hence, the realization of self-consciousness in religion comes about via encounters with what is absolutely and fundamentally other. These experiences are what religion is all about; hence, philosophy of religion is a matter of laying out the dialectical dynamics that undergird them, in order to arrive at a fuller understanding of "the supreme totality" of reality's "deepest ground."[110]

Conclusion

I have arrived at the point of being able to discuss how the dominant modes of philosophy of religion today both perpetuate and evade the various trajectories of modern philosophy of religion. So far, I have argued that Kant's philosophy of religion, though not central to his philosophical project, can be seen as both the point where the various lines of thought in early modern philosophy of religion (exemplified in this chapter by Cherbury, Hume, and

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[109] Hegel, *Lectures*, p. 218. Another translation renders *die Kraft de Urteils* as "the power of differentiation."
[110] Qtd. in Kroner, "Introduction, p. 38.

Rousseau) come together, as well as the point from which the significant trends and trajectories in philosophy of religion emanate into the 19th and 20th centuries.[111]

The Kantian legacy in philosophy of religion is threefold. First, Kant's philosophy of religion was *critical*, insofar as it aimed to impose limits upon what counts as genuine religious "knowledge." This is exemplified in the very title of his only major published work on the topic, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. On the one hand, this enabled the domain of secular knowledge to expand, and provided a model for Schleiermacher and others who came after him to appropriately differentiate "genuine" religious experience from other, non-religious experiences. On the other hand, Kant's critical idealism provided the impetus for Hegel's dialectical corrective to what he saw as the problematic subjectivism of Kant and Fichte. When it comes to the philosophy of religion, this meant building upon Kant's relation of religion to the power of judgment,[112] and reincorporating the speculative dimension of reason, such that religion was not bound to the merely practical, but could provide for true knowledge of reality.

This trajectory of critique is significant for understanding the origins of the meaning and truth challenges. Marking the boundary between reason and faith, between what modes of belief can and cannot provide knowledge, or even

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[111] This latter claim echoes the assessment of Dorrien in *Kantian Spirit and Hegelian Reason*, where he argues that "every major [modern theological] option from Schleiermacher and Hegel, to Kierkegaard and David Friedrich Strauss, to Ritschl and Troeltsch, to Rashdall and Temple, to Tillich and Barth got its bearing by figuring its relationship to Kantian and post-Kantian ideas" (p. 11). While Dorrien's claim is about the development of modern *theology*, my concern here is the development of modern and post-modern philosophies of religion.

[112] For a discussion of the relation of Hegel and Kant's understanding of judgment and its role in Hegel's philosophical system see Allen Hance, "The Art of Nature: Hegel and the Critique of Judgment," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (December 2010), pp. 37-65.

between different kinds of knowledge (i.e. practical vs. theoretical) can be understood as a response to the skepticism of the modern period. As I mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the dialectic between skepticism and essentialism is crucial to understanding how the distinctions borne of skepticism become reified and taken as given by subsequent thinkers. It is for this reason that distinguishing between religion and science, faith and reason, is taken to be an important or significant task. It is also for this reason that the truth challenge can claim a firm philosophical ground upon which to deny the possibility of true religious knowledge. To deny this possibility also diminishes the significance of religion in modernity, when knowledge is taken to be an important mode of expressing power. This, in turn, contributes to the meaning challenge's claim that religion is superfluous or unnecessary.

Secondly, Kant's relegation of religion to the domain of morality and practical reason became a commonplace interpretation of the meaning of religion. (This is evident in several thinkers discussed in this essay, most notably A.J. Ayer and Stephen Jay Gould). Most importantly, this relegation both provides the basis for the consequences challenge (which, in part, challenges the assumption that religion can or ought to be associated with morality and moral behavior), and hamstrings philosophers of religion who accept this assumption when it comes to providing an independent justification for the value and necessity of religion for a meaningful life.

Lastly, Kant shared the modern concern with extracting a definite form of "natural religion" from the culturally laden, historical religions of the world. As Cavanaugh and Pacini point out, this desire for a transhistorical, transcultural

definition of religion is a peculiar feature of Western modernity, one that had

nefarious implications in the way Europeans interacted with other religious

cultures in the colonial period and post-colonial period, as well as caused the

religious aspect of modern thought to be overlooked or concealed from view.

This last feature of Kant's philosophy of religion comes to its fullest

fruition in Hegel's philosophy of religion. In the *Phenomenology*, as well as in the

Lectures, Hegel examines concrete examples of religion from around the world.

In doing so, Hegel's intention was not to catalogue or document the differences

and similarities of these different religions, but rather to speculatively arrive at

how the dialectic of Spirit unfolds in them. He presents a transhistorical,

transcultural definition of religion that is more than a mere definition, but an

expression of the truth of religion as a phenomenon, which is also an expression

of the truth of the totality of the world. Locating the truth of reality in religion

indicates religion's indispensable role in human existence and the generation of

genuine knowledge. This challenges the modern tendency to cordon religion off

as just one kind of cultural and historical phenomenon among many.

Hegel's system of absolute idealism and "ontotheology" came in for heavy

critique in the latter part of the 19th century, much of which called for a return to

a more critical, less speculative approach to the philosophy of religion. The

dominant trends of contemporary philosophy of religion emerged as part of this

counter-movement. This response took on a more properly early-modern and

Kantian cast, seeking to draw clear and firm boundaries around religious

experience and religious knowledge, as well as fall back upon observational

rationality (now tempered by two hundred years of critique and philosophical

intrigue, as well as augmented by advances in scientific methods and technologies). The subsequent developments of positivism and the linguistic turn created the conditions for analytic philosophy of religion.

Schleiermacher's aestheticized philosophy of religion lived on in the 19th century, mostly in the seminaries of Germany, but also in the work of Soren Kierkegaard (who was also importantly influenced by Hegel).[113] Schleiermacher's influence carried forward into the twentieth century, particularly in Rudolf Otto's *Concept of the Holy* (1917) and, to some extent, the religious philosophy of Paul Tillich. Schleiermacher exerted influence across the pond, as well, upon the thought of the Transcendentalists (particularly Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson) as well as liberal theologians Horace Bushnell and Walter Rauschenbusch.[114] Even if he was not often cited by philosophers into the twentieth century, his conception of religious feeling and its primarily aesthetic dimension became one of the defining features of post-modern theology and philosophy of religion, and traces of his thinking are evident in contemporary examples of continental philosophy of religion as well.

Most pertinent to this essay, Schleiermacher's claim that religion constitutes a unique "province in the mind" in which it holds "unlimited sway" is

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[113] See George Pattison, *Kierkegaard and the Theology of the Nineteenth Century: the Paradox and the 'Point of Contact'* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), pp. 5-29.

[114] See Katherine Faull, "Schleiermacher and Transcedentalist Truth-Telling," in *Schleiermacher's Influences on American Thought and Religious Life: 1835-1920*, ed. Jeffrey Wilcox, Terrence Tice, and Catherine Kelsey (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishers, 2013), pp. 293-321; David Haddorff, "Schleiermacher and Horace Bushnell," *Schleiermacher's Influence* (op. cit.), pp. 190-216; and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, "In Each the Work of All, and in All the Work of Each," in *Schleiermacher's Influence* (op. cit.), pp. 370-407.

an important early pushback against the meaning challenge and attempts to

subsume religion into morality or practical reason.

Chapter 4: A Postmodern Approach to the Truth and Meaning Challenges

The truth challenge—that religion is irrational, insofar as the basic tenets of theism are false—is motivated by a concern with what counts as knowledge in the 21st century Anglophone world. On the negative side, the truth challenge holds that religious claims have no rational justification, insofar as they lack confirming empirical evidence. Beyond this, claims to "religious knowledge" rely upon unique and privileged ways of knowing (for example, those described by functionalist philosophers of religion like Ferré) that hold within particular religious domains of discourse. This indicates, however, that religious knowledge is not really knowledge *per se*, because the logic that undergirds it—the set of ordering principles that provide the warrant for claiming religious beliefs are true—does not adhere to the same epistemic rules that govern the truth or falsity of claims in general. This "*in general*" is key to understanding where the "challenge" of the truth challenge lays. It is also what is at stake in a proper rejoinder from the perspective of a philosophy of religion.

As I indicated in Chapter 1, the truth challenge is motivated by a univocal conception of rationality: namely, that the logic of naturalistic empirical science constitutes the sole basis for warranted true beliefs (i.e. knowledge). In Chapter 2, I showed the affinity between this position and that of the logical positivists, taking A.J. Ayer as a representative case. At the same time, I showed how Wittgenstein's critique of the picture theory of meaning and his analysis of language in terms of "language games" troubles any claim to a universal logic. Quine's critique of the two dogmas of empiricism further indicated that the sense of propositions is only ever intelligible within a pre-existent vocabulary (i.e. a

primordial language system that provides rules for sense and meaning). The vocabularies and discursive frameworks of different language games (including that of religious discourse) constitute the "rules" governing how propositions have sense, as well as what kinds of propositions can have epistemic import. Thus, the functionalist approach to the philosophy of religion describes the internal logic of religious discourse, which (presumably) constitutes the conditions for the possibility of religious knowledge within that discursive domain.

However, this presumption—that the logic of a given domain of discourse constitutes the epistemic conditions for knowledge—involves a troubling leap from the description of linguistic phenomena to a normative claim about their epistemic import. This may be warranted within a limited domain of discourse; this seems to be Plantinga's argument in *Warranted Christian Belief*. At the same time, such a leap invites the charge of *relativism*, which is precisely what the truth challenge highlights in the first place. The question undergirding the truth challenge thus remains unanswered: is there such a thing as properly objective, truth-functional religious knowledge?

William Blackstone diagnoses this problem with the philosophical analysis of religious language in *The Problem of Religious Knowledge*.[1] "The problem," Blackstone claims, is that while philosophy of religion sets out to clarify the propositional content of religious beliefs and articulate the logic which governs them, there are no ready criteria for "deciding whether a particular use of words

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[1] William T. Blackstone, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge: The Impact of Contemporary Philosophical Analysis on the Question of Religious Knowledge* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963).

is proper or not, and whether it has factual significance or not" within a given discursive domain.[2] This is owing to the fact that "Sentences which perform a religious function...are of many kinds. They include descriptions, predictions, explanations, exclamations, exhortations, prayers, questions, ejaculations, blessings, historical statements, and autobiographical statements."[3] Some of these sentences, Blackstone goes on to say, are by definition unverifiable and/or unfalsifiable. Echoing Ayer, he concludes that given the epistemic criteria of verifiability and falsifiability, sentences of these varieties "not only do not constitute knowledge, but are also not cognitively meaningful."[4] "This conclusion does not imply that those beliefs or attitudes have no value in the lives of people," Blackstone goes on to say. It indicates, rather, that the question of whether or not there is such a thing as religious knowledge is based "upon *normative differences*"—that is, differences on "both the norm or standard for cognitivity and the norm or standard for knowledge."[5] Blackstone concludes that one may reject his conclusion about unfalsifiable/unverifiable religious sentences not constituting knowledge; however, in doing so, "the burden of providing and justifying an alternative account of cognitive meaning and an alternative set of criteria for knowledge must be assumed."[6]

The dominant modes of contemporary philosophy of religion take up this task of providing and justifying accounts of religious cognition and epistemic criteria, and in so doing, further the prospects of a philosophical rejoinder to the

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[2] Ibid., p. 1.
[3] Ibid., p. 166.
[4] Ibid., p. 167.
[5] Ibid., p. 168.
[6] Ibid.

truth challenge. Another group of contemporary philosophers of religion, however, critique the entire enterprise. These thinkers—whom I will refer to under the moniker of "continental philosophy of religion"—take the philosophical project of articulating criteria for religious knowledge as a misguided outgrowth of the techno-scientific rationality of the modern period. In arguing for a postmodern, deconstructive approach to the philosophy of religion, thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, Gianni Vattimo, and John Caputo challenge the paradigmatic focus of philosophers upon providing objective cognitive standards and epistemic criteria for religious knowledge. Such a focus mistakes the forest of religious phenomena for the trees of religious knowledge, as it were. Continental philosophers of religion aim to provide a corrective to what they see as the excesses of modern philosophy of religion.

Rather than descriptive or normative claims about what constitutes religious knowledge, continental philosophy of religion is a philosophical interpretation of religious phenomena grounded in a critique of metaphysics (or "ontotheology") and a hermeneutical/deconstructive method. This approach both grows out of and critiques patterns of thought highlighted in the previous chapter. Contemporary continental philosophers of religion can neither unequivocally accept nor indifferently ignore the inheritance and influence of modern thinking about religion. Only by deconstructing this mode of thought can philosophy of religion get back to a true understanding of the significance of religious phenomena. In so doing, continental philosophy of religion in general undermines and renders incoherent the truth challenge, just as Cavanaugh's postmodern dissection of the myth of religious violence undermined the

consequences challenge. At the same time, as we will see in the concluding part of the chapter, continental philosophy of religion provides philosophical resources for a rejoinder to the meaning challenge. Such resources have been noticeably lacking in the philosophical approaches examined up to this point.

Postmodernism in Contemporary Continental Philosophy of Religion

As characterized by Morny Joy in her introduction to *Continental Philosophy and Continental Philosophy of Religion*, contemporary continental philosophy is identifiable with a specific canon of authors, but also (and more importantly) by its deconstructive method of approaching philosophical problems characteristic of late modernity. In almost every aspect of the regnant paradigm of Anglo-American philosophy of religion—its emphases upon objectivity, neutrality, and rationality; its concern with vindicating religious concepts and arguments through logical analysis; its tendency to conflate Christianity with "religion"—Joy claims that continental philosophers intervene "to encourage philosophy of religion to recognize its shortcomings."[7]

John MacQuarrie further elaborates the contrasts between modern and postmodern philosophy of religion by claiming that the latter emphasizes subjectivity and particularity, rather than objectivity and universality. This leads to a subsequent emphasis upon the fragmentation of experience, in opposition to logical, social, and political structures that organize it into a totality.[8] The push

[7] Morny Joy, ed. *Continental Philosophy and Continental Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Springer, 2011), p. 6.
[8] John MacQuarrie, "Postmodernism in Philosophy of Religion and Theology," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 50, No. 1/3 (December 2001), pp. 9-11.

for objective, verifiable truth as the sole standard for rational knowledge is just such a totalizing move. Macquarrie writes that,

> There have been respectable thinkers who have claimed truth for their beliefs, but have acknowledged the difficulty or impossibility of providing objective verification. Kierkegaard, for instance, declared that "an objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual." Such a truth cannot be written in or read off from a book. It is experienced.[9]

Postmodern philosophy of religion follows this Kierkegaardian critique of modernism, and its positivist dimension. At the same time, the postmodern view is more complex than a simple negation of positivism. MacQuarrie points out that "to abolish truth is to cut oneself of from serious discourse."[10] To deny that certain propositions have epistemic import, MacQuarrie explains, means denying the possibility of genuine communication. This is because discursive communities rely upon norms of communication. Providing accurate, objective, verifiable descriptions of facts [i.e. positivist 'truth'] is one such norm, but it is only *one* norm among many. The postmodern critique does not imply that truth in a positivist sense ought to be abolished. Instead, the postmodern critique notes that the positivist sense of truth is but one value among many that govern a community of discourse. To divorce the "truth" of a statement from, say, the morality or aesthetic values that color it is to lose something essential. This is the

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[9] Ibid., p. 16.
[10] Ibid.

case with postmodern philosophy of religion: "Spirituality, uncriticized by reason, tends to become a luxuriant undisciplined growth; but truth divorced from justice ('value-free') may easily become inhuman."[11] MacQuarrie concludes that postmodern philosophy of religion is an important and necessary corrective to those who merely seek to describe religion, without saying anything of its consequences or meaning.

Derridean Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida opens his essay "Faith and Knowledge" by asking, "*How 'to talk religion'? Of religion? Singularly of religion, today? How dare we speak of it in the singular without fear and trembling, this very day?*"[12] These are the questions concerning a postmodern philosophy of religion. First and foremost is the discursive concern: what vocabulary is appropriate to the topic of religion? Derrida points out that to even employ the term "religion" is to situate oneself in the linguistic context of "Latinity and its globalization." The alliance of Latinate vocabularies with Anglo-American global imperialism enables 'religion' to be "calmly (and violently) applied to things which have always been and remain foreign to what this word names and arrests in its history."[13] In response to the truth challenge—or, indeed, any of the challenges discussed so far—Derrida would assert that the "calm" and "violent" use of the term 'religion' in the first place is a mistake. Challenging the truth of religion, its consequences, or its

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[11] Ibid.

[12] Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," in *Religion*, eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998), p. 1.

[13] Ibid., p. 29.

necessity as articulated in modern discourse is a flat-footed and shabby attempt to reduce what is surprising, fearful, and eventful in the phenomena of religion.

Derrida claims that if *religio* is to escape this totalizing discursive tendency, it must remain "untranslatable"—that is, it must remain a site of fidelity, of a faithful response to a particular kind of concrete experience that must not be mistaken for a source of knowledge. For a philosopher to overlook the untranslatability of what *religio* indicates is to succumb to the "temptation of knowing...that one knows what knowledge is, that is, free, structurally, of belief or of faith."[14] In this way, Derrida not only troubles the foundational aim of modern philosophy to articulate religious *knowledge*, but undermines more generally the goal of any objective knowledge—that is, knowledge that is true in virtue of itself, and without an subjective claim, belief, or response.

The timeliness of Derrida's essay is also important. He writes in the context of the rumored "return of religion" in Europe—the surprising resurgence of religiosity after the "death of God" movement of the 1950s and 60s[15]—though the 'death of God' is, of course, older than that. "The said 'return of the religious', which is to say the spread of a complex and overdetermined phenomenon, is not a simple *return*, for its globality and its figures (tele-techno-media-scientific, capitalistic and politico-economic) remain original and unprecedented."[16] Derrida is indicating a confluence of seemingly unrelated features of late-modernity: religion and the techno-scientific, capitalistic global political

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[14] Ibid., p. 31.
[15] See J.J. Altizer, *Toward a new Christianity : Readings in the death of God theology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967).
[16] Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," p. 42.

economy. In so doing, he deconstructs the distinction between faith and knowledge, science and religion, noting that both rest upon an originary responsiveness to the world that is subjective, contextual, fragile, and risky. "We are constantly trying to think the interconnectedness, albeit otherwise, of knowledge *and* faith, technoscience *and* religious belief, calculation *and* the sacrosanct. In the process, we have not ceased to encounter the alliance, holy or not, of the calculable and the incalculable."[17] Religion, then, cannot be understood in abstraction from knowledge, technoscience, and faith in the late modern world. At the same time, it cannot be reduced to these aspects—nor can technoscientific knowledge be separated or reduced to its originary response of fidelity to experience.

Thinking faith and knowledge together in this late modern moment also pushes into negative spaces of "dispersion" and "disassociation." "The space of technical experience tends to become more animistic, magical, mystical. The spectral aspect of this experience persists and then tends to become…increasingly **primitive and archaic**. So much so that its rejection, no less than its apparent appropriation, can assume the form of a religiosity that is both structural and invasive."[18] Thus Derrida critiques those who invest technoscientific calculations and rationality with trust, even as they deny the sacrosanct and mysterious origins of that trust in experiences that call forth devotion in the first place. What is "primitive and archaic," counterintuitively, is seeking to eliminate the religious dimension—the polar opposite of the Enlightenment view of the triumph of

[17] Ibid., p. 54.
[18] Ibid., p. 56.

secularism and the progress of humankind through the elimination of superstition and religion.

Derrida's description of religion in terms of a primordial responsiveness embedded in the discourse of the globalized world of late modernity is his attempt to "*think—within the limits of reason alone—a religion which, without again becoming 'natural religion', would today be effectively universal...and which, for that matter, would no longer be restricted to a paradigm that was Christian or even Abrahamic.*"[19] Doing so requires resisting two temptations: the "Hegelian" temptation towards ontotheology, and the "Heideggerian" temptation towards collapsing religious experience into the originary existential ground of Being, while rejecting the dimension of belief. Derrida describes the Hegelian temptation, writing that in ontotheology, where "absolute knowledge" is taken to be the "truth of religion," all moral struggle is absorbed into a speculative (i.e. *not* existential) liberation and freedom. "Distinct from faith, from prayer, or from sacrifice, ontotheology destroys religion, but, yet another paradox, it is also perhaps what informs, on the contrary, the theological and ecclesiastical, even religious development of faith." Ontotheology is tempting, Derrida notes, precisely because it contributes to the possibility of crafting a consistent logic of religious knowledge, as well as a stable ontology that may be reflected in ecclesiastical institutional structures. If this structuring were not so tempting, there would be no need for Derrida's deconstruction.

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[19] Ibid., p. 14.

The Heideggerian temptation, Derrida explains, is to conceive of religion purely in terms of its experiential dimension—that is, in the openness to the originary meaning of Being that Heidegger describes in *Being and Time* as "*Faktum.*" "Each time Heidegger employs this word, we are necessarily led back to a zone where acquiescence is *de rigueur*...This zone is that of a faith incessantly reaffirmed throughout an open chain of concepts."[20] Heidegger's discussion of this "acquiescence" to Being, however, assiduously avoided allusion to religious terminology, for fear of being caught up in dogmatics or ontotheology. Derrida criticizes Heidegger for this refusal to acknowledge the religious character of belief that underlies fidelity to the originary meaning of Being, even as he acknowledges the prejudices and assumptions about the meaning of "religion" that Heidegger sought to avoid implicating *dasein* in. Thus, in seeking to guard against both the Hegelian and Heideggerian temptations, Derrida seeks to think religion in a way that acknowledges its experiential dimension. He refers to this dimension as the "sacred" (*heilige*), in an homage to Rudolf Otto, and occasionally as the "unscathed"—that is, that which has passed through the grinder of technoscientific modernity without being carved up. At the same time, Derrida emphasizes the subjective quality of religion in his affirmation of its being a response—an active belief or faith that undergirds not only what is unscathed, but also what has been subjected to the wheels of technoscientific, capitalist, globalist power.

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[20] Ibid., p. 62.

Vattimo's Nihilistic Secularization

The way in which the underlying religious quality attached to Being—i.e.,

the subjective experience of being open to the surprise, danger, and eventfulness

of what is sacred and incalculable—persists in late modernity is also emphasized

in Gianni Vattimo's postmodern philosophy of religion. "The common root of the

religious need that runs through our society and of the return of (the plausibility

of) religion in philosophy today lies in the reference to modernity as an epoch of

technoscience."[21] Under the conditions of late modernity, Vattimo argues that

there is no possibility of a return to ontotheology—"to God as the metaphysical

foundation."[22] This is the popular conception of what religion can mean: a sharp

break from the chaos, pluralism, and secularity of the present by a return to a

past in which the concept of God lent metaphysical, epistemological, and moral

stability. But this view, Vattimo argues, has been thoroughly discredited by

Nietzsche and Heidegger, among others. What, then, is the philosopher to say

about religion?

Vattimo's proposal is that philosophy must take up Heidegger's

understanding of philosophy as the interpretation of the event of Being. This

requires a radical historicism—a rediscovery of thought and language of

philosophy of religions past—coupled with Vattimo's own peculiar understanding

of nihilism: "The meaning of nihilism...if it is not to take the form of a

metaphysics of the nothing...can only think of itself as an indefinite process of

reduction, diminution, weakening."[23] Nihilism begins in the acknowledgement of

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[21] Gianni Vattimo, "The Trace of the Trace," in *Religion*, op. cit., p. 82.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., p. 93.

what is lost in postmodernity: "a world united by 'objective' Truths...where 'it is no longer possible' to act as in the past even in matters of religion." Vattimo describes nihilism as a "loss of center" involving "the devaluation of supreme values...the exhaustion of objectivity and absoluteness of first principles."[24] The result of this devaluation is not the elimination of religion; on the contrary, Vattimo argues that nihilism represents the "liberation of religiosity more generally, which is the only way—I am not aware of others—in which religious experience can have meaning."[25] The meaning of religious experience, Vattimo concludes, comes through this absolute openness, which is the flipside of what Schleiermacher described as "the pure feeling of absolute dependence on an infinitude, which obviously does not allow itself to be defined in positive or metaphysical terms."[26] Nihilistic religion, in the postmodern age, opens itself to the impossibility of its closure along traditional, dogmatic lines. This does not mean falling into a practice of pure mysticism, but rather actively engaging in the deconstruction of religious mythology. Vattimo sees this as not only the necessary outgrowth of the end of ontotheology that came with the death of good, but also as the most appropriate modality for religiosity in the postmodern era.

Vattimo's commitment to radical historicism informs his philosophical approach to generating this conception of nihilism out of a reading of Nietzsche and Heidegger. He acknowledges that his interpretation of these figures is colored by his own personal history and familiarity with Christianity (which he

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[24] Gianni Vattimo, "Nihilism as Postmodern Christianity," in *Transcendence and Beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry*, eds. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007) p. 47.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., p. 48.

describes as a "religious substratum that has remained a living part of me"),[27] and that this, in turn, leads to a kind of circularity to his reasoning. This same circularity, Vattimo argues, "characterizes the relation of the late-modern world to the Judaeo-Christian inheritance."[28] In conversation with the work of Sergio Quinzio and Rene Girard, Vattimo holds to "a conception of secularization characteristic to modern western history as an event within Christianity linked positively to Jesus' message and to a conception of the history of modernity as a weakening and dissolution of (metaphysical) Being."[29] Rather than taking the "secularization" of western civilization to be a reaction against the Judaeo-Christian worldview, Vattimo sees secularization and humanism as an effect of the Judae0-Christian criticism of nature worship, as well as Jesus's message of divine incarnation.[30]

Echoing Max Weber and Norbert Elias, Vattimo holds that "While our civilization no longer explicitly professes itself Christian but rather considers itself by and large a dechristianized, post-Christian, lay civilization, it is nevertheless profoundly shaped by that heritage as its source."[31] This "positive" historicist conception of secularization has important connotations in modernity, both for religion (read: Christianity) and for the technoscientific domain. In both cases, "the weakening of strong structures" forms the "nexus" in which "the

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[27] Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), p. 33.
[28] Ibid., p. 34.
[29] Ibid., pp. 40-1.
[30] For Vattimo, the incarnation of God in Jesus is an example of divine *kenosis*, or "emptying" "all the transcendent, incomprehensible, mysterious and even bizarre features that seem to move so many theorists of the leap of faith" (*Belief*, p. 55).
[31] Vattimo, *Belief*, p. 43.

history of modernity, the meaning of social rationalization," and "the Christian

tradition" can all be expressed and given an historical direction.[32]

Vattimo does not propose this historical project of consummating the

process of secularization via the weakening of strong structures (and, in so doing,

effecting the coming of the Kingdom of God) as a once-and-for-all universal ethic

or transcendental hope (a la Kant). Rather, it is an "interpretation of the history

of Being as weakening" that "appears (the most) reasonable and the strongest

precisely from our point of view in late modernity."[33] Vattimo argues that the

meaning of secularization and/or Christianity resonates in this era as a means of

critiquing the decadence of technoscientism. In addition to this negative quality,

the weakening of strong structures has the positive effect of providing "a task

with respect to the situation in which we find ourselves, which has itself to be

defined in recognizable terms" as "charity."[34] The voiding of God's transcendence

in Christianity ends with charity, which is pure generosity born of weakness and

humility. Charity—the love of God and of one's neighbor—is, according to

Vattimo, the principle according to which secularization gets its direction. But it

is a principle that must be "defined in recognizable terms" in "the situation in

which we find ourselves." Hence, Vattimo argues that "the last great metaphysical

misunderstanding of Christian thought" that must be weakened is "the idea that

there is a radical separation between the history of salvation and secular

history."[35] This means that a weak theology of charity has concrete social and

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[32] Ibid., pp. 52, 65.
[33] Ibid., pp. 68-9.
[34] Ibid., p. 80.
[35] Ibid., p. 81.

political implications for the reform of society (and the Roman Catholic Church) towards the fuller expression of freedom, democracy, and mutual respect.[36]

The argument thus inevitably cycles back to its original context in Vattimo's own life and the late modern period of Western civilization. "I run up against a circle," he writes: "the relative contingency of the whole. So what? Anyone who finds this argument outrageous should take it upon himself to prove the contrary, which could only be a renewed metaphysical position, and so, all in all, somewhat unlikely."[37] Vattimo is unperturbed by the circularity of his argument. He is openly dismissive of any attempt to resurrect the modern approach to philosophy of religion. Describing Hegel as the "high point of modern philosophical rationalism," Vattimo claims that "now that Cartesian (and Hegelian) reason has completed its parabola, it no longer makes sense to oppose faith and reason so sharply."[38]

Vattimo's hermeneutical approach follows Derrida's deconstructive one in undermining any distinction between rational claims to knowledge and religious belief. Rational claims are only reasonable within a constrained, discursive context. The subject's role in determining that context cannot be avoided, except disingenuously or via abstraction (which, in turn, must be justified). Hence, just as embracing secularization is not an obstacle to religion, but rather the consummation of the Judeo-Christian worldview, so too embracing hermeneutics

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[36] See Ibid., pp. 75-6, 81. John Caputo, in commenting on this aspect of Vattimo's description of secularization, highlights "pluralism" and "hospitality" as the virtues engendered by the weakening of theology into charity. See John D. Caputo, "Spectral Hermeneutics" in *After the Death of God*, by John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia UP, 2007), p. 77.

[37] Vattimo, *Belief*, p. 70.

[38] Ibid., p. 87.

is not the end of philosophy of religion, but rather the most appropriate approach to engaging the meaning of religion in this historical moment.

The truth and meaning challenges are not ahistorical, but rather arise at a particular moment in the late modern Anglo-American world. In this context, postmodern critique (beginning with Derrida) undermines the basic claim that one can challenge the truth of a well-defined, clearly delineated "essence" of religion. Indeed, the meaning of religion is both positive and negative, revelatory and unrecognizable. The positionality of such a critique in the current context, as Vattimo shows, is constrained within a religious paradigm (i.e. a Judaeo-Christian paradigm) that provides the conditions for the *weakening* of religion, but never its outright dismissal. Vattimo argues that religion—and Christianity in particular—is in part constitutive of the horizon of meaning within which the meaning challenge—the challenge that religion is unnecessary for meaning-making—arises in the first place. On Vattimo's account, the challenge is paradoxical, bespeaking both the truth of weakening religion (in arguing that religion is superfluous) and nonetheless affirming its necessity by arguing for secularization, i.e., the consummation of Christianity.

This view is problematic, however, insofar as it sets the philosophy of religion within a specific religious tradition and paradigm. As was discussed in Chapter 2, this methodological limitation creates a constraint for articulating a rejoinder to the three challenges that can function in non-Judaeo-Christian spaces. Vattimo appears to believe that there are no such spaces in the late modern West: that the absence of religion is a mirage, and that the ongoing

weakening of visible manifestations of religion is necessary for the fulfilment of the "coming of the Kingdom of God."

Marion: Theologizing an Impossible God

Jean-Luc Marion adds another critical dimension to postmodern philosophy of religion by addressing the implications of a deconstructive hermeneutic for philosophical theology. Unlike Vattimo, who sees the consummation of Christianity in the immanent and impending realization of secularism, Marion is concerned with preserving the untranslatable, unfathomable dimension of *religio* that Derrida initially indicated. In his essay, "The Impossible for Man—God,"[39] Marion focuses in on what he takes to be missteps in ontotheology, arguing that the traditional attribution of "transcendence" to God is misleading. He claims that neither of the two common meanings of "transcendence" given by philosophers ever actually escape the realms of ontology or metaphysics, respectively. A phenomenological account of 'transcendence' describes its meaning in terms of consciousness grasping a phenomenon that is not itself. This, however, means that transcendence "remains immanent to the horizon of being;"[40] that is, 'transcendence' merely names the intentional consciousness's striving towards grasping phenomena immanent in the world. A metaphysical account of 'transcendence,' on the other hand, associates it with the demarcation of the finite and infinite (the separation of Creation from Creator). All the various transcendental aspects of God's infinity

[39] Jean-Luc Marion, "The Impossible for Man—God," in *Transcedence and Beyond*, op. cit., pp. 17-43.
[40] Ibid., p. 18.

(e.g. omnipotence, omniscience, etc.), however, purport to name what is unnamable, even as they signal a certain kinship with their finite counterparts.

Thus, the transcendentals may provide a *definition* of God's transcendence, but in doing so, God is defined in terms relative to the realm of finite Being. On the flipside, God's transcendence may be established, but the definite aspects of it (i.e. God's essence) would be obscured. This signals what seems obvious: that God's transcendence implies that God is not of this world, and cannot be defined in terms of Being.

Marion concludes that any account of transcendence that relies upon these phenomenological or metaphysical assumptions must be transcended, if the meaning of 'God' and 'transcedence' are to escape the bounds of the realm of Being. "In God's case, all formal conditions of intuition must be transgressed," he writes. "If intuition implies space and time, then there can never be any intuition of God because of the even more radical requirement that there *must* not be any intuition, if God is ever to be considered."[41] The fallout of this claim is twofold: on the one hand, this is the basis for the "death of God," Marion explains, insofar as 'God' is understood dogmatically according to any particular religious formulation, thus rendering theism incoherent. On the other hand, Marion contends, atheism is just as effectively rendered incoherent, insofar as it fails to remain "regional and provisional."[42] It is, in Marion's words, idolatrous on either side of the theism/atheism divide to conceptualize "God's presumed 'essence'…Both cases also assume that 'being' or 'existing' signify something that

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[41] Ibid., p. 21.
[42] Ibid., p. 22.

is knowledge to us even when applied to 'God'—which is no self-evident in the least."[43] Echoing Derrida's skepticism of reducing *religio* to 'religion,' Marion is concerned with reducing the transcendent God-beyond-Being to the God-of-Being. Marion calls this last misstep "the chief idolatry...of Being itself"[44]—namely, claiming a category of human knowledge can be applied to God, whose transcendence precludes assigning any such concepts.

For this reason, Marion describes God as *impossibility*—i.e. as the one who is impossible to conceive in terms of being. However, coupled with impossibility, Marion also has claimed that God is transcendent. The meaning of this transcendence comes into play now in the "transcendence of all impossibility"—namely, the "radical possibility" of "*effecting the impossible*."[45] Marion explains that this does not involve any metaphysical definition, but rather the creation of the conditions for the possibility of thinking novelty, or thinking what is "hitherto unthinkable." Marion describes this creation as the "emergence" into existence, an event which, like one's own birth, "precedes all possibility as defined concept and representation."[46] This experience of an event, of being born, of radical possibility, further signals the more primordial birth of creation itself, which Marion describes as follows: "God, the master of the impossible, effectuates creation by making the [im-]possibility of each birth effective, starting with my own."[47] Like Derrida, Marion emphasizes the eventfulness of the divine as a disruption and eruption of something other (or, more properly speaking,

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Ibid., pp. 22-3.
[45] Ibid., p. 31.
[46] Ibid., p. 32.
[47] Ibid., p. 33.

some one other). Echoing Kierkegaard, Marion claims that religious experience is an encounter with that which is radically otherwise than all that is known. The impossibility of God signals God's unknowablility, and, at the same time, the creative potential of being made new by what was "hitherto unthinkable."

The question remains, however, as to what can be said about God, given this experience of radical possibility. Marion asserts that this question is cast in a new light in the postmodern age. It is no longer a matter of describing God's in terms of transcendentals (e.g. omnipotence, omniscience, etc.), but rather of articulating "how God chooses his [im-] possibles for himself."[48] Put another way, the goal is to conceive of

> What it is that God can indeed want *as his word*—a word which he
> commits himself to keep, allowing himself to be taken 'at his word.'
> Neither logic, nor contradiction, nor the principle of identity, nor efficacy,
> nor the principle of sufficient reason, retains the slightest relevancy
> here…Obviously, if God is God, he can do whatever he wants—that is not
> the question. The question rather, is what God is able to want and wants to
> be able to do?[49]

In order to answer this question, Marion concludes, "we must turn once again to biblical texts."[50] According to Marion, this is because Jesus's message in scripture is that articulation of what is impossible for humans, but not for God. That impossibility is the meaning of the "good news" Jesus proclaimed; the gospels,

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[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid., p. 35.
[50] Ibid., p. 36.

then, are a prooftext for Marion's theological claim that God is the impossible one, for whom all things are possible.

Why does Marion claim it is imperative to turn to biblical texts? On the one hand, his reasons for turning to scripture are obvious: Marion is a Roman Catholic priest, a philosophical theologian in the Christian tradition whose theology is, in the main, a Christian one. But on the other hand, up to this point, he has been articulating a theology that befits Derrida's deconstructed *religio* in its attention to creativity, negation, and impossibility—that is, the utter non-worldliness of religion as an event. Is his turn to Christian scripture meant as an elaborative illustration, or does it serve as supporting evidence for his claims? That is, does scripture function as a source of revealed *knowledge* for Marion (which would seem to put him at odds with Derrida), or is it something else?

In his book *God without Being*,[51] Marion offers some clarity to these questions in his distinction between the idolatry of onto-theology and the "iconic" phenomenology of "envisaging" the divinely impossible possibility. Ontotheology, Marion claims, is idolatrous, insofar as it takes God to mirror the visible (i.e. Being)—a phenomenological take on Feuerbach's classic critique of theology as human self-projection. By contrast, "in the icon, the visible is deepened infinitely in order to accompany, as one may say, each point of the visible, since it consists only of an intention...its revelation offers an abyss that the eyes of men never finish probing."[52] Marion's reference here to traditional Christian iconography is illustrative of his deeper phenomenological claim that the divine is experienced

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[51] Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, 2nd ed., trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012 [1991]).
[52] Ibid., pp. 20-21.

as a deep intentionality that lies in the "abyss" of impossibility. The inscrutable face of a religious icon is a visible sign of an absolutely unknown intentionality. In the icon, "Visible and invisible grow together…The icon unbalances human sight in order to engulf it in infinite depth…to give itself to be seen, the icon needs only itself. This is why it can demand, patiently, that one receive its abandon."[53] The iconic character of the divine encounter is what Marion seeks to preserve, over and against the tendency towards idolatry in ontotheology.

Though Marion does not explicitly address his use of scripture in this same vein, it seems clear that he sees scripture itself as something like an icon, in which the intentionality of the divine is expressed, but never contained—just as the impossible is expressed in the world, though the world does not contain it. "The text, where the Word's effect of eaning is fixed in verbal signs, consigns the incommensurability of the Word: the Scriptures thus exceed the limits of the world." This excess, Marion concludes, "demands an infinity of interpretations" and "implies an infinity of Eucharistic hermeneutics."[54] Rather than seeing theological discourse as finally wrapped up in metaphysical productions, Marion claims that theology as a discourse only finds its fulfillment in ongoing interpretation that is "rendered possible, more even than by the talent of a mind, by the labor of the Spirit that arranges a Eucharistic community in such a way that it reproduces a given disposition of the Word-referent."[55] Eucharistic hermeneutics is characterized by reference to the originary Word—the impossible possibility of divine intentionality—that takes place in historically and

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[53] Ibid., pp. 23-4.
[54] Ibid., p. 156.
[55] Ibid.

geographically contingent communities. Marion claims that theology in this vein is not oriented towards some special insight or knowledge. Rather, the hermeneutic act is itself a means for the community to "accomplish its own extension, through the text, to the Word:"[56] that is, to participate and embody the intentionality of that which is impossible to conceive or intend outside of such a community.

Marion further troubles the commitment of theological discourse to metaphysical claims in *God Without Being* with this blunt question: "Does God have anything to gain by being? Can being—which whatever is, provided that it is, manifests—even accommodate any(thing of) God?"[57] Marion argues that the very notion of 'being' is an idol, a thought that appears tantalizingly intelligible, even as it holds no real power or significance. God has no need for being, and neither, presumably, do humans who seek God. Here Marion echoes the insight of fellow French philosopher and theologian Etienne Gilson, who wrote in *God and Philosophy*, "Where a man's metaphysics comes to an end, his religion begins."[58] Religion, on this view, does not derive conceptually from a metaphysical theology; its origins lay elsewhere. It must be understood, according to Marion, as (negatively) a matter of shedding the idolatry of this-worldliness (of taking existence to be what is of highest value[59]), and (positively) a project of embracing the immediacy and intentionality[60] of divine love. The nature of this embrace

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[56] Ibid., p. 158.
[57] Ibid., p. 2.
[58] Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale NB, 2002), p. 143.
[59] See Ibid., pp. 33-7.
[60] See Marion, "The Intentionality of Love," in *Prolegomena to Charity* (New York: Fordham UP, 2002).

seems to be captured to some extent in the contemplation of the icon (as opposed to idol-worship). Such contemplation may yield some kind of intuitive or provisional knowledge of the intentionality of God. This is secondary, however, to the reshaping of one's own intentionality to align more deeply with the possibility of what is hitherto impossible. In this way, Marion's philosophical theology directs one's attention back to practical matters, and in particular, to a life of ritual and community.

For Marion, as with Vattimo, true religion is oriented by a theology of *charity*. He contends that the "most theological name" for God is *charity* or *agape*, both of which signal the reality that before God "is," God "gives Himself—according to the horizon of the gift itself. The gift constitutes at once the mode and the body of his revelation. In the end, the gift gives only itself, but in this way it gives absolutely everything."[61] Theology aims to describe this "gift," insofar as one is capable of doing so—it is, after all, the impossible! Conversely, theology is also contingent upon the degree to which one is *receptive* to the gift, and willing to have one's intentionality reshaped in accordance with it.

The gift itself is evident as divine love (*agape*, which has to do with the gift of the world as totality—that is, the very possibility of a world *per se*) or, more particularly, as the charitable love for an other (which is more subjective). These two forms of love combine in the Eucharistic community, which is constituted by divine intentionality for the sake of extending a value that transcends and is prior to existence. "That the world *is* offers no marvel in itself...that which is, if it does

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[61] Marion, *God without Being*, p. xxvi.

not receive love, is as if it were not, while that which is not, if love polarizes it, is as if it were."[62] Love is what animates and calls us to wonder at the existence of the world, and the existence of things in the world. Without that primordial gift that calls us to silent wonder at the very fact of existence, it would be "as if [existence] were not." "Only love does not have to be," Marion concludes. "And Gød[63] loves without being."[64] Only love has the freedom to be or not to be—and God exercises that freedom to love without being.

The religious orientation Marion describes is about matching the intentionality of God's love in one's own life. Marion thus echoes Kant in primarily characterizing religion and the experience of the divine in terms of action. Religious knowledge is not theoretical, but practical. Here, however, Marion revises the Kantian imperative from one of doing that which is just to that which is loving—an impractical, impossible category. Marion's shift in emphasis from the hard-and-fast justice of Kantian practical reason to the Eucharistic interpretation of love indicates his postmodern skepticism of absolute claims to rationality or morality (especially in the context of religion), as well as his desire to preserve the role and significance of Christianity.

Though Marion's approach is thoroughly wedded and imbedded in his own interpretative context of the Catholic Church, the underlying description of religious communities as sites of interpretive extension towards impossible

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[62] Ibid., p. 136, emphasis added. This further reflects Gilson's insight that the special provenance of theology and religion is the way it answers the question "why anything at all is, or exists" in the first place. See Gilson, *God and Philosophy*, p. 189ff.
[63] Marion indicates "God without being," who is not marked by predicates of any kind (and especially not by any existential function) by crossing out the 'o' in 'Gød.'
[64] Ibid., p. 138.

possibilities aligns well with Derrida's deconstructive search for *religio*. Marion

articulates a unique and significant function of religious experience—that is, the

revelation of what is impossible as possible in the context of a religious

community—that could serve as a reasonable response to the meaning challenge.

Acknowledging this function serves (in true deconstructive fashion) to indict both

conservative, dogmatic religious institutions and anti-religionists who lack both

an awareness and the capacity for living towards impossibility (i.e. directing one's

intentions into an unknown and unknowable future). At the precipice of the

present, on the threshold of what is next, religious experience is the site of true

possibility and purpose.

Caputo's Radical Theology and Postmodern Philosophy of Religion

Marion's theology stresses the primordial, affective aspect of divine *agape*

as the seed of religious wonder and of theological discourse. Like Vattimo, his

work operates within and against a specifically Christian paradigm. Unlike

Vattimo, Marion is less concerned with historicizing his philosophical theology.

In this sense, Marion's approach is more traditional: that is, it is in keeping with

the speculative philosophical theologies of the past. It is, at the same time,

thoroughly postmodern, insofar as Marion draws upon Husserlian

phenomenology in his emphasis upon the intuitive, phenomenal character of

impossibility, and Derridean deconstruction in his reduction of theology to

agape.[65] That being said, Marion has little to say about how his theology of the impossible and agape manifests itself in a religious life.

John D. Caputo distinguishes himself from Marion by following Vattimo in embracing the concrete, historical implications of postmodern thinking not just for theology, but for religion. In fact, he sees this as the unique and significant task of philosophy of religion in the 21st century. Caputo embraces the Derridean challenge to "talk of religion in the singular" after Nietzsche, whom Caputo describes as having "decapitated anything that dares Capitalize itself": Reason, Truth, Physics, Nature, God, Religion, etc.[66] Caputo claims this postmodern project of giving voice to "post-secular" religion is "a certain *iteration* of the Enlightenment, a continuation of the Enlightenment by another means, the production of a New Enlightenment." This "more enlightened Enlightenment is no longer taken in by the dream of Pure Objectivity," but rather has "a more modest sense of how far our concepts cut, a heightened sense of the difficulty of things, and a sharper sense of knowledge as a more open-ended, fluid, mobile, less logo-centric undertaking."[67] Caputo attributes this revising of the Enlightenment project to the indelible impact of Nietzsche, especially when it comes to creating the conditions for the possibility of post-secular religion. "Marx and Freud, along with Nietzsche himself, find themselves hoisted with Nietzsche's petard, their critiques of religion having come undone under the gun of Nietzsche's critique of the possibility of making a critique that would cut to the

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[65] See Kevin Hart, "Absolute Fragment or the Impossible Absolute?" *Christianity & Literature* Vol. 59, No. 4 (Summer, 2010), pp. 694-703.
[66] John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York/London: Routledge, 2001), p. 60.
[67] Ibid., pp. 60,61,64.

quick—of God, nature, or history."[68] All such reductionist and eliminative critiques of religion for its reliance upon imagination, historical contingency, and (mal)formation according to the myriad influences of culture, Caputo concludes, are themselves just as contingent, reliant upon imagination, and subject to cultural currents.[69]

In *The Insistence of God*,[70] Caputo states that the task of a philosophy of religion today is not simply to "start with a stable concept of 'philosophy' and a stable concept of 'religion' and then 'apply' 'philosophy' to 'religion.' We must allow what are called 'philosophy' and 'religion' to tremble together under the force of their mutual contact, letting each push back on the other."[71] In this book, Caputo goes on to argue that the interaction of philosophy and religion is not something to be done "in the abstract, but rather from out of the original sources of the experience of 'religiosity,' out of the concrete experience of the religious traditions."[72] For Caputo, this is both a prescriptive and descriptive claim of philosophy of religion done well. Philosophy of religion must begin in concrete experience, but it unfolds through the deconstruction of that experience to reveal underlying possibilities for meaning-making.

This view leads Caputo to favor Hegel's philosophy of religion over Kant's; whereas Kant famously sought to "limit reason to leave room for faith," thereby

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[68] Ibid., p. 59.
[69] Elsewhere, Caputo states, "When Nietzsche says 'God is dead,' he's saying there is no center, no single, overarching principle that explains things. There's just a multiplicity of fictions or interpretations. Well, if there's no single overarching principle, that means science is also one more interpretation, and it doesn't have an exclusive right to the absolute Truth. But, if that's true, then nonscientific ways of thinking about the world, including religious ways, resurface" (Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, p. 133).
[70] John D. Caputo. *The Insistence of God* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2013).
[71] Ibid., p. 59.
[72] Ibid.

constraining philosophers' access to religious content and consigning philosophy of religion to a secondary status as an extension of moral philosophy, Hegel recognized that "religion is pivotal...in the becoming true of truth," as Caputo puts it.[73] The concrete content of religious teachings and religious experience—for Hegel and Caputo, the content of a Lutheran-esque Protestant Christianity—is "a stage of truth in the making, where truth is a work in progress, and so each element merits philosophical respect and demands a philosophical analysis. The truth needs philosophy but philosophy needs religion."[74] Thus, philosophy of religion is not an act of crossing the boundary from reason into faith, but the immanent consideration of the Absolute truth of the world from the standpoint or perspective of its religious aspect.

In *After the Death of God*, Caputo further clarifies his view of the relation between faith and reason, as well as religion and philosophy. Caputo claims that postmodernism weakens the disciplinary distinctions between theology and philosophy, and the epistemic markers that distinguish faith and reason. This is because "Virtually of contemporary [read: postmodern] philosophy is bent on showing the way in which to understand something is to operate within a horizon of understanding that has to remain tentatively in place for you to get anything done. That horizon of understanding is something like a faith. It's a presuppositional structure that is constantly getting tested, but it has to be in place."[75] Philosophy needs religion because religion is both the name for the living experience of faith in a "presuppositional structure" that orders experience.

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[73] Ibid., p. 89.
[74] Ibid., p. 90.
[75] Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, p. 143.

Caputo follows Kierkegaard in tempering his Hegelianism with a heavy dose of anti-Modern skepticism about the reach of metaphysics or the need to ground the process of world-disclosure in a ultimate foundational Truth. Instead, Caputo defines religious experience in terms of revelation: "an in-coming, a breaking-in upon the world that takes the world by surprise" that discloses the "amplitude of the way the world works." "To live in history is to be structurally subject to surprise, to unforeseeability, to the future. The interruptive disclosure that breaks in upon the world in a revelation is the interruptive disclosure, the disclosive interruption, which *is* the world."[76] Insofar as the world itself is disclosed as a surprising interruption in religious experience, a genuine philosophy of religion gets at the truth of the world by attending to that which defies expectations. This stands in radical opposition to the rationality of modernity (and in tension to orthodox Hegelianism), which can in theory "see everything coming."[77] That is, scientific rationality purports to be able to confront the unexpected with the power of experimentation and explanation, building itself into a body of knowledge that can meet and account for every corner and facet of the world. Caputo, however, emphasizes the contingency and limitation inherent in the "event" and "gift" of revelation. In so doing, he seeks to strike a balance between the Kantian claim of God's ultimate inaccessibility and the Hegelian claim of God's radical presence.

Caputo goes on to say that the distinction between the postmodern approaches to philosophy of religion flowing from the Kantian and Hegelian

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[76] Caputo, *Insistence of God*, p. 93.
[77] Ibid., p. 94.

streams of continental philosophy is especially revealed in "the contrasting ways they deal with hard-line atheism and fundamentalism."[78] The Kantian postmodernists tend to agree with the fundamentalists, insofar as religious fundamentalists claim that God Almighty ought not be confused with any "God concept" that reason can generate. On the other hand, "It chastises them for confusing themselves with God and for having allowed themselves to be stampeded by the deracinating effects of techno-capitalism into biblical literalism and authoritarianism." Hegelian postmodernists tend to agree with the atheists; a God who stands utterly independent of the world certainly cannot be said to exist. On the other hand, "the Hegelians chide dogmatic atheistic metaphysics for having a tin ear for the poetics of religion, for being ham-fisted, inept, and insensitive with religion."[79] In both the Hegelian and Kantian forms of postmodernity, the overarching value of epistemic humility provides a bulwark against what Caputo describes as the "disdainful eliminationist critiques of religion (one thinks of the popular but polarizing intellectual temper tantrums of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett) and, on the other hand, religious fundamentalists."[80]

Caputo dismisses both religious fundamentalists and the New Atheists out of hand for their lack of epistemic humility. Caputo argues that religion is not True in the objective, absolute sense—but this is because on this account, truth is radically contextual. The truth of religion is governed by the fleeting and unexpected nature of the event. Caputo's postmodernism embraces epistemic

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[78] Ibid., p. 102
[79] Ibid., p. 102.
[80] Ibid., p. 99.

humility, positing no new metaphysics, nor claiming the existence of God, but rather outlining a "theopoetics" that names the event of revelation: "God, perhaps." Here, Caputo takes his turn at naming the event that Derrida labelled *religio*, and that Marion located in the Word (as expressed in the Eucharistic hermeneutics of scripture). Caputo takes a slightly different tack from these other thinkers: rather than mark the eventfulness of the divine with the "untranslatable" *religio* (as Derrida did), or "cross Gød" and describe the divine phenomenologically (as Marion did) in the gaze of the icon or the interpretive excess of Christian scripture, Caputo qualifies God with "perhaps," and places it in scare quotes. The scare quotes are necessary for the name "God" because "no one has access to anything else:"[81] that is, no one accesses God without qualification. God is not a being with whom one interacts in any other way besides in the event(s) of revelation, religious experiences to which one assigns the name "God." The scare quotes indicate the epistemic limitations upon naming revelation, while indicating how the construction of a theology is contingent upon a creative use of language. In addition, these scare quotes are also "scary." Caputo writes,

> If they are removed, then things get genuinely scary and we are exposed to
> the worst violence…. The history of "God" includes the history of the worst
> bloodshed, persecution, and injustice. To this, the orthodox respond, but
> that is not God; that is simply how some people have misused the name of
> God or made it serve their selfish purposes, as opposed to others from

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[81] Ibid., p. 104.

whom the name of God has called forth a life of sacrifice for others. But my

whole point is that this is a recourse which we are denied, that we do not

get to lay aside "God" and seek entry through the back door to God. The

scare quotes cannot be lifted.[82]

Caputo endorses the view that religion is risky, even violent. At the same time,

however, the event that "God" names cannot simply be reduced to its essential

undecidability and potential for conflict. Rather, he insists that, not unlike "other

high-velocity words like justice and democracy, truth and love...'God' calls forth

the best *and* the worst. It is the riskiest name we know and you cannot simply

decontaminate it of its undecidability."[83] Hence, while Caputo may join those

who claim religion is inherently risky, even incalculably so, he denies that religion

must be eliminated on these grounds. For Caputo, the answer to the fearfulness

of religion is not eliminating it, but rather approaching it with epistemic humility,

which means fidelity to the "perhaps" of the event of revelation. This calls into

question the hubris of the truth challenge, and any attempt to exert epistemic

authority in the context of theological and/or religious discourse. It is impossible

for "God, perhaps" to be true or false in the hard-and-fast sense of the truth

challenge. Then again (following Marion), situations of impossibility are precisely

what theology and religion are all about.

This last point also indicates a potential response to the meaning challenge

as well. Caputo argues that 'religion' calls forth both the best and worst in life,

just as 'justice,' 'love,' 'democracy,' and 'truth.' Insofar as these latter terms

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[82] Ibid., pp. 104, 108.
[83] Ibid., p. 108.

contribute to the grammar of a meaningful life, it follows that religion does as well. This "grammar" of 'religion' is not merely linguistic either, but rather refers to "the concrete confessional communities and cultural-historical traditions, including both the first-order religious beliefs and practices and the second-order theological traditions in which the former achieve conceptual articulation."[84] In his Hegelianism, Caputo affirms that the revelation that takes place in concrete cultural historical traditions is revelation of the truth (not the Truth) of the world. And the truth—so uncapitalized and constrained—is the truth of the world. If truth (not the Truth) is the ultimate ground for meaning in life, then the event of its revelation—i.e. religious experience—seems to be a crucial contributor to a meaningful life.

> Caputo essentially says as much in *On Religion*, when he writes,
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> Having a religious sense of life is a very basic structure of our lives... The religious sense of life is tied up with having a future, which is something we *all* have...So instead of distinguishing "religious people," the ones who go to church on Sunday morning, from non-religious people, the ones who stay home and read *The Sunday New York Times*, I would rather speak of the religious *in* people, in all of us. I take "religion" to mean the being-religious of human beings...the very thing that most constitutes human experience as experience, as something that is really happening.[85]

Caputo attributes this description of human experience as an event—a happening, the becoming possible of the impossible—to Derrida, but it is clearly

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[84] Ibid., p. 83.
[85] Caputo, *On religion*, pp. 8-9.

consonant with Marion's theology of the impossible as well. "The impossible is a defining religious category…the stuff of which religion is made," Caputo claims. "The impossible…is what makes experience to be *experience*, makes it truly worthy of the name 'experience,' an occasion in which something really 'happens'…the impossible is what give life its salt."[86] Caputo's metaphor is instructive; salt has its own flavor, but its primary contribution is to enhance the flavors that surround it. Thus, the impossible—"the stuff of which religion is made"—enhances the flavors of every genuine experience: namely, every experience that stands out from the dullness of quotidian existence to make life meaningful.

As an answer to the meaning challenge, Caputo's postmodern approach (which I take here to be emblematic of contemporary continental philosophy of religion) follows the pattern of the theological response. At the same time, however, Caputo is critical of those who would over-Christianize their postmodern theologizing. For example, he states that "While I am full of admiration for Vattimo's bracing and embracing hermeneutics, I have certain reservations that turn on the privilege 'Christianity' enjoys in his work."[87] Caputo is wary of essentializing "religion" in a Judeo-Christian fashion for a number of reasons. In the first place, he notes that doing so has historically contributed to anti-semitism. More contemporaneously, claiming (as Vattimo does) that Christianity is an ally of the West and secularization further polarizes the conflict between the West and the Arab World. But in addition to these material

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[86] Ibid., pp. 10,11.
[87] Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, p. 77.

implications, Caputo objects to the notion of *kenosis* as an emptying of God *into* the world from *beyond* the world. "I do not distinguish two different worlds," Caputo explains, "but two different logics, the logic of the mundane constituted economies and the logic of the event that disturbs them."[88] Grounding one's philosophical theology in an epochal approach that focuses so heavily upon firmly defined transitions from "modern" to "postmodern," "secular" to "postsecular" springs the trap of falling into "grand narratives, overarching a priori histories that are selling us another metaphysical bill of goods under the name of demythologization."[89] Instead, Caputo firmly holds to the "weakness" of theology—its limitedness, fragility, and fallibility. "I wonder if Vattimo's weak thinking is too strong," Caputo muses, as opposed to "a truly radical hermeneutics" that is "a little more lost in the desert."[90]

Caputo calls for both a weakening of thinking and even of historicism, and a decision for "radical theology" in philosophy of religion. Radical theology attends to the events "God" names and interprets them to indicate the contextual, contingent truth "insisting" (rather than "existing") in the world—not in terms of some grand narrative, but relative to specific socio-cultural moments. Unlike the theological approach to addressing the meaning challenge examined earlier, in which the possibility of addressing the meaning challenge is structurally foreclosed by the objectification of God, Caputo's radical theology departs from the name "God" (*Gott*) rather than ontotheological God Almighty (*Gottheit)*. Yet Caputo insists that "God" *is* God, that "God" names the "trace" (a word he

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[88] Ibid., p. 82.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid., pp. 83,85.

borrows from Vattimo) of God in the event of revelation that is the

phenomenological basis for philosophy of religion. In the end, the

meaningfulness of God is still contingent upon the naming of God as "God," while

simultaneously insisting that the name and what is named are inseparable.

Caputo's theology of "God, perhaps" seems to share one feature in

common with the meaning challenge. The meaning challenge asserts that the

meaningfulness of religion is found in its capacity to provide comfort in times of

trial and tribulation. This capacity is at best a mirage, and at worst actively

harmful for religious folks, lulling them into a false sense of security in a

dangerous and complex world. Caputo's criticism of God-as-Highest-Being—the

traditional God of theology, the "steady hand at the wheel of the universe"—

echoes this strand of the meaning challenge. "Faith is not a safe harbor," Caputo

writes, "but risky business. God is not a warranty for a well-run world, but the

name of a promise, an unkept promise, where every promise is also a risk, a

flicker of hope on a suffering planet in a remote corner of the universe."[91] The

hope of religion, on Caputo's account, is both thoroughly "this-worldly" and

fleeting. "There is grace, grace happens, but it is the grace of the world. There is

salvation, but we are 'saved' only for an instant, in the instant, saved without

salvation by a faith that does not keep us safe."[92] Caputo argues that his

assurance of the "grace of the world" is not, as it seems, a form of atheism, but

rather "a way we have come upon to reconfigure what we mean by God and to

break the grip not only of a strong theology but no less of a violent atheism and

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[91] Ibid., p. ix.
[92] Ibid., p. 246.

above all of the tiresome wars between the two."[93] As a response to the meaning challenge, I read this as an attempt to both endorse the challenge to the comforting aspect of religion, while simultaneously endorsing a need for religion to persist in the postmodern world.

> My entire idea is to reclaim religion as an event of this world, to reclaim religion for the world and the world for religion. I have not annulled the religious character of our life but identified its content and extended its reach, by treating it as a name for the event by which life is nourished. In so doing we have redescribed and marked off religion within the boundaries of the world. Religion emerges in response to the promise of the world…The promise of the world is not extinguished by evil, not suffocated by suffering and setbacks, not abolished by the cosmic forces, but grows like a root that makes its way through rocks to find a nourishing soil.[94]

Caputo argues that what "God" names is the possibility and novelty that insists (rather than exists) in the world. This inherent potentiality is not some ontological foundation to be analyzed or understood, but rather a call to be responded to (a la Heidegger, and the call of conscience). It is the call to life itself, rather than surrender to the nothingness that deconstruction creates out of the structures of power that prop up the world as it is commonly known. As a postmodern response to the meaning challenge, Caputo's conclusions

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[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid., p. 247.

acknowledge the premise that religion does *not* comfort, but nonetheless insist that religion attends to "the event by which life is nourished."

In his concluding chapter, Caputo indicates that science and technology have increasingly horned in on philosophy and religion's territory of ultimate concern. "If the task of philosophical thought is to think against the unthinkable boundaries of thought, today that limit is being redefined, reimagined, and reconceived not by religion or philosophy but by speculative physics and contemporary bio-technologies."[95] He goes on to say that "'Perhaps' is older than God…'Perhaps' is a place more elemental than anything that takes place within it."[96] In the end, Caputo appears less committed to "God" than to "perhaps." To get too wrapped up in identifying God with the potentiality of being that calls is to miss the point of theology. "Is it God who calls? Is it the world? Is it life? The point is that this is not a query requiring an answer but a call calling for a response."[97] That response need not be something identifiable as "religious" in any traditional sense—but it is, according to Caputo, nonetheless "religious."

In the end, Caputo's philosophy of religion is thoroughly Hegelian in its method, insofar as he conflates deconstruction and religion, not as two systems of truth, but as a single methodology for "nourishing life." At the same time, Caputo endorses the postmodern rejection of ontotheology and metaphysical foundations, and goes further than some others in his rejection of historicism and the temptation toward "grand narratives." This is what Caputo means by describing his approach as a "more enlightened Enlightenment": namely, the

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[95] Ibid., p. 258.
[96] Ibid., p. 259.
[97] Ibid., p. 262.

freedom of human beings from their self-incurred subservience to "the center," to capitalized categories (e.g. Reason, Truth, Religion, Christianity, etc.), capitalism, and the unfolding of world history.

There is a danger in this approach of construing religion only as a mode of response to certain linguistic phenomena. For this reason, the freedom indicated by "perhaps" must be more than merely hermeneutic. It must be located phenomenologically in experience more generally—in what happens, what catches our attention, what gives life its "salt." It is the freedom to respond to the call of the future—the unexpected, what is only ever "perhaps." It is, on Caputo's account, ultimately the freedom of faith, which is the only reasonable orientation towards the impossibility-that-may-become-possible. Faith, as the expression of the love for God responding to the love that is God (and the God that is love), acknowledges its own limitedness (or weakness, as Caputo puts it). In turn, theology becomes more radical and weaker, eschewing comfort for the sake of risk, and, in so doing, creating a contingent, contextual narrative for telling of (an) experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined some of the contemporary voices in continental philosophy of religion who seek to both build upon and critique the legacy of modern philosophy of religion. These thinkers acknowledge that one cannot talk about religion the same way after Nietzsche or Kierkegaard, even as they see the Kantian and Hegelian canvas upon which these later thinkers painted. Rather than reading the declaration of the "death of God" or the "leap

into faith" as signs of the victory of rationalism and modern secularism, Derrida, Vattimo, Marion, and Caputo all agree that the meaning of religion is critically destabilized in these thoughts—but it is not toppled.

Contemporary continental philosophy of religion thus undermines the truth challenge, and also provides a rejoinder to the meaning challenge *par excellence*. The very idea of capitalized Truth is the central target of these philosophers' postmodern critique in general, but especially when it comes to religion. Marion indicates in his theology of impossibility that not only can God's existence be thought of in terms of truth, it cannot even be thought in terms of being. Ultimately, the impossible possibility of God is *agape*—charity, or love— which, in turn, becomes the orienting value for theology against which all subsequent claims about God must be judged. This shift from the truth of God to the love of God is evident in Vattimo's critiques of institutional Christianity, and in Caputo's theology of the event. The question of whether religion is "True" does not and cannot, in fact, enter into the domain of religion. This is ultimately because it is the very function of religion to circumscribe and undermine hegemonic systems and ways of being that seek to totalize and crowd out the possibility of the impossible.

The hermeneutical approach to postmodern religion creates a sharp focus upon how religion is functioning in different contexts in the world in this era. Assessing the function of religion philosophically means connecting the dots between these different experiences in a way that remains humble, contingent, and does not subject them to a "grand narrative" or a priori metaphysic. The weakness of Vattimo and Caputo's thinking, the radical constraint of Marion's

theologizing impossibility, and Derrida's deconstructive focus upon the affective

quality of "religion without religion" articulate what religion *does* and indeed

must continue to do in the postmodern (or late modern) age. So long as

hegemonic structures of hyper-rationality and scientism seek to totalize the world

of discourse and claim all knowledge as their own, religion remains as a critical

propadeutic, the site where the impossibility of totality is acknowledged and

maintained.

This critical function is a crucial and necessary corrective to analytic

approaches to the philosophy of religion, which set out to articulate the logic of

religious discourse, either in a very broad or narrow sense, for the sake of

claiming the possibility of religious knowledge. In either case, the presumption

that the analysis of religious language and supplying a coherent logic based upon

its use would be sufficient to constitute a philosophy of religion that ensures

genuine religious knowledge is false—or, from a postmodern perspective, it is at

the very least a misapprehension and uncritical neglect of the phenomenological

aspects of religion—namely, its rootedness in the impossible (as Caputo says, the

"salt" that makes an experience *an experience*). By treating religious language as

a discourse like any other, rather than as the discourse that undermines and

critiques every form of discourse, analytic philosophy misses the crucial and

necessary function that religion has to perform as the locus of what is unsayable

and impossible in experience. This insight further highlights the consonance of

deconstruction as a methodology with religion.

Chapter 5: The Meaning Challenge: A Review

Rather than describing religion as a constellation of conceptual and/or practical content that may be reasonably adopted (or not), continental philosophies of religion focus instead upon the important function of religious beliefs *and* practices. 'Religion,' at least in some deconstructed sense of the word, names something essential to living a meaningful life, particularly in the context of modernity: namely, an awareness of the limits of reason, and an openness to what lays beyond those limits. At the same time, however, the post-modern view examined in the previous chapter emphasizes understanding religion in a non-essentialist way—or, at least, in a way that does not fall into the modern trap of essentialism. What is one to make of this non-essentialist account of what is essential about religion for a meaningful life?

This seemingly-contradictory formulation highlights an aspect of the meaning challenge that has so far gone largely unaddressed: namely, the emphasis upon "justification" for the necessity of religion as the key component of any rejoinder. The meaning challenge denies that religion is necessary for a meaningful life. This ought not be construed as a descriptive or empirical claim. To claim, for instance, that it is empirically true that religion is superfluous in the life of Pope Francis would be absurd. Instead of operating in the register of description, the meaning challenge falls squarely in that of justification. The role of religion cannot be justified, so the challenge goes, in light of religious claims' untruth and the intolerable consequences of religious praxis. The meaning challenge synthesizes the truth and consequences challenges, and forms the crux

of the New Atheist position. It represents nothing less than an absolute denial of any possible justification, epistemic or moral, for the perseverance of religion in the contemporary global environment.

The postmodern continental philosophers of religion discussed in Chapter 4 reveal the bankruptcy of attempts to justify religion in terms of some description of its "essence," regardless of whether that essence is described in terms of language, emotion, neurophysiology, etc. In postmodern thought, any claim to some sort of essential, true, rational knowledge of God, whether theoretical or practical, is dead on arrival. Instead, the category of 'religion' names what is essentially impossible to essentialize. 'Religion' (or, to use Derrida's nomenclature, *religio*) evokes a certain kind of sensibility, which does not constitute knowledge *per se*, but rather a certain kind of orientation or being-in-the-world. This view awakens one to the limitations of modern philosophical treatments of religion, whether theistic or atheistic. In both cases, arguments for or against religion come to naught insofar as they overstep and overlook the yawning gap between human understanding and the divine.

This line of thinking does not provide a straightforward justification of the need for religion, however. Instead, it remains true to its phenomenological and deconstructive roots in offering a commentary upon the significant and important role religion plays in the world. It is a role that can only be uncovered, however, by pushing through the dialectic of essentialism and skepticism that characterizes modern philosophy of religion, and wading into the pluralistic, nuanced realm of postmodern thought. Contemporary continental philosophy of religion highlights, deconstructs, evokes, and attends to the ways in which

religion highlights, evokes, deconstructs, and attends to possibility, newness, and value. In this way, it provides a concrete link between religion and these aspects of experience, which may be construed as a rejoinder—albeit a tangential one—to the meaning challenge.

This positive description of the role and function of religion in human existence shares much in common with yet another school of thought in the philosophy of religion: pragmatism. By centering religion's *function*, rather than its linguistic, ritualistic, or neurophysiological content, continental and pragmatist philosophies of religion both undermine the meaning challenge's appeal for justification. In the next chapter, I will provide a novel description of pragmatist philosophy of religion, highlighting its continuities with continental philosophy of religion, as well as points of dissent and critique. I highlight the notion of 'integration,' borrowed from Mary Parker Follett as a useful corrective to the confusion engendered by the use of the term "transcendence" in pragmatist (and continental) philosophy of religion. I claim that integration, properly understood as a creative response to a particular kind of problem engendered in human experience, is how the pragmatists William James, John Dewey, and Josiah Royce understand the basic function and role of religion in human experience. But before I make this case, I want to pause and describe how precisely the pragmatist approach to the philosophy of religion alerts us to the significance of integration, and in doing so, achieves the overall goal of this essay: namely, to offer a philosophical rejoinder to the three challenges that religion is untrue, immoral, and unnecessary.

Interlude: A Metaphilosophical Review of the Meaning Challenge

The meaning challenge, as it is formulated in the hyper-modern thought of the New Atheism, sets the debate over religion's place in human existence in terms of providing a rational justification. The grounds for this justification must be either properly epistemic (that is, the meaningfulness of religion may be offered on the basis of the possibility and significance of true religious knowledge), ethical (religion can be justified as a moral good), emotional (religion is meaningful because of the feelings it engenders), aesthetic (religion captures the beauty of the world), or some combination of all of these. Most importantly, however, there must be something unique and independent of these domains that necessitates religion, as it, too, stands unique and apart as one domain of meaning among many in the pluralistic context of the late-modern world. Otherwise, if other domains of meaning serve the same function(s), religion can be dismissed as superfluous.

In a manner similar to the consequences and truth challenges discussed earlier in this essay, I would argue that assuming that the necessity of religion can or must be justified in this manner creates a methodological constraint in how one addresses the phenomena of religion that, in turn, overdetermines the kind of conversation that can be had about religion's meaning. That a rejoinder to the meaning challenge must constitute a "*justification for the necessity of religion*" is neither a straightforward nor necessary assumption to make. In the case of the consequences challenge, I indicated how problematic it is to concede that there is a clearly-defined category of "religious violence." Similarly, with the truth challenge, I showed that attempts to either reify or dismiss "religious knowledge"

altogether were also prone to error. In this final chapter, I would offer that the meaning challenge's emphasis upon justification is a similarly problematic methodological orientation for the philosophy of religion in general. I concur with Zuurdeeg (see Chapter 2 above) that philosophy of religion should not primarily be an apologetic endeavor. Philosophers ought not (and probably cannot) "win souls" through their arguments.

What, then, ought a philosophy of religion do? What is philosophy of religion capable of doing? These questions have haunted attempts to respond to the three challenges from different philosophical perspectives throughout this essay. The philosophical genealogy of the three challenges in Chapter 3 highlighted the tension between essentialism and skepticism, and provided some much-needed context for the analytic, empirical, and continental approaches to the philosophy of religion. In the case of analytic philosophy of religion, skepticism about our ability to interpret the meaning of language informed the varying degrees to which different philosophers "bought in" to religious systems. At one extreme of the spectrum, Ayer claimed religion carries emotional significance, but does not constitute a properly rational source of knowledge. At the other extreme, Plantinga affirmed that the essential tenets of Christian belief are rationally warranted, if, in fact, they are true—a question that is notoriously difficult to answer empirically. In Plantinga's case, skepticism about the empirical veracity of Christian beliefs does not preclude claiming that they are essentially rational, while in Ayer's, skepticism about the rational meaning of religious claims indicates that they must be essentially emotional. In between these positions, functionalist analytic philosophers of religion like Ferré remained

skeptical of the possibility of making sense of religious language outside of its function in particular contexts (i.e. language games). Functionalist analytic philosophy of religion concerns discerning the "rules of the game," which, in turn, constitute the essence of religion—but only in a radically constrained fashion.

In each of these cases, the essence of religion is radically constrained: either to a purely emotional content, or to a specific set of tenets or practices that constitute an independent domain of significance, separate and discontinuous from the non-religious secular domain. Either way, there would be no grounds for appealing to the neutral ground of secular rationality to justify the necessity of religion in an independent manner.

With empirical philosophy of religion, skepticism about supernaturalism and whether religious language adequately captures the phenomena of religious *experience* leads to a staunch naturalism and, in some cases, a thoroughgoing materialism that describes religion essentially in terms of cognitive functioning and neural systems. However, when such essentialist descriptions are treated as normative (either in support of or against religion), they either commit the naturalistic fallacy or introduce a secondary framework of values (such as evolutionary theory or scientism) that, in turn, overdetermines any response to the meaning challenge in advance.

Continental philosophy of religion, as discussed above, aims to deconstruct the dialectic of skepticism and essentialism. The basic aim of these philosophers is to provoke a renewed awareness of what religion evokes in experience. The vocative quality of this philosophy indicates how these thinkers seek to overcome the subject-object dualism that drives the skepticism-

essentialism dialectic. The eventfulness of the divine in Derrida', Marion', and Caputo's thought especially is understood to be the element of religion which most demands our attention. It is experienced as a demand, an address, a call. But a call to what? To deconstruction—to not sitting idly as claims to objective truth are floated as fact, or intra-discursive debates over the rules of a certain language game are allowed to pass for genuine consideration of religious experience. It is not that these thinkers are simply applying deconstruction in the domain of religion for the sake of furthering deconstruction. Religion calls for deconstruction because deconstruction is already part of what 'religion' names in Euro-modernity. It is the site of what is beyond reason, beyond good and evil, and beyond being.

Pragmatism, I would argue, shares a similar (pro)vocative orientation in common with that of deconstruction. This is evident in James's description of "What Pragmatism Means," when he writes that "a pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction...and towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power...Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work."[1] In his classic articulation, James describes pragmatism as a method for resolving metaphysical disputes, coupled with a theory of truth that reflects an underlying epistemological orientation of "radical empiricism." Based upon a reading of Peirce's seminal essay "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," James describes

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[1] William James, "What Pragmatism Means," in *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 379-80.

pragmatism as considering philosophical ideas—any ideas, really—solely in terms of their concrete effects in experience: that is, in terms of the sensations, reactions, and activities that one may expect. In *Pragmatism*, James is initially concerned with the way in which pragmatism intervenes in the late-modern debate between rationalism (which James describes as the love of abstractions and systematicity) and empiricism (the position motivated by a love of concrete though inexorably plural facts). This debate may, on the one hand, be a manifestation of the classical debate in Western philosophy over whether reality is basically one or many: at the same time, it can also be construed as a manifestation of what I have described as the tense debate between essentialism and skepticism. "The pragmatic method" provides a means of cutting through this conflict, James claims, because it "can remain religious like the rationalisms, but at the same time, like the empiricisms, it can preserve the richest intimacy with the facts."[2] This is because pragmatism famously treats of the "practical cash-value"[3] of ideas, by claiming that the truth of ideas ought to be understood in terms of the relation of those ideas to actual experience. This concern with cash-value does not imply the "materialistic bias" that "ordinary empiricism labors under," meaning that pragmatism "has no *a priori* prejudices against theology. *If theological ideas prove to have value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much.*"[4] James concludes with the caveat that the truth of theological ideas is not merely contingent upon their relation to concrete experience, but also to other ideas recognized as true.

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[2] Ibid., p. 373.
[3] Ibid., p. 380.
[4] Ibid., p. 387.

Pragmatism thus does not dismiss religious ideas out of hand as either false or non-truth functional, even as it holds open the possibility that theological ideas may not in fact prove true in the light of other, non-theological ideas.

The pragmatist approach to philosophy, knowledge, and truth is grounded for James in the recognition that the world itself is "pure experience," in which the abstractions and systems of rationalism and the variety of concrete objects and facts of empiricism are not separate. Instead, all ideas "terminate" in concrete realities, even as they originate in cognitive activity. "Knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is *made*; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time."[5] The radicality of James' "radical empiricism" is to treat the *relations* between ideas and facts as the site of truth, rather than simply the ideas or facts themselves. This is because the significance (the cash-value) of either the facts or ideas only emerges in their interconnection in experience—or, more properly, in experiences, joined into a "stream of consciousness" that is the transcendental condition for the possibility of knowledge, value, even life itself: "Life is in the transitions as much as in the terms connected; often, indeed, it seems to be there more."[6] James held that there is no contradiction between claiming that experience is "both one and many"—a position he describes as "pluralistic monism."[7] Such a position is tenable from the pragmatist perspective, because the relation of ideas to facts is not just real, but is the site of significance, value, and truth in general. Relations of subjects to objects, knowers to facts, actors to effects constitute the coin-of-

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[5] James, "The World of Pure Experience," in *Writings*, p. 201.
[6] Ibid., pp. 212-3.
[7] James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy," in *Writings*, p. 366.

the-realm of experience. In turn, neither facts nor concepts can be intelligible except in relation to one another.

James offers this perspective as an intervention in the philosophical debate between empiricism and rationalism, which is another way of describing the ongoing dialectic between skepticism and essentialism. Furthermore, James repeatedly and explicitly alerts us to pragmatism's intervention for the sake of rehabilitating theological ideas and religious experience. So long as these features of religion can be shown to have cash-value (positive or negative) in experience, they cannot be overlooked. In this way, James's commitment to radical empiricism in orienting his pragmatic method hints at undermining the meaning challenge's claim that religion is superfluous.

Similarly, in his essay "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism," Dewey seeks to clarify James's position (and his own) by asserting that pragmatism primarily rests upon a tacit presupposition about "what experience is and means." "Immediate empiricism," Dewey writes, "postulates that things— anything, everything, in the ordinary and non-technical use of the term 'thing'— are what they are experienced as."[8] Dewey claims that this presupposition ought to be uncontroversial; the controversies of philosophy revolve around what kind or sorts of experiences are referred to different things. The most important distinction for Dewey is not between, say, how a thing is known and what the immediate, sensible features of it are—both constitute ways of experiencing a thing. Instead, the degree of *determinacy* of a given experience is what is most

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[8] John Dewey, "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism," in *The Middle Works, 1899-1924*, Vol 3., ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), p. 158.

significant: the difference between knowledge and fact is the difference between a situation that has been cognized and rendered more determinate by being thought through, versus a situation that either has not been engaged cognitively or that confounds one's cognitive faculties.[9] Cognitive activity, according to Dewey, allows for greater determinacy in a situation, even if that greater determinacy is only a nearer and clearer sense of how little is determinate.

The indeterminacy of a situation, in keeping with the principle of immediate/radical empiricism, must be treated as genuine and real. Indeterminacy does not render a given experience "false," or non-truth-functional. Rather, Dewey writes that "The question of truth is not as to whether Being or Non-Being, Reality or Mere Appearance, is experienced, but as to the *worth* of a certain concretely experienced thing…It is in the concrete thing *as experienced* that all grounds and clues to its own intellectual and logical rectification are contained."[10] Hence, indeterminacy marks the degree to which those "grounds and clues" remain obscured in a given experience. At the same time, any given experience is determinate, at least to the degree that it can be identified *as an experience*.

With this description of the meaning of experience in mind, Dewey concludes that "Philosophic conceptions have, I believe, outlived their usefulness considered as stimulants to emotions, or as a species of sanctions; and a larger, more fruitful and more valuable career awaits them considered as specifically experienced meanings."[11] Here, Dewey makes the metaphilosophical claim that

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[9] See ibid., pp. 160-2.
[10] Ibid., p. 163.
[11] Ibid., p. 166.

philosophy must transcend its appeal to temperament (a chief complaint of

James), as well as its claim to judicatory power in matters of rationality. Instead,

philosophy must focus its energies upon the relation of ideas like truth,

knowledge, justice, religion, etc., to the facts with which they are associated, and

which together constitute "an experience" of truth, knowledge, etc., etc.

Philosophy is not, then, the contemplation of experience, but rather a mode of

intellectual activity that operates and (as James remarked) "comes to life in the

tissues of experience." "The prime function of philosophy," Dewey writes in

Reconstruction in Philosophy, "is that of rationalizing the possibilities of

experience, especially collective human experience."[12] Rather than sitting back

and constructing theories, or simply engaging in piecemeal engagement with the

plurality of experiences, philosophy is a cognitive activity that treats of the

"possibilities" latent in the "grounds and clues" to the determinate meaning of

experience—which constitute, pragmatically speaking, the truth of experience.

There is a melioristic aspect to Dewey's pragmatism as well. In "The Need

for a Recovery of Philosophy," he writes,

> As a matter of fact, the pragmatic theory of intelligence means that the
>
> function of mind is to project new and more complex ends – to free
>
> experience from routine and from caprice. Not the use of thought to
>
> accomplish purposes already given either in the mechanism of the body or

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[12] Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, in *The Middle Works,* Vol. 12, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: SIU Press, 2008) p. 150.

in that of the existent state of society, but the use of intelligence to liberate

and liberalize action, is the pragmatic lesson.[13]

This orientation towards the betterment of society, the increase of freedom and

social determination through treating democracy as a way of life is perhaps the

best known feature of Dewey's philosophy. It is this liberatory strain, for instance,

that Cornell West found so fruitful when he incorporated Deweyan pragmatism

into his own philosophical view that he calls "prophetic pragmatism."[14] At the

same time, Dewey was criticized, most notably (and vociferously) by theologian

Reinhold Niebuhr in *Moral Man, Immoral Society* for his supposed naivete in

putting so much stock in the power of human intelligence to overcome social

evils.[15]

Christian Matheis[16] offers an alternative way of reading this passage.

Rather than evaluating the claims Dewey is making, Matheis suggests that the

importance of this passage is the way it alerts the reader to the liberative

potential of the very notion of 'intelligence.' This is a characteristic of pragmatist

philosophy more generally: rather than treating ideas or concepts as explanatory,

descriptive, or justificatory, they are treated as *alertive*—that is, concepts alert us

to new and potentially liberatory possibilities. Concepts like 'race,' 'justice,'

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[13] Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery in Philosophy," in *The Middle Works*, Vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: SIU Press, 2008), pp. 44-5.

[14] See Cornell West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (Madison: UW Press, 1989), pp. 71-109.

[15] See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), pp. 35, 212.

[16] Christian Matheis, "We Who Make One Another: Liberatory Solidarity as Relational" PhD Diss., Virginia Polytechnic Institute, Blacksburg VA (2015), Collection 12485. This section also draws upon an unpublished paper presented at the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, 2017. I am grateful for the author's permission to make use of his ideas in this context.

'democracy,' and, indeed, 'religion' create a relation through their alerting one to what is previously either lost in the shuffle of the quotidian, or absented from the world through speculation. Pragmatism is a philosophy that both calls philosophers to account in abstract discourse, even as it alerts those entrenched in conservative patterns of action and thought to new and liberatory possibilities.

An "alert" is different from a "call." A call may or may not be acknowledged and responded to. An alert is more difficult to ignore, insofar as it signals a problematic situation that requires attention and responsive action. The pragmatist emphasis upon the working-out of concepts in lived experience indicates that ideas and intentions come into their significance when they are acted upon. The pragmatist philosopher does not simply clarify ideas in a descriptive sense, or verify truths in a justificatory sense. Rather, the pragmatist alerts a community of inquirers to those ideas and concepts which, when taken up and *acted upon*, lead to a truer, more meaningful, and more liberatory way of being in the world. Without action, the alert—and, indeed, the whole philosophical enterprise of critical reflection—is utterly meaningless.

The role of the pragmatist philosopher of religion, then, is primarily alertive: not descriptive, nor justificatory. There are descriptive and justificatory elements involved in calling attention to ameliorative possibilities. Those possibilities must be made clear and shown to be viable. But first and foremost, it is the role of the philosopher to treat concepts as shapers and potentially re-shapers of experience in melioristic ways. On this view, the philosophy of religion ought not to be focused upon pure description or justification of religious praxis, but upon the questions: what liberative possibilities does this concept 'religion'

alert us to? What deep dynamics of experience does 'religion' call to attention? How does 'religion' provoke, or even demand, a response?

Seeing the three challenges through this philosophical lens changes them dramatically. According to James, pragmatism provides a theory of truth, and it is a theory that James himself enthusiastically applied in defense of religious believing. But the pragmatist theory of truth itself also alerts us to the insufficiency of the hyper-rational debates of traditional ontotheology that form the primary content of the truth challenge. It calls attention to the need to situate the question of the truth of religion in the way it actually functions in experience, rather than in speculative discourse. In other words, whether the claims of religion are true or not is a matter of whether they "work" in action, and "cash out" in melioristic and liberatory ways.

The consequences challenge inevitably rises in stature from the perspective of a pragmatist philosophy of religion. The truth of religious claims is ultimately reflected in the consequences of religious concepts being intentionally put into action. Thus, these consequences are a subject of special scrutiny, from the historical/empiricist perspective of the pragmatist. The pragmatist commitment to the bounded, situated character of experience, however, undermines the grandiose claims of the consequences challenge. The empirical argument that religion results in an overall quantum of violence that outweighs non-religious violence is too broad to carry water in a pragmatist discussion of the consequences of religion.

The more pragmatistic alternative would be to examine the extent to which specific religious ideas lend themselves to violent acts in certain contexts,

attending to the totality of the experience of the violence to rule out and account for other contributing factors. At the same time, the liberationist strain within pragmatist thinking also calls attention to the questions of the positive consequences of religion, which cannot afford to be overlooked if religion proves to have some "cash value" in experience.

Most importantly, however, the meaning challenge can no longer be considered or responded to primarily as a question of justifying the specific *necessity* of religion in a meaningful life on anything other than religious experience itself—that is, the actions and interactions to which 'religion' alerts us. Such a justification may be arrived at through a consideration of the pragmatic value of religious beliefs (i.e. on an assessment of their "workings"). However, I would contend that the primary value of pragmatist philosophy of religion is not that it ultimately *justifies* the necessity of religion—indeed, such a claim would be a misrepresentation of the thinkers' views whom I discuss in this chapter—but rather that pragmatist philosophy of religion *alerts* us to the deep significance of the concept of 'religion,' and, in so doing, provokes religious *action*.

It is not, then, a matter of providing an argument in advance that will justify leading a religious life (this seems to be what the folks who offer the meaning challenge have in mind as a response). Rather, the philosophical engagement of a pragmatist philosophy of religion begins and ends in the intra-active experience that 'religion' alerts us to. The focus is upon provoking one to engage the real possibilities of liberation and amelioration in religion. The goal is to somehow articulate the eventfulness of that experience (to borrow a phrase from the previous chapter), to point a finger and shine a light upon it. More than

that, though, being alerted to the meaningfulness of religion indicates a specific course of concrete action that cries out to be taken. In this way, the value of the religious experience comes to justify itself in its unfolding.

Pragmatist Philosophy of Religion: Past and Present

There has been something of a boom in scholarship on pragmatist philosophy of religion in recent years. With book-length examinations of specific classical" figures like Dewey,[17] Peirce,[18] Royce,[19] James,[20] and Santayana,[21] as well as works collecting or critically comparing these figures' views on religion,[22]

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[17] See Steven Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994); Victor Kestenbaum, *The Grace and Severity of the Ideal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and Melvin Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy* (New York: Columbia UP, 2012). Dewey is a particularly interesting case, because many have written about the need *not* to take his views of religion to be actually about 'religion' *per se*, but rather to see his writing of religion as an extension of his purely secular reconstructive philosophy. See, e.g. Michael Eldridge's chapter "Dewey's Religious Proposal," in *Transforming Experience: John Dewey's Cultural Instrumentalism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1998).

[18] See Michael Raposa, *Peirce's Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989); Hermann Deuser. *Gott: Geist und Natur : theologische Konsequenzen aus Charles S. Peirce' Religionsphilosophie* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1993); Douglas R. Anderson, *Strands of System: The Philosophy of Charles Peirce* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1995); Leon J. Niemoczynski, *Charles Sanders Peirce and a Religious Metaphysics of Nature* (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2011); and Richard Kenneth Atkins, *Peirce and the Conduct of Life: Sentiment and Instinct in Ethics and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2016).

[19] See Frank M Oppenheim, *Royce's Mature Philosophy of Religion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987); Dwayne A. Tunstall, *Yes, but Not Quite: Encountering Josiah Royce's Ethico-Religious Insight* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); and Kelly A. Parker and Krzysztof Piotr Skowroński. *Josiah Royce for the Twenty-First Century: Historical, Ethical, and Religious Interpretations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

[20] Ellen Kappy Suckiel, *Heaven's Champion: William James's Philosophy of Religion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); Hunter Brown, *William James: On Radical Empiricism and Religion* (Toronto and Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Wayne Proudfoot, *William James and a Science of Religions: Reexperiencing the Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004); Michael Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009); Jeremy R. Carrette, *William James's Hidden Religious Imagination: A Universe of Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Henrik Rydenfelt and Sami Pihlström. *William James on* Religion (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Donald Capps, *The Religious Life: The Insights of William James* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

[21] See Edward W. Lovey, *George Santayana's Philosophy of Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

[22] See Stuart Rosenbaum, Ed. *Pragmatism and Religion: Classical Sources and Original Essays* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003); John M. Capps and Donald Capps, eds.,

religious problems have become increasingly identified as central concerns of the pragmatist tradition. For most of the twentieth century, many assumed pragmatism to be associated with secular humanism, naturalism, and atheism. In large part, this was due to subsequent generations of thinkers who emphasized these values in their interpretation of the pragmatist tradition (most notably Sidney Hook and Richard Rorty). In the late 1980s and 90s, a new wave of scholarship challenged those assumptions: as Richard Bernstein notes, "Pragmatism is not indifferent or hostile to the religious life...On the contrary, *all* the classical pragmatists argued that a pragmatic orientation can help us to clarify the concrete meaning of religious life."[23] The work of the past two-plus decades of rediscovering the fundamental concern of the classical pragmatists with religion has created the conditions for more thoroughgoing, systematic treatments of "pragmatist philosophy of religion" today.

Michael Slater's recent book *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Religion*, and an even more recent collection of essays entitled *The Varieties of Transcendence*, edited by Hermann Deuser et al., take up this project, but in decidedly different ways.[24] In his book, Slater compounds classical and neo-pragmatist figures James, Dewey, Rorty, and Kitcher, in order to "demonstrate

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James and Dewey on Belief and Experience (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005); Frank M Oppenheim, *Reverence for the Relations of Life: Re-Imagining Pragmatism Via Josiah Royce's Interactions with Peirce, James, and Dewey* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005); J. Caleb Clanton, *The Classical American Pragmatists and Religion: A Reader* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2011); and John W. Woell, *Peirce, James, and a Pragmatic Philosophy of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2012).

[23] Richard Bernstein, "Pragmatism's Common Faith," in Rosenbaum (ed.), *Pragmatism and Religion*, p. 140.

[24] Slater, *Pragmatism and the Philosophy of Religion* (op. cit); and Hermann Deuser, Hans Joas, Matthias Jung, and Magnus Schlette, eds., *Varieties of Transcendence: Pragmatism and the Theory of Religion* (New York: Fordham UP, 2016).

the compatibility of pragmatism with supposedly 'anti-pragmatist' metaphysical views such as theism and metaphysical realism."[25] Deuser et al.'s volume, on the other hand, focuses on "the various connections between Peirce's, James's, Royce's, and Dewey's reflections on religion and on their relevance for a philosophical theory of religion in our time."[26] Unlike the work of Slater and Sami Pihlström,[27] *Varieties of Transcendence* passes over neopragmatism in silence, presumably because the editors and contributors to this volume view the possibility of reconciling "classical" and "neo" pragmatism into a single coherent tradition as dependent upon a prior reconciliation of what Randall Auxier has called the "two types" of classical pragmatism.[28] From an intellectual-historical perspective, this approach is much sounder, insofar as it is less exclusive in its treatment of the origins of the pragmatist tradition of philosophy of religion than that of Slater and Pihlström.[29]

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[25] Slater, *Pragmatism and Philosophy of Religion,* p. 4. In his book, Slater uses Dewey as the lynchpin for connecting classical and neopragmatism, arguing that Dewey differentiated himself from his predecessors James and Peirce by his "thoroughly naturalistic account of religion" (p. 108).

[26] Deuser et al., *Varieties of Transcendence*, p. 4.

[27] See Sami Pihlström *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (New York: Fordham UP, 2013). Pihlström argues that "scholarly studies on the classical pragmatists or their religious ideas rarely take neopragmatism seriously enough. A substantial look at both classical and recent currents in pragmatist thought is needed to evaluate the relevance of this extremely rich philosophical orientation to the philosophy of religion today and also to compare it to other traditions and perspectives" (p. ix). Unlike Slater, Pihlström argues that it is *James* who provides a methodological (rather than metaphysical) thru-line connecting classical and neopragmatist philosophy of religion (see pp. 99-128).

[28] See Randall Auxier, "Two Types of Pragmatism: Dewey and Royce," in *Dewey's Enduring Impact: Essays on America's Philosopher*, eds. John R. Shook and Paul Kurtz (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2011), pp. 125-45. Auxier describes the "two types" as the "Dewey/James" and "Royce/Peirce" types. He rather polemically condemns neopragmatism as a pure embodiment of the "Dewey/James" type that has avoided "*difficult* philosophy" by eschewing metaphysics and having no regard for the "Royce/Peirce" type. He concludes that "the cash value of radical-empirical pragmatism is seriously occluded by its habit of ignoring the logical and metaphysical resources with which it might learn to handle ideals" (p. 145).

[29] Both Slater and Pihlström only treat James, Dewey, and Peirce in their books, because both seem to be combatting the impression that pragmatism is essentially conjoined with ontological naturalism and materialism. Both authors argue that this is not the case, and do so in large part to

From a philosophical perspective, as well, Deuser et al.'s claims in the introduction to *Varieties* that "All pragmatists share a concept of transcendence," and that "transcendence" may be considered a "common pragmatist denominator,"[30] points to what they think makes pragmatist philosophy of religion uniquely relevant. From a pragmatist perspective, 'transcendence' names what religious experience contributes "to solve problems in the process of individual self-realization."[31] The "semiotic significance of transcendence" is another emphasis of pragmatist philosophy of religion. This focus upon semiotics provides a means for expressing "the integral relationship between the individual religious consciousness and the community-based symbolic frameworks of its articulation."[32] In this way, Deuser et al. indicate pragmatism's most significant contribution to the philosophy of religion: namely, its emphasis upon the way in which religion organizes selves and communities into a determinately ordered reality. "In this context," they conclude, "'having religion'…means as much as being aware of a higher order as the other of our partial, fragmented intentions and actions, an order that we experience through our striving for probation in the world."[33]

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show the relevance of pragmatism in the contemporary debate over religious realism vs. nonrealism. John Woell's *Peirce, James, and a Pragmatic Philosophy of Religion* (op. cit., note 6 above) follows a similar line of argumentation. Robert Neville's *Realism in Religion: A Pragmatist's perspective* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009) is a more original contribution to the religious realism debate, though Neville does draw upon the work of Peirce extensively in that book (see esp. chapters 3, 6, and 7). Pihlström also seeks to show the relevance of pragmatism in debates over the problem of evil, but in doing so inexplicably eschews any consideration of Royce's treatment of the subject, despite it being one of the most well-known features of Royce's philosophy of religion.

[30] Deuser et al., *Varieties of Transcendence*, p. 2.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., p. 4.

[33] Ibid., p. 2.

The problem with much of philosophy of religion today is that reduces religion to one or the other of these aspects. Religion is usually conceived either as a system of beliefs that express a higher order (whether that order is real or not), or as a set of practices that influence human flourishing (either positively or negatively, depending upon whom one asks). In both cases, the fundamental meaningfulness that religion has in human existence is sundered, or it is only considered in a piecemeal way—which is not the goal of a philosophy of religion.[34]

Pragmatist philosophy of religion avoids this problematic dualism by connecting these two features of religion in a single, functional interpretation. Deuser et al. did well to identify 'transcendence' as the crucial concept in pragmatist philosophy of religion—it provides an orientation for thinking about the ways in which religion cashes out in experience. This terminology is misleading, however, insofar as 'transcendence' most commonly connotes either a higher metaphysical state, one that can be juxtaposed to 'immanence,' or a movement between different metaphysical states. Centering 'transcendence' gives the appearance that pragmatist philosophy of religion is yet another philosophy in the tradition of ontotheology. But this metaphysical emphasis is not Deuser et al.'s final view: for the editors and contributors to this volume, pragmatist

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[34] This piecemeal approach would rather be the project of a "science of religion." E.S. Brightman, in the introduction to his *A Philosophy of Religion* (Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1940), differentiates between a "science" of religion and a "philosophy" of religion by saying "Both science and philosophy are movements of experience from a state of confusion and contradiction toward a state of order and coherence. Science is such a movement within a limited field; philosophy aims to include and interpret all experience in a comprehensive unity" (p. 1). Insofar as the philosophy of religion *qua* philosophy "aims to include and interpret all experience," it must include and interpret *every dimension of religious experience* "in a comprehensive unity." This methodological push for comprehensiveness and unity is also what is behind the attempt to get at a comprehensive, unified interpretation of the pragmatist philosophy of religion.

philosophy of religion is fundamentally focused on the *function that religion has* in human experience. In this way, pragmatist philosophy of religion mirrors continental postmodern philosophy of religion in its movement away from ontotheology and towards the situations and events that constitute religious experience.

Conclusion

Taking this functional perspective, I suggest 'integration' as a better way to understand the "common pragmatist denominator" in the philosophy of religion, as opposed to 'transcendence.' This is not just a matter of word play. Rooting pragmatist philosophy of religion in 'integration' rather than 'transcendence' is, on my reading, not only truer to the thought of James, Dewey, and Royce, but also provides a unique opportunity to see what these three thinkers share in common. Royce, in particular, has been traditionally ostracized from discussions of pragmatism, despite his own claims to having an affinity for many pragmatist tenets. Royce and Dewey are often juxtaposed as unreconstructed vs. reconstructed neo-Hegelians, with Royce clinging to the outmoded metaphysical view of Absolute Idealism, while Dewey embraces a naturalistic, experimentalist ontology. This distinction is a fair one; however, when it comes to matters of religion, in particular, Dewey and Royce share much more in common than one might expect. In what follows, I intend to demonstrate these commonalities by focusing upon how these thinkers employ the notion of integration at the level of the individual, the community, and the totality of experience as a way of alerting us to the creative and liberatory possibilities of religion.

Thinking about religion in terms of integration rather than transcendence also clarifies the relation of pragmatist philosophy of religion to the postmodern theologies discussed in the last chapter. Just as Derrida, Vattimo, Marion, and Caputo sought to overcome the prejudices of ontotheology and refocus the meaning of religion upon the event/advent of impossible possibilities, so too is pragmatist philosophy of religion concerned with alerting us to new forms of possibility. However, the pragmatist approach differs, insofar as it provides a more robust understanding of the problematic situation in which such possibilities become available, as well as how the peculiar responses of religion must be understood as responding to particular, concrete, worldly problems. This paradigmatic focus upon disruption, problematic situations, and engaging in ameliorative responses marks pragmatism in general, and enables one to have a unique insight into the meaningfulness of religion.

Chapter 6: Integration and Pragmatist Philosophy of Religion

"Integration" is a term of art borrowed from Mary Parker Follett, whose philosophy is described as a hybrid pragmatist-idealist feminism of the early 20th century. According to Judy Whipps, Follett, who studied with James and Dewey, and whose work shared commonalities with her contemporary Jane Addams, developed the notion of integration as her "central philosophical concept." "For Follett, integration is an ontological principle…it offers a method for growth. Integration is also the foundation of her political theory…in her later writings, the integrative process becomes central to her conflict resolution process."[35] In her book *Creative Experience*, Follett introduces the term 'integration' as "a way by which desires may interweave…a method by which the full integrity of the individual shall be one with the social progress…to make our daily experience yield for us larger and yet larger spiritual values."[36] Follett describes how "integrative behavior" in situations of social conflict leads to a resolution through the creation of a "plus-value":[37] that is, a new, shared value that reflects the totality of the situation, instead of the perspective of one or the other interested parties. Follett's understanding of "integration" is an extension of individual *Gestalt*-school psychology to a social level, in recognition of what she calls "the deepest truth of life" that "We move always in a larger life than we are directly cognizant of."[38]

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[35] Judy Whipps, "A Pragmatist Reading of Mary Parker Follett's Integrative Process," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2014), p. 408.
[36] Mary Parker Follett, *Creative Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1930), p. xiv.
[37] See Follett, p. 75, no. 14.
[38] Ibid., p. 116.

Follett points out that mere compromise will always rob one or another of the individuals involved in a dispute, because a compromise treats each party as distinct and sufficient for creating values for themselves. Compromise is a merely quantitative shifting-around of values and resources already identified as "facts" in a given situation. Integration, however, is a qualitative change in the situation that comes about by tapping into the creative potential of the situation as a whole.[39] It is not additive, but rather creatively reconstitutes every aspect of the situation —the parties involved, their relation to one another, the environment they share—in light of its totality, so that the situation is the basis for new value or meaning in experience. This creative process (ideally) neither adds nor subtracts from whatever is present in the situation in the first place. In this way, "The theory of creative experience," she concludes, "shows that the individual can create without 'transcending.' He expresses, brings into manifestation, powers which are the powers of the universe, and thereby those forms which he himself is helping to create…are ever more ready to respond, and so Life expands and deepens; fulfils and at the same moment makes possible larger fulfilment."[40]

Unlike transcendence, integration is a thoroughly immanent, yet nonetheless transformative function of individual *and* social experience. As a function, integration is fundamentally an "activity of relating," and it "is always functioning; our interest in it is on that very account."[41] 'Integration' does not name the products, but the process itself. If there is any essential feature of

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[39] Ibid., p. 163.
[40] Ibid., p. 116.
[41] Ibid., p. 76.

"integration," it is its character as a dynamic, creative *function*—one that involves both intelligence and morals[42]—and not as a state of being or way of knowing.

Properly understood, the intent of the integrative process is to resolve "the problem of uniting men without crushing them;"[43] that being said, what Follett shows is that such a "unity" can only be interpreted in terms of creative inter-activity between individual persons that is, at the same time, creative intra-activity within a given situation. Follett goes on to describe the method of integration as proceeding through the "breaking up of wholes" through analysis.[44] This analysis involves "the examining of symbols," include the "imaginary or verbal wholes" which individuals have posited on their basis of their own intentions. In a situation of conflict, each party brings his or her own intentions and demands to bear. Breaking up the whole of a situation is to ask of each party "What does the individual really want?"[45] Elsewhere, Follett describes this examination as finding "*the significant rather than the dramatic features*" of a conflict—that is, not allowing the darkness of the forest as a whole to obscure the trees—to uncover "the whole-demand…the real demand, which is being obscured by miscellaneous minor claims or by ineffective presentation."[46] Thus, in "breaking up the whole," one counterintuitively gains access to the "whole-demand." The "wholes" in these cases, however, are different: in the former case, the "wholes" are indicative of the incommensurate worldviews and social orders

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[42] See Ibid., p. 170.
[43] Ibid., p. 165.
[44] See ibid., pp. 165ff.
[45] Ibid., p. 168.
[46] Follet, "Constructive Conflict," in *Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett*, eds. Henry Metcalf and L. Urwick (New York/London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1940), pp. 40, 42.

of competing parties, whereas in the latter case, the whole is constituted by the conflicting parties themselves. Integration refocuses upon the new situational relationship that is created by conflict and division between the parties.[47]

The creative re-interpretation of these individual demands *together* is integration. This method, in turn, creates the situation anew, and re-orients the activities[48] of the individuals involved in such a way as to create a "bigger self."[49] At the individual and social level, "We build up our characters," Follett concludes, "by uniting diverse tendencies into new action patterns."[50] Integration not only generates a collective course of action in a situation of conflict and indeterminacy. It also has the effect of reconstituting the character of those involved in the situation into a fuller, more determinate one.[51]

"Unity, not uniformity, must be our aim." Follett argues that integration creates a situation of unity, but also recognizes that the integrative process is always taking place in the context of the rich plurality of distinct persons,

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[47] Conflict or disruption is crucial to the process of integration, both in its proceeding and as its impetus. In *Creative Experience*, Follett writes that "We should always see the relation between disruptive and creative forces; disruption may be a real moment in integration...This point ought to be much further developed, for it would prevent us from too superficial an optimism; by dwelling so exclusively on integration, I have rather tended to oversimplify the process of life...yet disruption is only a part of that total life process to which, in its more comprehensive aspect, we may give the name integration" (p. 168).

[48] Follett notes that "our main consideration is always with the integration of activities. It is thus impossible to speak of the integration of the persons" (p. 177). This is in keeping with the goal of integration to "unite men without crushing them," and is a bar against the charge of having some sort of absolutist or monistic ontology, rather than a pluralistic one.

[49] Ibid., p. 173. Follett clarifies this point by explaining that "the process is not that I integrate my desires, you yours, and then we together unite the results; I often make my own integration through and by means of my integration with you" (p. 177).

[50] Ibid., p. 174.

[51] It is worth pointing out that integration is not always possible. In "Constructive Conflict," Follett is careful to stipulate this from the outset: "I do not say that there is no tragedy in life. All that I say is that if we were alive to its advantages, we could often integrate instead of compromising" (p. 36). She identifies six obstacles to integration, including the high bar of intellectual ability required for integration, a general cultural aversion to the process in favor of domination, and incongruent social and linguistic structures that impede integration (pp. 45-8).

interests, and institutions. "We attain unity only through variety. Differences must be integrated, not annihilated, nor absorbed...Heterogeneity, not homogeneity, I repeat, makes unity."[52] Follett's conception of social unity is predicated upon an action-oriented, relational ontology.

> Reaction is always reaction to a relating...Integrative psychology shows us organism reaction to environment plus organism. In human relations, as I have said, this is obvious: I never react to you but to you-plus-me...in the very process of meeting, by the very process of meeting, we both become something different.[53]

Existence, according to Follett, is fundamentally relational and social, because there is no human being that is not organically interconnected with their environment. Follett acknowledges the interrelation of her social ontology to the pluralistic universe of William James. She writes in *The New State* that "there is no way of separating individuals, they coalesce and coalesce...the chasm between men is an individualistic fiction, that we are surrounded by fringes, that these overlap and that by means of these I join with others."[54] The interconnection of individuals is what gives the very notion of society its meaning; at the same time, individuals cannot be understood (except by an *a posteriori* abstraction) independent of the relations to the environment and to one another upon which they depend. Recognizing this, Follett holds, allows one to recognize the complexity of human needs, as well as the broad effectiveness of any one persons' agency.

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[52] Follet, *The New State* (London/New York: Longman Green and Co., 1918), pp. 39-40.
[53] Follett, *Creative Experience*, pp. 62-3.
[54] Follett, *The New State*, p. 60.

"Life is the true revealer," Follett concludes in *The New State*;[55] likewise, "Genuine integration occurs in the sphere of activities, and not of ideas or wills," she writes in *Creative Experience*.[56] Follett's philosophy is thoroughly pragmatic, insofar as she does not simply develop a theory, but provides a plan for *practically ordering* one's intentions and actions in accordance with this social ontology, as well as engaging in the integrative process that one can infer from it. Having been called to action, it is up to social actors to uncover the "cash value" of these ideas in concrete, everyday living.

I propose appropriating Follett's notion of integration as an *ars technica* for the common thread running through the pragmatist philosophy of religion of James, Dewey, and Royce. Follett deploys integration in a psycho-social context in *Creative Experience* to describe the process of resolving interpersonal, economic, legal, and political conflicts, in order to create progress that is both individual and social. I contend that we ought to see James, Dewey, and Royce as deploying *something like integration*[57] in their descriptions of the way religion functions as well. Integration provides a conceptual model in which to fit different aspects of religion: the problematic situation in which it develops, its interpretive nature, the creative and spontaneous energy of new possibility, and the dynamic interrelation of individuals in community. These are the aspects

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[55] Ibid., p. 265.

[56] Follett, *Creative Experience*, p. 150.

[57] I say "*something like*" here, because none of the three thinkers named actually uses the term "integration" or "integrate." *Creative Experience* comes well after Royce and James are dead (though Follett studied with James and Royce, as well as Edwin Holt, who was a colleague of these two at Harvard from 1901 onward, and whose theory of psychology is heavily influenced by James, in particular), and at the beginning of Dewey's "late" period. Nonetheless, much has been made of the connection of Follett to these other thinkers in recent scholarship. See, e.g., Scott L. Pratt, "American Power: Mary Parker Follett and Michel Foucault," *Foucault Studies* 11 (2011): pp. 76-91.

highlighted by the classical pragmatists in their discussions of religion, alerting us to the dynamic nature of religious activity in experience.

This appropriation requires a few caveats, however. First of all, and probably most importantly, Follett would probably not endorse such an appropriation. At the very best, she would find it a little strange. As a political theorist and someone interested in conflict resolution in corporate and labor settings, Follett's orientation as a thinker is largely materialist. She is concerned with democratic norms, systems of power, and structures and institutions in society. She also does not have particularly charitable things to say about organized religion; she sees Christianity in particular as having contributed to the sorry state of "the hell of our present European situation" (a reference to the Great War).[58]

She does, however, make reference to the "spiritual life" in *Creative Experience*. There, she refers to "the spirit of art" as something that flows eternally in and through the creative interaction of people with their environment (and one another). She both acknowledges that this spirit cannot manifest anywhere other than genuine living (that is, after all, where the "cash value" is), yet does not think it can be located in industry, commerce, or bureaucracy. Though Follett only gives passing mention to even a vague and romantic sense of spirituality, it would seem that she considers "the spiritual life" to be associated with the "fruitful interweavings" that result in "our material progress"—a rather vague but telling indication of a spiritual aspect to the integrative process.[59]

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[58] Follett, *The New State*, p. 344.
[59] Follett, *Creative Experience*, p. 60.

Follett's views on the philosophy of religion are too limited to develop much further than this; she simply did not say enough on the matter. At the same time, however, there is a striking congruency with her description of integration and its attendant ontology and the way in which James, Dewey, and Royce articulate their philosophy of religion. In the next section, I will endeavor to show these connections. This, in turn, will further an understanding of how pragmatist philosophy of religion responds to the meaning challenge, and alerts us to the need for religion.

Conceptual Elements of Religious Integration

On my interpretation of pragmatist philosophy of religion, the essence of religion is, first and foremost, the creative activity of integrating a plurality of objects, intentions, actions, feelings, and personalities into a determinate order—that is, a situation of determinacy which admits of the possibility of future meaningful action. *Religious* integration can be specified by four factors: (1) its orientation towards an "unseen" *widest order* (2); its arising out of a specific kind of conflict: namely, the *problem of salvation*; (3) its involving *an act of Grace*; and (4) its necessarily *interpretive, symbolic character*.

The Unseen Order

In his less-well-known but more general definition of religion in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, James describes it as consisting in "the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting

ourselves thereto."[60] This description is much more endemic to James' work than the one more commonly attributed to him: namely, that religion is "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."[61] In "The Will to Believe," "What Makes Life Significant," and "Is Life Worth Living?" James refers to the association of religion with the idea of an "unseen order." "A man's religious faith," James argues, "means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained."[62] It is the nature of this unseen order to lend "the true significance of our present mundane life," which provides only "the mere scaffolding or vestibule of a truer, more eternal world."[63] Trusting in such an order is the basic activity of religious faith, James contends in "Is Life Worth Living?"

He famously defends this trust in "The Will to Believe" as well, arguing there that "*where faith in a fact can help create the fact,* that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the 'lowest kind of immorality' into which a thinking being can fall."[64] In that essay, James offers this defense as a means of resolving the ontotheological dispute over whether or not such an unseen order exists. In "Is Life Worth Living?" however, James' concern is much less metaphysical and more plainly practical. "The

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[60] William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library, 1902)*,* p. 53.
[61] Ibid., p. 32.
[62] James, "Is Life Worth Living?" in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 51.
[63] Ibid.
[64] James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe*, p. 25.

question whether life is worth living...depends on you *the liver*."[65] This is the question of suicide, James explains: whether one succumbs to pessimism about the limited meaningfulness of one's life, or decides in favor of "your unconquerable subjectivity" in which "you find a more wonderful joy than any passive pleasure can bring in trusting ever in the larger whole."[66] The experience of deciding to end one's own life throws the nature of trusting in an unseen wider order into sharp relief. James points out that the very activity of deciding the matter signals that the meaningfulness of one's life is originally dependent upon one's own agency (upon "the liver"), which is consciously or unconsciously oriented by one's dispositions. The disposition towards recognizing a wider, more significant, truer, and more valuable order of existence than is presently available to one orients action in a particular way.

James is quick to point out, however, that this orientation of trust in the unseen order does not simply "verify itself." "Who knows? Once more it is a case of *maybe*; and once more *maybes* are the essence of the situation."[67] James admits his own ignorance and ambivalence about settling the question he proses in this essay: is life worth living? He observes only that "it *feels* like a real fight— as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem...For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted."[68] James' allusion to human nature here is telling. Human nature does not indicate whether one decides to embrace the

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[65] James, "Is Life Worth Living," pp. 59-60.
[66] Ibid., p. 60.
[67] Ibid., p. 61.
[68] Ibid.

"wild" or "saved" aspects of existence. It rather portends the deeper truth that "possibilities, not finished facts, are the realities with which we have actively to deal."[69] Thus, the "unseen order" to which James initially alludes is uncovered as a kind of "impossible possibility," as in Marion's description, and a matter of "maybes," as in the "perhaps" of Caputo.

In *A Common Faith*, the work in which John Dewey most explicitly and thoroughly engages the topic of religion, he describes the religious attitude as "bound through imagination to a *general* attitude. This comprehensive attitude, moreover, is much broader than anything indicated by 'moral' in its usual sense."[70] Dewey's description is importantly different from James' in two ways. First, Dewey specifically associates religion with the cognitive activity of the *imagination*. This is importantly different from both James and Royce, who largely associate the meaning of religion with intentionality, belief, trust, and loyalty—all of which are connected to the will, rather than the imagination. Parsing religious cognition in this way reflects the double-barreled influence of Kant, who claimed both that religion is primarily a matter of practical reasoning, and so is associated with intentionality of the will, and that religion is caught upon in the synthetic apprehension of the sublime. The distinction between these two modes of Kantian philosophy of religion are expressed here in the difference between Dewey and James. It is a distinction that Royce endeavors to overcome by describing the roles of will and imagination in religion as both/and, rather than one or the other. Secondly, Dewey emphasizes that the religious attitude

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[69] Ibid., p. 62.
[70] John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, in *Later Works*, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: SIU Press, 1989), p. 17.

towards generality cannot simply be construed in terms of morality. This seems

to be an extension of the influence of Kant's description of religion in terms of the

sublime, as opposed to purely considering it as morality. James, for one, often

conflates religion with morality, though this is tempered in *Varieties* and

associated writings (such as "On Psychical Research") in which he emphasizes the

aesthetic and experiential features of religion.

For both James and Dewey, religion functions to reconfigure individuals'

intentions towards a larger, ideal, not-as-yet-realized determinacy. Dewey writes

that religion's "natural place [is] in every aspect of human experience that is

concerned with estimate of possibilities…and with all action in behalf of their

realization."[71] While James emphasizes that "the stronghold of religion lies in

individuality,"[72] Dewey asserts that religious attitudes towards ideal ends

"assume concrete form in our understanding of our relations to one another and

the values contained in these relations."[73] This focus upon social relations as the

source of value and possibility is reminiscent of Follett's relational ontology.

More than just understanding these relations, the religious disposition marks a

plan of action in response to them: namely, to act towards the ideal ends of a

wider, unseen order held in and by the imagination as a distinct possibility. "An

unseen power controlling our destiny becomes the power of an ideal," Dewey

remarks in *A Common Faith*, shifting the locus of religious potentiality from

some supernatural or divine source to human imagination. "All possibilities, as

[71]Ibid., p. 39.
[72] James, *Varieties*, p. 493. This is also evident in the way James describes religion primarily in terms of individual belief and trust in "The Will to Believe" and "Is Life Worth Living."
[73] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 57.

possibilities, are ideal in character…For all endeavor for the better is moved by faith in what is possible, not by adherence to the actual."[74] Dewey focuses upon the motive power of faith, recognizing that it is a creative response to situations that require amelioration, rather than a cognitive activity engaged in for the sake of "saving souls."

Royce, who (among these figures, anyway) is most readily associated with the notion of a "widest order" in his conception of religious insight[75] and its necessary expression in the relation of individuals in community through religion,[76] shares this basic assumption about the function of religion with James and Dewey. These points will be elaborated in the next section, because in Royce's case (as with James), the nature and significance of the unseen order can only be apprehended in relation to the specific problematic situation with which it is associated: namely, the problem of salvation. 'Salvation' is an alertive concept that captures both the problem and the possibility of an ameliorative solution characteristic of religious experience.

The Problem of Salvation

The "problem of salvation" can be understood as a conflict between the fragmentation and limitation of human activities and intentions, and a wider, universal order that is both more reasonable and more moral than what people seem to be able to achieve on their own. In this way, the "religious order" is not

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[74] Ibid., p. 17.
[75] See Josiah Royce, *Sources of Religious Insight* (Edingburgh: T&T Clark, 1912), pp. 5-9.
[76] Josiah Royce, *Problem of Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

reducible to a merely moral, aesthetic, or rational form, but must be understood as a pluralistic unity of all of these ways of ordering experience.

Royce describes this conflict in terms of the *problem of salvation* in his introduction to *Sources of Religious Insight*. Salvation, he writes there, is the idea that there is "some sort of highest good, by contrast with which all other goods are relatively trivial," but which one is also "in great danger of losing."[77] James stresses the precarity of salvation in his description of the "sick soul" in *Varieties*—one who is overcome by melancholia at his or her inability to be reconciled to the evils of his or her experience. Having collected some examples of this condition, James describe it as a response to three conditions: recognition of the vanity of mortal things, a sense of pervasive moral failing, and fear before the vastness of the universe. For the sick soul afflicted by these affectations, "that man's original optimism and self-satisfaction get leveled with the dust."[78] This is not simply a matter of imaginative or conceptual understanding of these facets of existence; rather, it is the "blood-freezing and heart-palsying sensation of it close upon one" that marks the sick soul.[79] "Here is the real core of the religious problem," James asserts: "Help! Help! No prophet can claim to being a final message unless he says things that will have a sound of reality in the ears of victims such as these."[80] James concludes that the degree to which religious actions, beliefs, and intentions specifically are able to address the pervasive

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[77] Josiah Royce, *Sources*, p. 12.
[78] James, *Varieties*, p. 139.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.

sensation of the need for salvation in "the sick soul" signals the degree to which such actions, beliefs, and intentions can be properly called "religious."

James goes on to describe the way in which the divided nature of human character is a contributing factor to the sickness of one's soul.

> Some persons are born with an inner constitution which is harmonious and well balanced from the outset. Their impulses are consistent with one another, their will follows without trouble…Others are oppositely constituted…wayward impulses interrupt their most deliberate plans, and their lives are one long drama of repentance and of effort to repair misdemeanors and mistakes.[81]

The development of one's character, James goes on to explain, consists in the achievement of a unity of self, which is a "general psychological process…and need not necessarily assume the religious form."[82] "Getting religion" or being "converted" is not a necessary condition for achieving the integration of the self; however, it is sufficient in many cases, and in such cases, the "ripe fruits of religion" are identified with "Saintliness"[83] and that special insight into the true nature of reality found in "Mysticism."[84]

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[81] Ibid., pp. 144-5.

[82] Ibid., p. 150.

[83] Ibid., p. 220. James describes saintliness as (1) the feeling and conviction of the existence of a "wider life," as well as one's participation in that life (2) continuity between one's own life and that of the "ideal power" through self-surrender; (3) elation and freedom through the unity of the self; and (4) an emphasis upon love and harmony. These characteristics manifest practically in (1) Ascetic Practices (2) Strength of Soul/Equanimity (3) Purity (in the sense of self-consistency) and (4) Charity (pp. 220-2).

[84] Ibid., p. 299. James describes mystical experiences as (1) basically ineffable (2) noetic in nature (i.e. being states of *knowledge* rather than just experiences of emotion (3) transient and (4) passive—"the mystic feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power" (p. 300). James notably restricts the binding significance of mystical states (and, thus, whatever knowledge they may render) to the individual mystic,

While James focuses upon the problematic situation the individual finds him or herself in that occasions a religious response, Dewey emphasizes the way in which religious experience emerges in social contexts. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey argues that experience is always social, the interplay of subjective and objective conditions identifiable in complex *situations*, but never as a singular, subjective perspective.[85]

Dewey describes "the religious problem of the present" as being marked, on the one hand, by the supernaturalist position, which stipulates that human beings are incapable of morality without divine intervention, and, on the other hand, by the naturalist view that all of the ideal ends and values are already present in concrete experience, and that "goods actually experienced in the concrete relations of family, neighborhood, citizenship, pursuit of art and science, are what men actually depend upon for guidance and support."[86] Dewey asserts that the dualism created by these two opposing viewpoints is precisely what impedes the reconstruction and rededication of religious experience to ameliorate concrete, social ills. "The values of natural human intercourse and mutual dependence are open and public...Why not concentrate upon nurturing and extending them?"[87] Refocusing in this manner reorients consideration of religious experience onto a relational ontology by which "all modes of human association are 'affected with public interest,'" and in which "a significance that is

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probably because of the way in which these states break down confidence in non-mystical (i.e. rational) knowledge (p. 331).

[85] John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Vol. 1, Ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988 [1925]).

[86] Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 47.

[87] Ibid., p. 49.

religious in its function" is evident.[88] This significance can only be brought out more and more by an intensification of focus upon ameliorating social problems through the deployment of human intelligence—which includes the imaginative capacity of human minds for religious experience.

Insofar as the religious attitude is understood by Dewey as a "a sense of the possibilities of existence and as a devotion to the cause of these possibilities," it provides a unique and important outlet for "aspiration and endeavor."[89] Salvation represents an opportunity for creative amelioration—for integration— that brings new value to experience.

Dewey claims that religious ideals emerge through imagination as a means for integration of individual and social energies (the two are inseparable) for the realization of specific, concrete outcomes—that is, to achieve a creative integration that ameliorates whatever problem is motivating the need for salvation. It is worth noting, however, that this process only begins if there is some agreed-upon problem to provide the impetus for inquiry. For Dewey, the religious attitude functions as a meaning-making tool only in social situations where communities of inquiry have come into an agreement about the nature of the problems they face—or, even more fundamentally, that there are issues that need to be addressed.

Cornel West critiques Dewey on this point in his essay "Pragmatism and the Sense of the Tragic," arguing that Dewey's optimism about the ability of societies to recognize and solve problems lacks an appreciation for the tragic

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[88] Ibid., p. 53.
[89] Dewey, *The Quest For Certainty*, in *Later Works*, vol. 4, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: SIU Press, 1988), pp. 242, 244.

quality of all life and the problem of evil.[90] For West, the religious emerges not only out of particular situations, but also out of a general, persisting condition of fallenness. Without this sense, West concludes, the strenuous devotion to ideal ends that marks religious experience in the Jamesian/Deweyan tradition is necessary to make life meaningful, but only incidentally. This episodic view of religion clashes with the holistic character of the religious dimension of life for which these thinkers also argue.

Furthermore, Dewey can also be criticized for overstating the "open and public" nature of religious ideals. There is a confidence in such a claim about the possibilities and potentialities that characterize religion that thinkers like Derrida, Marion, Caputo, and even James would hesitate to endorse. Yes, Dewey emphasizes that religious experience is the experience of unseen possibilities coming into view. But in his haste to emphasize the concreteness of such possibilities—indeed, in his general inclination to understand the religious attitude solely in service to concrete social and material improvement—Dewey has elided many of the aspects of ineffability, indeterminacy, and genuine potentiality from religion. Dewey's constraint of religion to a function of the imagination also restricts the significance of other modalities of religious experience—e.g. ritual. In his zeal to wrestle the religious attitude free of institutionalism, dogmatism, and supernaturalism, Dewey erred on the side of an overly materialistic reduction of religion's significance.

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[90] Cornel West, "Pragmatism and the Sense of the Tragic," in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2000), 107-118.

In his essay, West suggests that Royce does a much better job of alerting us to the true nature of the problem of salvation and the significance of religion in response to it by centering the more universal problem of suffering and the pervasive tragic quality of life. Royce provisionally defines religion in *Sources* in terms of the tragic situation of the conditions that constitute the problematic situation associated with salvation is reminiscent of James' description of the sick soul.

> The central and essential postulate of whatever religion we, in these lectures, are to consider, is *the postulate that man needs to be saved*...Man is an infinitely needy creature. He wants endlessly numerous special things...But amongst all these infinitely manifold needs, the need for salvation stands out, as a need that is peculiarly paramount...to desire salvation is to long for some pearl of great price, for the sake of which one would be ready to sell all that one has.[91]

Salvation both names what is most desirable, some "end or aim of human life that is more important than all other aims," as well as humans' natural inability to achieve that end: "*man as he now is, or as he naturally is, is in great danger of so missing this highest aim as to render his whole life a senseless failure by virtue of thus coming short*."[92] Royce concludes his description of the problem of salvation by saying that "There is always a certain element of gloom and tragedy involved in the first conception of this need. All depends, for the further fortunes of one's religious consciousness, upon whether or not one can get insight into the

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[91] Royce, *Sources*, pp. 8-9, 11-12.
[92] Ibid., p. 12.

true nature of this need."[93] Gaining insight into the way of achieving the goal of

salvation however, is further confounded by what Royce calls "the religious

paradox": namely, that it is impossible to distinguish a genuine "revelation" of

what is highest from regular, run-of-the-mill ideals. This is the problem which

Dewey elides, but which takes a central place in *Sources*. It is also a concern that

Royce shares with the postmodern theologians discussed in the previous chapter,

and constitutes his main criticism of pragmatism (as it is couched in the

metaphysical terms of Jamesian pluralism or Deweyan naturalism) in both

Sources and *The Problem of Christianity*.

<div align="center">Acts of Grace</div>

Insofar as pragmatist philosophy of religion genuinely alerts us to the

integrative quality of religion, it involves some description of *an act of Grace*,

understood as *an act that one cannot do for oneself*, or, more straightforwardly,

the act of a non- or super-human agency. Here is where Follett's understanding

of integration must be modified slightly to accommodate the topic of religion,

because, properly understood in light of the religious paradox, salvation is

genuinely "out of one's hands." Put another way, religiously indeterminate

situations cannot become determinate through an isolated process of inquiry.[94]

James ventures to describe this intervention in terms of the individual example of

the "convert" and the "mystic" in *Varieties*, both of whom James describes as

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[93] Ibid., p. 16.
[94] It should also be noted that the determinacy—the "unseen order"—which religion affords combines an aesthetic sense of wholeness with an ethical devotion or loyalty to that wider world. In this way, the religious function cannot be reduced to either a merely aesthetic appreciation of the world, nor an ethical orientation, but synthesizes both in a single religious experience.

those who "receive grace" and "experience religion."[95] Dewey and Royce ascribe it to the agency of communities, which they both conceive of as joined together to work towards specific, concrete ideal ends. Of such communities, Royce writes that "they form a source of religious insight to all who come under their influence…*in this new source, we find the crowning source of religious insight.*"[96] Communities are the sites of a gracious intervention that plays an essential part in the integrative process. Dewey writes that "The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link."[97] In both Dewey and Royce, it is unclear whether the act of grace is genuinely novel, or is simply a timely discovery of what is already present in the situation. Either way, religious integration—as a creative reconstitution of the religious problem of salvation into a wider order—cannot occur without an act of grace.

There is a fundamental distinction, however, between Royce and Dewey about the nature of acts of grace. Dewey's passing reference to grace in *A Common Faith* seems to refer to grace as a kind of cultural production—the collective outcome of a series of events, inquiries, experiments, works of art, etc., that constitutes Western civilization. One may read this as Dewey's endorsement that all ideals (including religious ones) that are prized are inherited via culture. To hold to the "common faith" in these ideals is to perpetuate a cultural tradition. Though this view may lend itself to a way of understanding religion as a force for cultural conservatism, but conservation is only part of what it means to be

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[95] James, *Varieties*, p. 160.
[96] Royce, *Sources*, p. 276.
[97] Dewey, *LW* 9, p. 57.

graced: "Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying, and expanding the heritage of values we have received, that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shared."[98] Dewey's emphasis upon greater access and expansion reflects the deeper value of growth[99] in his thought. His optimism about the human capacity to contribute the betterment of the world and to create the conditions for ameliorating problematic situations infuses every aspect of his philosophy. It is meant to rebuff any conditions of exclusion or exclusivism. In *A Common Faith*, growth is expressed as an optimism that the implicit "religious faith" of traditional religions may explicitly become "the common faith of mankind."[100] Dewey's optimism can be seen, in this context, as a grateful response to the grace of the common doings and workings of human kind, which evince for him the genuineness of the possibility that humanity may, on its own, realize a more just, democratic, wise, and open way of being in the world.

Royce's understanding of grace does not rest upon an optimistic appreciation for the principle of growth, as Dewey's does. Instead, Royce understands grace as a condition for the possibility of genuine loyalty and love for one's community. In turn, grace is a property of communities, and, in the Christian tradition, as a feature of the ideal community, which he describes in *The Problem of Christianity* as the "Realm of Grace," as well as with the phrase popularized during the American Civil Rights movement: "The Beloved

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[98] Ibid., pp. 57-8.
[99] See Sidney Hook, "John Dewey—Philosopher of Growth," in *The Journal of Philosophy* 56, no. 26 (1959): pp. 1010-018, esp. pp. 1013-16.
[100] Dewey, *LW* 9, p. 58.

Community." Royce differentiates between the "Natural love of individuals for communities" that may occur in the case of the family and nation of origin, and the "loyalty of the type that is in question when our salvation...is to be won."[101] Salvation, as has been seen already, is a matter of achieving a coalescence of one's will with an ideal that so captures one's attention that it surpasses all other ideals. Loyalty to such an ideal, in turn, unifies and integrates the self, and furthermore, unifies the self into a larger community that shares this highest ideal.

As in the religious paradox described in *Sources*, the question of the Beloved Community is how it can both be the cause of one's loyalty and already exist as its object. "The unity of love must pervade it, before the individual member can find it loveable. Yet unless the individuals first love it, how can the unity of love come to pervade it?"[102] Royce's answer is that "Only some miracle of grace (as it would seem) can initiate the new life, either in individuals who are to love communities, or in the communities that are to be worthy of their love."[103] 'Grace' thus names the inexplicable condition for the possibility of an ideal community oriented and sustained by shared loyalty to an ideal (and, by extension, to the community itself). Royce goes on to explain that such a community is made up of "at the very least, three essentially necessary constitutent members": the community itself (made up of individuals loyal to it), the spirit of the community, which is expressed in an individual (or individuals) who embodies and models the ideals of the community in such a fashion as to motivate the other individual members to greater love; and "Charity itself, the

[101] Royce, *Problem of Christianity*, p. 128.
[102] Ibid., p. 130.
[103] Ibid.

love of the community by all its members, and of the members by the community."[104] The Beloved Community, then, is Royce's way of describing the context in which salvation (i.e. loyalty to the highest ideal and its attendant community) comes to be expressed in actual human workings and doings, but in a way that is not reducible to the merely human. For, as Royce points out, the Beloved Community is constituted by its members, but also by the spirit of the community and by charity. Without all three of these elements, the last of which is most easily identified with Royce's description of grace, the religious problem of salvation cannot be adequately addressed.

Royce's description of charity and grace ultimately has less in common with Dewey's optimistic interpretation of growth in religion, but resonates more clearly with descriptions of *agape* in the postmodern theologies of Marion and Caputo. The mysterious origin and inescapable necessity of *agape* as an expression of the divine life in the human world is, in many ways, what Royce sets out to describe. At the same time, however, Royce is also concerned with understanding the human side of how communities are shaped by the effects of charity and grace. In this sense, his consideration of what the postmodernists refer to as *agape* is more pragmatic: that is, he is concerned with the concrete effects of *agape*, and how *agape* directs action. The way in which *agape* lends itself to shaping intentionality, both of individuals and communities, is crucial to Royce's understanding of the integrative quality of religion.

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[104] Ibid., p. 133.

For Royce, the realm of grace is an essential description of the workings of religion. It is a concept that is shaped by the pragmatist method, insofar as Royce is both concerned with the origins and expressions of the realm of grace in experience. At the same time, Royce's aim in *Problem of Christianity* is to alert his audience to what he calls "the center of the faith" of Christianity, in order to respond to the question of how one can be properly Christian in the modern world (a more specific application of the general question of how to be religious in the modern world that drives his inquiry in *Sources*). He does not identify Christianity with the person of its founder (Jesus) or any other individual person. Instead, "The core of the faith is the Spirit, the Beloved Community, the work of grace, the atoning deed, and the saving power of the loyal life. There is nothing else under heaven whereby men have been saved or can be saved. To say this is to found no new faith, but to send you to the heart of all true faith."[105] Royce's conclusion here demonstrates a genuine philosophical insight in the pragmatist sense. It rests upon the particular doctrines of a particular religion; but the concept he ultimately draws out is that of "the heart of all true faith." This articulation is no mere description: it calls for action as well: "since the office of religion is to aim towards the creation on earth of the Beloved Community, the future task of religion is the task of inventing and applying the arts which shall win men over to unity, and which shall overcome their original hatefulness by the gracious love, not of individuals, but of communities."[106] The *task* of religion that Royce lays out is "no vague humanitarianism, is no worship of the mere natural

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[105] Ibid., p. 404.
[106] Ibid.

being called humanity [Dewey's view], and is no private mystical experience [James' view]. This is a creed at once human, divine, and practical, and religious, and universal."[107] This conclusion may not be a justification for the necessity of religion. It is, however, an articulation and an alert to the universality of the doings and workings that the concept of 'religion' alerts us to.

In this way, I take Royce's philosophy of religion to provide the best grounds upon which to respond to the meaning challenge in a way that does justice to the true nature of religious phenomena and religion's essentially communal nature, as well as a clear articulation of how the divine intervenes and comes to expression in human being in the world. In this sense, Royce's philosophy of religion affirms both the human and divine functionality in religious experience, as it is expressed in the realm of grace, in which individual strivings towards salvation are integrated into a universal Beloved community. Royce rejects the idea that religion is or ought to be exclusively a matter of individual "mystical piety," which he calls "the childlike...immature aspect of the deeper religious life."[108] In this sense, Royce's pragmatist philosophy of religion goes beyond that of James and Dewey in articulating religion-as-integration in a cosmic sense, rather than at the level of the individual (James) or human (Dewey).

This prompts the question: is such a cosmic understanding of integration necessary to articulate the meaning of religious experience in human affairs? Does it not overstep, and redound to a problematic reaffirmation of

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid., pp. 215-6.

ontotheology? It is true that Royce is a metaphysician, insofar as he is not afraid to make claims about the fundamental reality of the universe. But it is worth noting, I think, that Royce does not make such claims in a way that puts him in violation of pragmatist principles. The claim that Royce was, above all, an "unreconstructed Hegelian" is overblown by those who seek to claim that pragmatist philosophy is essentially naturalistic. In the next section, I intend to explain how Royce's understanding of religious interpretation fits with his larger conception of "Absolute Voluntarism," which, in turn, provides the basis for the metaphysical claims that expand his understanding of the religious function of integration to a cosmic, world-ordering dimension.

Religious Interpretation

As Follett makes clear, the process of integration involves an analysis of symbols and language to assess the true nature of the conflict: to find "the whole-demand, the real demand, which is being obscured by miscellaneous minor claims or by ineffective presentation."[109] The attention to symbols and their interpretation is one key legacy of Charles S. Peirce in pragmatist philosophy in general, and in philosophy of religion specifically. James, Dewey, and Royce all describe religion as having an essentially interpretive component. Religious symbols are key to understanding the meaning of religious experience through language and ritual, while also creating a source of conflict and division that

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[109] Follett, "Constructive Conflict," p. 42.

ought to be addressed in the search for a clear and unified understanding of the nature of religion.

In "Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered," James illustrate how the pragmatic method helps to clarify intractable conflicts, as, for example, between a "materialist" and "theist" metaphysics. A pragmatic approach to this debate involves considering the meaning of these terms not in some abstract sense, but by "taking them prospectively:"[110] that is, by understanding the meaning of "materialist" or "theist" in terms of the actions and intentions that follow from such worldviews. "The really vital question for us all is, What is this world going to be? What is life eventually to make of itself?"[111] This articulation of the pragmatic method of interpreting metaphysical questions further clarifies how James arrives at his endorsement of a religious outlook in the "half-wild, half-saved universe" in "Is Life Worth Living?" Religious ideas must be interpreted in terms of their prospective quality, and how they can contribute to the continued doings and strivings of one's life that lend it its ultimate significance.

Dewey echoes James' emphasis upon the prospective nature of religious ideals in *A Common Faith*. "The aims and ideals that move us are generated through imagination. But they are not made out of imaginary stuff. They are made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience."[112] Dewey maintains that all ideals are constituted by and through, rejecting a hard-and-fast distinction between the existent and the ideal. He attributes such a

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[110] James, "Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered," in *Writings*, p. 397.
[111] Ibid., p. 404.
[112] Dewey, *LW* 9, p. 33.

distinction to supernaturalism, which would hold that ideals cannot either come to be or come to fruition without supernatural intervention. Ideals still constitute that which is not yet "completely embodied in existence;" but this does not mean they are "fantasies" or "utopias." Natural conditions in experience shape ideals, and they "are further unified by the action that gives them coherence and solidity. It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name 'God.'" Dewey does not claim it is *necessary* to call this relation 'God;' rather, "the *function* of such a working union of the ideal and actual seems to me to be identical with the force that has in fact been attached to the conception of God."[113]

Dewey's emphasis upon the projective, future-oriented, and active quality of religious ideals (he includes God in this category) has been criticized for its narrowness. Wieman and Meland argue that rather than simply focusing upon the active relation between the ideal and actual, Dewey's conception of God should have also included the relation between the ideal and non-ideal—that is, as a "collective representation of the total process or community of activities that sustain, promote, and bring life to high fulfillment."[114] William Shea also critiques Dewey for neglecting to bring the full weight of his theory of aesthetic experience to bear in *A Common Faith*, which he claims contributes to the narrowness of Dewey's view. Shea points out that Dewey made scattered connections between aesthetic and religious experience throughout *Art as Experience*, which he was writing around the same time as *A Common Faith*. However, in the latter case, "the intermingled roots of art, religion, and aesthetic and religious experience

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[113] Ibid., pp. 34-5.
[114] Henry Nelson Wieman and Bernard Eugene Meland, *American Philosophies of Religion* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936), p. 283.

escape analysis... Nowhere, for example, in the text does he record the two as related to the whole, nor does he explore the aesthetic implications of the religious experience of unity and security in terms of beauty and form."[115] In *A Common Faith*, Dewey describes the meaningfulness of religious ideals only in terms of their psychological and moral character. Dewey claims that religious experiences are to be interpreted as acts of imaginative projection of ideals that, in turn, confer a sense of wholeness. The meaning of religious experience, then, is to be interpreted and communicated through language, at least as far as it can be.

Dewey describes his theory of interpretation in *Experience and Nature* as taking meaning to be "a method of action, a way of using things as means to a shared consummation...Meanings are rules for using and interpreting things; interpretations being always an imputation of potentiality for some consequence."[116] Interpretation of meanings is a matter of creating (and eventually enacting) a "method of action." In this way, Dewey's theory of interpretation and meaning is thoroughly pragmatist—in the same vein as James's—inasmuch as the "workings" and "doings" of concepts constitute their meanings.

'Concepts' are the symbolic embodiment of generalized plans of action, and these, in turn, are what create the possibility of mutual cooperation when they are communicated.

Communication is consummatory as well as instrumental. It is a means of establishing cooperation, domination, and order. Shared experience is the

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[115] William Shea, "Qualitative Wholes: Aesthetic and Religious Experience in the Work of John Dewey," in *The Journal of Religion* 60, no. 1 (1980): pp. 43, 45.
[116] Dewey, *LW* 1, p. 147.

greatest of human goods. In communication, such conjunction and contact as is characteristic of animals become endearments capable of infinite idealization; they become symbols of the very culmination of nature. That God is love is a more worthy idealization than that the divine is power. Since love at its best brings illumination and wisdom, this meaning is as worthy as that the divine is truth.[117]

Here, Dewey sheds light on both the way in which communication functions as both means and end for interpretation, and also why he may have chosen to focus upon the moral and psychological meaning of religious experience in *A Common Faith*. If "shared experience is the greatest of human goods," Dewey may have sought to avoid conflating mysticism (being *alone* with the divine, as James put it) with the potential good of the religious. Instead, Dewey focuses upon the way in which religious experience binds individuals into a common social life—a common faith—that is a significant source of "illumination and wisdom." Dewey's choice of the phrase "God is love" can be read back into his description of God as the active relation between the ideal and the actual. This relation is fundamentally social, bound up with communication (and, by extension, interpretation), and constitutes meaning only insofar as it is a "method of action" that orients a community. Thus, for Dewey, religious symbols are meaningful primarily (though, as Shea points out, probably not completely) in terms of morality (i.e. plans of action) rather than aesthetics (i.e. qualitative acquaintance with "the whole").

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[117] Ibid., pp. 157-8.

In the end, Dewey concludes in *Experience and Nature* that "When the instrumental and final functions of communication live together in experience, there exists an intelligence which is the method and reward of the common life, and a society worthy to command affection, admiration, and loyalty."[118] Dewey's goal in *A Common Faith* is to bring this sense of "intelligence" to bear in the context of the religious. In his claim that intelligence and communication together constitute the "reward" of "a society worthy to command affection," I think there is a clear parallel with Royce's description of the Beloved Community, which he claims "whatever else it is, will be, when it comes, a Community of Interpretation."[119] The difference, however, between Royce's Beloved Community and Dewey's description of a society of common faith is the way in which Royce connects interpretation not just to nature, but to reality itself.

Whereas James sought to interpret the meaning of religious concepts through the pragmatic method in terms of their consequences for lived experience, and Dewey further expanded upon the role communication and social expression of these meanings plays in the common life of a society, Royce, drawing more thoroughly upon earlier Peircean semiotics, describes the role of interpretation in religion as bound up both with the nature and life of communities (and the Beloved Community, especially). Additionally, Royce focuses upon the function of the will, rather than the imagination, in outlining how interpretation is enacted based upon an underlying triadic logic of interpretation. In so doing, Royce combines the strengths of the pragmatist

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[118] Ibid., p. 160.
[119] Royce, *Problem of Christianity*, p. 318.

emphasis upon intentionality with a focus upon sociality that, in turn, can help address a fundamental shortcoming of the pragmatists: namely, the inability to provide a clear account of error and tragedy.

In his description of the "Christian Doctrine of Life" in *The Problem of Christianity* (which is, again, an application of his general philosophy of religion as articulated previously in *Sources*), Royce identifies loyalty, community, and atonement as necessary for addressing the problem of salvation. Individual loyalty to a cause provides an orientation for one's life; the cause is expansive, embracing many lives in a common loyalty. He describes community as "a being that attempts to accomplish something in time and through the deeds of its members. These deeds belong to the life which each member regards as, in ideal, his own."[120] 'Community' denotes something practical—both the instrument and the consummation of a shared intention coming to fruition. The way in which each member participates, regards, and ultimately 'belongs' to this community is through interpretation.

"Interpretation," Royce explains, "always involves a relation of three terms."[121] An interpretation brings an interpreter, an object of the interpretation, and an audience for whom the interpretation is provided, into a determinate relation. This relation constitutes the minimum form of a "community of interpretation." Whereas perception and conception are essentially dyadic (in their relation of a perceiver to an object, e.g.), interpretation is triadic. Additionally, through the process of interpretation, the interpretation offered by

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[120] Ibid., p. 254.
[121] Ibid., p. 286.

the interpreter becomes an object for interpretation by the audience. Hence, at least if the process functions well, "the social process involved is endless."[122] This social quality further differentiates interpretation from perception:

> Interpretation lives in a world which is endlessly richer than the realm of perception. For its discoveries are constantly renewed by the inexhaustible resources of our social relations, while its ideas essentially demand, at every point, an infinite series of mutual interpretations in order to express what even the very least conversational effort, the least attempt to find our way in the life that we would interpret, involves.[123]

The end of interpretation is, finally, mutual understanding. But it is a mutual understanding that only comes about through the series of interpretations of interpreter to audience, and then of audience-turned-interpreter to the interpreter-turned-audience. Within a community, the deeds and events in the life of the community become ideals that function as common objects of interpretation. The degree to which individuals share mutually consonant interpretations of those ideal objects is crucial to genuine loyalty and genuine integration.

Thus far, Royce sounds Deweyan enough in his description of how ideals unite communities. Even in describing the Beloved Community as an ideal community towards which humankind ought to strive—that is, that community that interprets the idealized histories and projects of all humankind in an infinite series of interpretations—, Royce still seems to be running along the same track

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[122] Ibid., p. 290.
[123] Ibid.

as Dewey. However, Royce's view differs in two significant ways. First, Royce has a different conception of the relation of a community to its history. As mentioned in the previous section, Dewey understands "grace" largely in terms of cultural production: that is, the collected doings and strivings of "civilization" that have brought human beings to where they are today. But for Royce, grace constitutes the life of the community in a different way: i.e. through the *will to interpret*. Royce differentiates between a "community of memory" and "community of hope," writing that the former is "constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts as part of his own individual life and self the same *past* events that each of his fellow-members accepts," while the latter is "constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts, as part of his own individual life and self, the same expected *future* events that each of his fellows accepts."[124] The way Royce describes communities of hope is very similar to the way in which Dewey describes a community organized around a common faith. On Royce's account, however, attention is also paid to the past. In the community of memory, the past is not a source of givens, but is always taken up through an intentional act of interpretation. The facts that are accepted as constituting the life of the community are not given, but are objects of interpretation in the *present* life of the community. The triadic structure of interpretation is thus mirrored in the life of the community, which interprets its own present life in terms of the past and for the sake of the future.

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[124] Ibid., p. 248.

The second and more important distinction between Dewey and Royce's view of the role of interpretation in a religious community is that Royce leans upon the role of the will, rather than the imagination, to describe how interpretation functions. Imaginative projection (a la Dewey) is not interpretation in the strict sense. It is a mental process of generating a shared conception, which, in turn, is "cashed out" in experience. The key pragmatist insight was to generate a method for checking perceptions against conceptions, and vice versa. This comparison is undergirded by a deeper ontological claim about the continuity of experience. This, Dewey claims, is what applying intelligence to religion means: checking the ideals generated through imaginative projection towards wholeness against their practical consequences in the life of a community.

Royce, however, notes that there is something lacking in such a pragmatist position. He points out that what establishes the continuity between ideal and practical consequences is not just the continuity of experience, but rather the particular agency of the inquirer. Royce agrees with the other pragmatists when it comes to the role of intentionality in the meaning of concepts and percepts: but insofar as the will is involved, it cannot simply be a will to *perceive* or *conceive*, because such pragmatic outcomes will only ever be particular and isolated. When it comes to the interpretation of ideals, the genuine insight of interpretation does not "consist simply in our pragmatic leadings…It is not more intuition that we want. It is such interpretation which alone can enlighten and guide and

significantly inspire."[125] Interpretation provides the triadic structure whereby disparate ideas may be articulated in a single act of will. This is the case both in the interpretation of one's own ideas to oneself in the act of comparison (treating one's self as both interpreter and audience, with the ideas serving as the objects of interpretation) and to the interpretation of the ideas of others—that is, for an interpreter to articulate an other's ideas to some third person (i.e. the audience). In this latter case, "The Will to Interpret undertakes to make of these three selves a Community."[126]

The will to interpret, on Royce's account, is analogous to the problem of salvation: "I am discontent with my narrowness and with your estrangement. I seek unity with you."[127] To intend to interpret is to seek a unity of understanding with one's neighbor that can, in turn, be articulated to some third person with such exactitude, it would be as if the neighbor him or herself had expressed it. It is to seek to know another person completely, to be able to claim to genuinely and truly share goals and ideals in common.

But the will to interpret aims at an ideal of interpretation that is marred by "my narrowness" and "your estrangement."

> One goal lies before us all, one event towards which we all direct our
> efforts when we take part in this interpretation. This ideal event is a goal,
> unattainable under human social conditions, but definable, as an ideal, in

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[125] Ibid., p. 312.
[126] Ibid., p. 314.
[127] Ibid.

terms of the perfectly familiar experience which every successful comparison of ideas involves.[128]

The will to interpret, then, aims at the eventful arrival of a true community of interpretation. This is not a utopian ideal, but one which become acquainted with in our own interpretation of distinct ideas in comparison. The will to interpret is also not exclusively religious: it plays a role in scientific and philosophical communities of interpretation as much as it does in specifically religious contexts. The difference that marks the religious community of interpretation, however, is its attempt to interpret the meaning of true and genuine salvation, which is the achievement of a genuine communion with the sure and certain reality of the world.

The "problem of reality," Royce claims, is that "we find ourselves in a situation in which, because of the fragmentary and dissatisfying conflicts, antitheses, and problems of our present ideas, an interpretation of this situation is needed, but is not known to us."[129] It is a correlate to the problem of salvation: that there is some unity or "wider order" that one finds oneself in danger of missing due to the fragmentary and pluralistic nature of human experience. The constant competition of differing impulses, intuitions, values, and goals is a jangling cacophony, until it can be placed into some determinate order. For Royce, the means for such an ordering can be found in the triadic structure of interpretation. It is also the means for ordering a society in which individual persons compete, backstab, neglect, and generally act in their own autonomous

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[128] Ibid., p. 315.
[129] Ibid., p. 337.

interests, rather than as a cohesive community. In both cases, interpretation is the means of integrating selves and communities into a wider unity of understanding, intention, and (ultimately) action.

The question that remains is, what is the relation between salvation and reality? Royce concludes that they consist in the same event of interpretation, which takes place in community, that opens up an individual to the wider reality in which one shares:

> Practically, I cannot be saved alone; theoretically speaking, I cannot find or even define the truth in terms of my individual experience, without taking account of my relation to the community of those who know. This community, then, is real whatever is real. And in that community my life is interpreted…My life means nothing, either theoretically or practically, unless I am a member of a community. I win no success worth having, unless it is also the success of the community to which I essentially and by virtue of my real relations to the whole universe, belong.[130]

Royce's conclusion in *The Problem of Christianity* is that true reality cannot be found except via the will to interpret, which is entwined with loyalty to a community without which interpretation would be impossible. He is willing to grant that such communities may be of differing characters, constituted by different causes and taking place in different historical and geographical contexts. In this sense, his understanding of community is thoroughly pluralistic. At the same time, however, all of these communities share in common the determinate

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[130] Ibid., p. 357.

triadic structure of interpretation, and all are empowered by the spirit of loyalty that is the will to interpret. Loyalty to the absolute truth of an interpretation of reality ultimately transcends any one particular community of interpretation, and aims at the Beloved Community. 'Beloved Community' functions as a sign of that widest community of interpretation that *is* reality. It consists in the "final union of temporal sequence, of the goal that is never attained in time…the real community, the true interpretation, the divine interpreter, [and] the plan of salvation."[131]

This, then, is Royce's articulation of what he sees as "essential" in Christianity, what cannot be contradicted by the hard critiques of dogma and doctrine in the modern age: "*The name of Christ has always been, for the Christian believers, the symbol for the Spirit in whom the faithful—that is to say the loyal—always are and have been one.*"[132] Beyond Christianity, however, he concludes that true religion consists in "whatever practices best you find to enable you with a sincere intent and a whole heart to symbolize and to realize the presence of the Spirit in the Community." "All else about your religion," he goes on to say, "is the accident of your special race or nation or form of worship of training or accidental personal opinion or devout private mystical experience."[133] Here, then, is the essential core of Royce's philosophy of religion: namely, that the problem of salvation cannot be solved except in community, and that salvation consists in loyalty to the Beloved Community, through which the fragmentariness, tragedies, failings, and successes of one's life are brought into a

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[131] Ibid., p. 383.
[132] Ibid., p. 403.
[133] Ibid., p. 404.

harmonious union not only for oneself, but in union with one's neighbors, one's nation, the world, and, ultimately, the Universal Community. This harmony is an expression of a will to interpret that is universal—that of the divine interpreter—and the triadic structure of interpreter-object-audience, both of which are mirrored in individual and communal acts of interpretation with which every person is familiar, if only ever in a limited way.

"More-Than-Pragmatist" Philosophy of Religion

In the preceding sections, I have outlined an interpretation of pragmatist philosophy of religion as integration, marked by four basic features: commitment to the existence of order, responding to the problem of salvation, relying upon an act of grace, and interpreting symbols. I have included James, Dewey, and Royce, the last of whom is an unlikely bedfellow in a discussion of *pragmatist* philosophy of religion. Royce himself once wrote that "We must be pragmatists, but also more than pragmatists."[134] His argument for going beyond pragmatism to make metaphysical claims about the nature of reality rests in his attention to the reality of tragedy and error.

I have already commented on one shortcoming of pragmatism (its obsession with percepts and concepts, rather than interpretations) that Royce harps on in *The Problem of Christianity*. But this criticism is an extension of a more fundamental problem of neglecting what it means to be genuinely "fallibilist" when it comes to considering the "working-out" of ideas in experience.

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[134] Royce, "The Eternal and the Practical," in *The Pragmatic Idealisms of Josiah Royce and John E. Boodin*, eds. R. Auxier and J. Shook (London: Thoemmes, 2006), p. 20.

This is because every act, "as an individual act, is irrevocable and is absolutely what it is. Our deeds, judged in the light of a reasonable survey of life…are, for a determinate purpose, either hits of misses…whoever regards his deeds as having only relative reality, as capable of being recalled if he chooses, is not actin seriously."[135] Pragmatism is concerned with the effects of ideas—that is, with what happens when a hypothetical course of action (the meaning of a concept) is actually put to the test. Royce is not quibbling with this focus upon the outcomes of deeds; he is only pointing out that acting with purpose is always an absolute decision to do something, which in turn is a concrete contribution to the reality of the world, even as it is a concrete elimination of entire universes of possibilities. "The pragmatist who denies that there is any absolute truth accessible has never rightly considered the very most characteristic of the reasonable will, namely, that it is always counselling irrevocable deeds" that may be "irrevocably right or wrong."[136] What makes such action right or wrong ultimately relies upon the question of whether or not it anticipates or fits into "what a wider view, a larger experience of your present situation, a fuller insight into your present ideas, and into what they mean, would show you."[137] Truth and falsity is nothing but the confirmation of a judgment of a deed in terms of a wider insight.

Opinions about the *reality* of that deed, however, do not just appeal to a wider insight, but to "the live insight which experiences what makes them true or false, and which therefore *ipso facto* experiences what the real world is. If there is *no* such world-possessing insight, then, once more, your opinions about the

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[135] Royce, *Sources,* pp. 155-6.
[136] Ibid., p. 157.
[137] Ibid., p. 107.

world are neither true nor false."[138] So, to affirm the reality of the irrevocability of a deed is to make a claim about the nature of reality: either this particular act contributes to the reality of the world, or it denies it. In either case, the absoluteness of the deed can only be confirmed insofar as there is an experience or insight of the reality to which that deed does or does not contribute. To deny that "there is no largest view, no final insight, no experience that is absolute, is to assert that the largest view observes that there is no largest view…And such an assertion is indeed a self-contradiction."[139] "We can err about what you will," Royce concludes; yet, "In every error, in every blunder, in all our darkness, in all our ignorance, we are still in touch with the eternal insight."[140]

This, then, is Royce's argument for going beyond a purely relativist or metaphysically pluralistic pragmatism to assert the reality of a universal agent, capable of intention, interpretation, and insight. Without such an agent, the purposive inquiries of the pragmatic method would have no way of accounting for the reality of that very deed, nor for the possibility of being truly in error. Some ideas do fail in their working out. But this is not just a matter of expectation failing to correspond to a particular state of affairs. To prove a claim genuinely false requires that it be shown to be untrue in terms of a situation in its fullness (i.e. as a qualitative whole). No experience is pure and discrete, but they run together in the stream of consciousness and the deep river of time. Because of this, the insight to which one appeals is ultimately a universal one.

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[138] Ibid., p. 113.
[139] Ibid., p. 114.
[140] Ibid., p. 115.

While Royce's critique may not be a necessary corrective to pragmatist philosophy in some of its applications (as, for instance, in political philosophy, or philosophy of science), I do believe it is necessary to render pragmatist philosophy of religion something more than merely descriptive. Without Royce's extension of the significance of concepts such as the will to interpret and the Beloved Community to reality itself, it would be hard to avoid the charge that pragmatist philosophy of religion was either merely descriptive,[141] or that it is too naturalistic—thereby consummating the modern conception of religion.

This would not be all bad, if it were not for the persistence of the postmodern critique of essentialism, and the need to free the concept of religion from the constraints of ontotheology. In this regard, Royce's metaphysical approach would indeed give many of the thinkers so far examined some pause. However, I do not believe that Royce's conception of the Beloved Community and the Spirit of Interpretation run afoul of the criticisms of Derrida, Vattimo, Marion, or Caputo. In fact, in many ways, I seek Royce's philosophy of religion as consonant with a view of the religious aspect of life as that which opens new possibilities of ever richer and deeper experience. Royce's attention to the irrevocability of purposive action is reminiscent of Marion's conception of the eventfulness of birth, for instance. The open-ended quality of the loyalty to the Beloved Community—which is impossible to achieve in time—is reminiscent of Caputo's weak "God" of the "perhaps." But unlike Caputo's conception of God,

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[141] This, in short, is the approach of Wesley Wildman, who argues for the continuation of a kind of naturalistic inquiry into describing the pragmatic meaning of religious experience and symbols as the "future" of the philosophy of religion. See Wildman, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry*, op. cit. above.

Royce's notion of the Beloved Community provides a concrete course of action—what he calls the religion of loyalty—that transcends any one community, even as it can be found couched in the accidents and special manifestations of different traditions, cultures, and peoples.

In the end, in Royce's philosophy of religion one sees the culmination of a pragmatist philosophy of religion that aims to alert us to the integrative function of 'religion' as it expressed in concrete experience. His take on religion is "more than pragmatist" in several ways, but this only helps expand and clarify the role that religious experiences, concepts, and symbols play in acquainting human beings with reality.

Conclusion

This brings me, finally, to consider the meaning challenge once again. In the beginning, I set out to address the claim levelled by the New Atheists that in this hyper-modern moment, in the developed Anglo-American world, there is simply no need for religion: that we can be good without God, that one can lead a full and meaningful life without anything like religion. To this, I would now say that a life without the religious function of integration—without some sense of an ideal order, a recognition of the problem of salvation, the eventfulness of an act of grace in order to overcome it, and the significance of signs that point to the unity and richness of experience amidst the quotidian doings and strivings of an average life—would be self-defeating and impoverished. Without some means of extending oneself towards an ideal, and without a community in which to share

in fidelity to that ideal, one would live buried in struggles that come with the fragmentary, disconnected reality of a capricious and inattentive consciousness.

But this is not, I think, what the New Atheists have in mind as the alternative to religion. In fact, I think that the New Atheists would generally agree that the function of integration is crucial to a meaningful life. The challenge seems ultimately to come down to this word 'religion.' In the end, it is the rehabilitation of this word, more than anything else, that seems necessary to rebuff the meaning challenge.

I believe that a pragmatist philosophy of religion can provide such a rehabilitation (or, to use Dewey's parlance, a "reconstruction"). Let 'religion,' then, come to signify the event and activity of a particular kind of integration. Let it be a term that intervenes in a discourse to direct our attention to wider vistas and more inclusive communities. Let it not be deployed exclusively, but in a pluralistic fashion, as useful sign that alerts us to the need for interpreting the unity of diverse communities of faithful people striving towards ideal ends. I say let religion continue to be the shibboleth of the faithful in every time and place, who strive to integrate their own experience into the deeper and wider reality of a world that is infinitely grander than any particular conception may ever capture.

At the same time, on another quarter one must also preserve the meaning of religion over and against that of mere 'spirituality' or 'spiritualism.'[142] Genuine religious integration is never consummated in isolation. The idea that one may simply *choose* a spiritual orientation towards the world, and that that will be

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[142] I have in mind here both those who claim to be "spiritual, but not religious," and Flanagan's notion of the space of "spirituality" in the Space of Meaning[Early21stcentury].

sufficient to provide for the thoroughgoing integration of a life is ludicrous. Individualism is antithetical to integration, even as the worldview of religion-as-integration recognizes the autonomy, freedom, and agency of persons in seeking the Beloved Community. So long as faith is a matter of belief alone, it may remain a private affair. But the philosophy of religion that I have sought to develop in this essay indicates that faith is more than belief: it is an active striving, an embodied and lived participation in community, an openness to the possibility of unrealized and even impossible ideals. These dynamic expressions of the function of religion all contribute to understanding how religion provides meaning and contributes to the amelioration of the human condition, and the growth and enrichment of reality.

In describing religion as integration, I have attempted to demonstrate a novel way forward for philosophy of religion. In the contested space of the "God Debate," neither side has been able to claim the absolute victory it seeks, because the truth of what religion is and what 'religion' means cannot be adequately captured by the overdetermined categories of hyper-modern discourse.

Over fifty years ago, in *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Wilfred Cantwell Smith pointed out that "the sustained inability to clarify what the word 'religion' signifies, in itself suggests that the term ought to be dropped; that it is a distorted concept not really corresponding to anything definite or distinctive."[143] Smith argued that the term 'religion' is no longer capable of capturing the plurality of the phenomena and traditions it is meant to describe. The problem of

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[143] Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper Row Publishers, 1978 [1962]), p. 17.

religious pluralism made the systematization of 'religion' increasingly difficult. "The contemporary interpenetration of men's traditions, on the religious as on other planes, may be inaugurating a radically new age," Smith hypothesizes. "Man's new awareness of all this and of his own involvement in it, as a process in which he is a conscious and responsible participant, is radical."[144]

What Smith recognized in the 1960s was both the limits of modern religious scholarship, and the potential of more deconstructive, particular, and pragmatist approaches to understanding religious phenomena and traditions. He pointed out that as scholars of religion became more and more aware of the true diversity of what "religious studies" study, the well-worn and essentialist understandings of 'religion' could not hold. In the field of religious studies, this meant doubling down on social scientific inquiry, focused upon the documentation of how specific and discrete traditions actually function. In the field of philosophy of religion, some (such as John Hick) followed Smith in seeking a more pluralistic conception of religion—an attempt to modify the meaning of 'religion' to fit an increasingly pluralistic and unruly world of religious experiences.

The challenges of the New Atheism signal the need for inaugurating another "radically new age" in thinking about the meaning of religion. This time, however, the challenge comes not simply from the "interpenetration" and commingling of religious traditions, but of religion and the explicitly non-religious. It requires a discourse that does not just capture religious pluralism,

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[144] Ibid., p. 200.

but non-religious pluralism. Such a discourse must be appropriately chastened by the lessons of the postmodernists. At the same time, it cannot surrender claims to religious meaning.

I have argued in this essay that a pragmatist (or "more-than" pragmatist) philosophy of religion can occupy the contested discursive space between the religious and non-religious. In this space, concepts like integration can be treated as alertive, signaling the possibility of religious meaning. At the same time, the impossibility of *religio* places limits upon claims to truth or to the essentialization of religious experience. In such a space, 'religion-as-integration' can be interpreted as a call to action, to a way of being, that is intelligible, if not necessarily compelling, to the non-religious. Nonetheless, this discourse also makes plain the possibility that the New Atheists have been right all along, and that those who venture into the deep waters of faith run a risk that the experience they seek is a genuine impossibility.

Curating this discursive space is, I contend, how a philosophy of religion can participate in the radical newness of this age. It is how philosophy of religion can contribute to religious studies—by offering a system in which to interpret the signs, practices, and beliefs of religious traditions. It is how philosophy of religion remains relevant to questions of religion's meaning and place in public discourse.

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