



Religion without God (and without Turning East): A New Western Alternative to Traditional Theistic Faith

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Let's start with a little thought experiment. Suppose you've lost your ten-year-old son. The police fear he has been taken and killed. Days of searching have turned up nothing. Do you still believe that your son will be returned to you safe and sound? It wouldn't be surprising if you don't believe this—if this belief, which you treasured at first, has been ripped away by everything that's happened. Of course you may not *disbelieve*. But at some point you will at least land in doubt, the condition in which one neither believes nor disbelieves. You can't help it. It's only human. Now let's shift gears slightly. Can you, in these circumstances of doubt and nonbelief, still have *faith* that your son will be returned to you alive and well? It sure seems that you can. This too is only human. Indeed, it's only human to in these circumstances display a *dogged* faith that, among other things, holds on to the idea that, somehow, all shall be well. Now is when you most *need* faith, to sustain your morale and motivate the continuation of the search. Here, one almost wants to say, we see faith's *raison d'être*. So surely it must be possible to have faith involving a proposition such as "My son will be returned to me safe and sound"

Philosopher J. L. Schellenberg here imagines the possibilities of religious faith without reference to a personal, theistic God, locating these possibilities in the idea of a "non-believing faith" in an evolving understanding of God and creation.

even when you don't believe this proposition. And if the story makes sense with this proposition, why not with others, including religious propositions?

By means of thought processes like this one some contemporary Western philosophers, including myself, are arriving at the view that religious faith without religious belief is possible. And there are other ways, too, of stretching our thinking in this intellectual neighborhood that result in changes not just to conventional understandings of the *attitude* of faith, which our thought experiment was focused on, but to conventional understandings of what should go into the religious *propositions* so often associated with this attitude. The upshot is a new option in religious thought—a way of showing that life without God and without religious belief needn't be life without religion.

My title broadly characterizes this new option as “religion without God.” Of course there are other, well-known ways of having religion without God, represented by the non-Western religions of the world. And, despite my title, I have nothing against “Eastern” religious traditions. In fact, what I'll be talking about provides a framework for better understanding much that is found in them. Perhaps the future of religion will beneficially be marked by something emerging from them. But the religious option I will describe is a *Western* contribution, since it grows out of Western philosophy and receives support from some of the results of Western science.

THREE CENTRAL MOVES

The option I have in mind I call “skeptical religion.” It really is skeptical twice over: in its attitude, which is non-believing, and also in its unwillingness to direct this attitude to the sort of detailed sectarian propositional content that is typically found in Jewish or Christian or Islamic faith.¹

Three moves establish skeptical religion as worthy of discussion. First, we show that religious propositions vary in detail, and that a certain quite general religious proposition, which I call ultimism, might be the basic propositional object of faith and help to shape a recognizably religious life even for persons who are doubtful about more detailed religious propositions such as traditional theism, which claims that there is a personal God (many call this view monotheism), or who regard these propositions as false. Second, we show that there are alternatives to the attitude of believing which is so regularly found in the medley of dispositions constituting religious faith, so that even someone who remained skeptical about ultimism, neither believing nor disbelieving it, if otherwise appropriately disposed, could display ultimistic religious faith. Third, we show that, in ways linked to our place in deep time as revealed by science and still generally overlooked, the human species is religiously immature, which means that a general and skeptical faith, instead of being a distant second-best and religiously pitiable, or an

¹J. L. Schellenberg, *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) xii.

equally pitiable attempt to escape reason's verdict on religion, surprisingly turns out to be just the ticket both religiously and rationally.

Having seen the skeleton of my proposal, let's now put some flesh on those bones. In the space available I certainly can't produce a well-rounded account, but I will be content if the main shape of these three central moves and their cumulative impact become clearer.

ULTIMISM

It may seem just like a philosopher, which proudly I am, to start by talking about propositions! But please notice that, in my summary above, I didn't make propositions the be-all and end-all. I spoke of faith as a *medley* of dispositions *including* such propositional attitudes as belief. This implies that attitudes like believing that a certain proposition is true do not get faith all to themselves.

However, they do get a part of it. This is often called faith's *cognitive core*. Christian faith, to focus on the sort of faith most familiar to readers of this journal, may include, say, *trusting* in God and in God's redeeming work in Christ, but it would be odd for it to omit altogether a positive attitude toward various propositions about God (and presupposing the existence of God) of the sort often assembled into a creed.

Ultimism is more cautious and guarded. Ultimism is what results when—showing the concept's Western provenance—we mentally extract from the claim of theism three general features marking it as a religious proposition.

How detailed should that cognitive core be? Here let's compare traditional theism (or theism, as I will hereafter call it) with a proposition I call ultimism. Theism declares the divine to be *personal*. That God can be addressed as Father or Mother and, drawing on the deepest resources of knowledge and power, acts in perfect goodness to create and redeem is a fundamental theistic statement about the character of the divine, providing parameters for everything else that theistic religious traditions such as Christianity have historically had to say. Ultimism is more cautious and guarded. Ultimism is what results when—showing the concept's Western provenance—we mentally extract from the claim of theism three general features marking it as a religious proposition.

For theism the existence of God the creator is the fundamental *fact*. It is metaphysically ultimate. Now imagine someone saying only that there is a metaphysically ultimate reality, without the detailed content about a personal creator that theism adds to fill this out. What you've imagined is the first of the three things ultimism says.

Theism says the inherent *value* of the divine is inconceivably great; the com-

bined impact of God's infinite power and knowledge and love, for one who properly apprehends it, is such as to produce a response of worship. God, in other words, is axiologically ultimate. Now imagine someone saying only that there is an axiologically ultimate reality, without the detailed content about a personal power that knows and loves that theism adds to fill this out. What you've imagined is the second of the three things ultimism says.

But more is required to make theism a religious proposition. This "more" could be seen as the "other side" of axiological ultimacy: not now the ultimate inherent value of the divine but its ultimate value for creatures and the world. I call this soteriological ultimacy. Theists think they see it when they think they see God acting not as creator but as redeemer—acting *in* the world so as to ensure its ultimate felicity and that of all who come to know God. But now imagine someone saying only that there is a soteriologically ultimate reality, without the detailed content about a personal power that knows and loves and redeems that theism adds to fill this out. What you've imagined is the third of the three things ultimism says.

Ultimism, true to its name, says there is a triply ultimate reality. And that's *all* it says. One might, as it were, give ultimism a theistic filling, but ultimism does not require that theism be true. Theism, as we've seen, is one way of giving more content to ultimism. We might call it *personal ultimism*. But there are other ways of filling out the ultimist claim. Here is where the openness to "Eastern" thought mentioned earlier can already be seen: depending on the details one finds in these traditions, there could be Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist elaborations of ultimism. Indeed, there may be *many* other ways of elaborating it, including ones we've never thought of.

One might form a religious life by responding in a life-involving way to ultimism and to the world as seen in its light, allowing the recesses of one's mind to be colored by its content and cultivating a disposition of acting accordingly. Initially it might seem that things must be otherwise when the cognitive core is as spare as it is here. The message of theism, especially when even further filled out as it is in Christian communities in connection with the Christian gospel, may seem to offer a rich and meaty spiritual diet by comparison with ultimism's thin gruel. But here Christians and other theists will have to be careful, since, as we've seen, theism is itself committed to ultimism's content; ultimism focuses on what even theists would have to say is, intellectually speaking, the heart of the matter. And, as we'll see, a spiritual diet can—to continue with my metaphor—be too rich to offer any hope of sustenance over the evolutionary long haul. Ultimism offers what may be needed for the long-distance spiritual runner.

And one can concede too much in this domain. Ultimism has more content than may immediately appear, because we have to factor in not just what it explicitly says but also all it *entails*—all those propositions, distinct from itself, that must be true if ultimism is, such as the claims that there is a reality transcendent of the

natural world; that a dimension of reality transcending nature is most fundamental and important; that the core of reality is on the side of the good; that even though we might have a hard time seeing exactly how, the universe or our environment in the largest sense is not indifferent to our deepest needs, and so on.² An ultimist is free to draw consequences for thinking and feeling and behaving from any and all of these propositions. And a great many consequences there are! Interestingly, many of them are shared with theistic versions of ultimist religion, precisely because ultimism brings out what is deepest in theism. In part for this reason and in part for other reasons, certain aspects of more propositionally detailed forms of religion such as theistic religion might find their way into an ultimist religious life, even if in some way transformed during the journey (for example, by being metaphorized).³

Now suppose we define *atheism* as the denial of theism, which is the most common way of construing atheism in philosophy, instead of conflating it with a much more general and indeed comprehensive anti-supernaturalism, as many “new atheists” do. (The anti-supernaturalists or naturalists *add* to the content of atheism the idea that concrete reality is exhausted by the single unified reality of nature. To speak of living with their view is to speak of “life without anything transcendent of nature” not just of “life without God.”) If we define atheism in this philosophical way then we have a most interesting consequence of another kind, a consequence of distinguishing between theism and ultimism in the way we’ve just done: namely, *that atheists can be religious in a manner explicable within Western categories*. This is because atheists can be ultimistically religious (or religious ultimists). After all, even if theism is false, ultimism may be true. Theoretically, an atheist might go as far as to believe ultimism while disbelieving theism.

But here a quick warning is called for. An atheistic embrace of ultimism has sometimes been construed as choosing the *impersonal* by contrast with theism’s personal emphasis. And this is an error. An atheistic ultimist need not hold that there is *no way at all* that personal facts enter into the reality of the Ultimate. All she’s committed to denying is that the personal *defines* the divine. This denial might be the right way to go, intellectually and spiritually, even if the divine were infinitely multifaceted, with personal features part of an unfathomably glorious mix of properties, playing a role in that mix something like that of the numeral “6” in a page of Einstein’s equations. The atheistic ultimist might well make it part of her religious practice to contemplate such possibilities.

NON-BELIEVING FAITH

With atheism still on our minds, let me quickly point out that there is nothing in what I’ve just said that *requires* us to assume the truth of atheism. One who

²For more on this, see *ibid.*, 30–35.

³I have told more of this tale elsewhere. See the volume already referenced and also J. L. Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

lives religiously without God in the new Western mode I am sketching might do so while in *doubt* about theism and a skeptic on that front rather than as a disbelieving atheist. Another relevant point highlighting nonbelief rather than disbelief is that, whatever one's stance on theism, one's stance on ultimism, even if avoiding disbelief, need not include belief: one might be a skeptic about ultimism too. And what I want now to indicate—here is the second of the two “moves” essential to my task mentioned earlier—is how religious faith is not ruled out by such skepticism.

This move too has a Western provenance. It is linked to the recent discussion in contemporary Western philosophy of religion of what is called *nondoxastic* [i.e., non-believing] *propositional faith*: an attitude of faith with respect to a proposition which does not include believing that proposition. I alluded to this discussion at the outset of the paper: It is commonly assumed that to have faith, say, that one will survive a severe case of depression, or that Hillary will defeat Trump, or that God exists (my apologies for putting those three in such close proximity), one *has* to believe the proposition in question. But this seems to be more a case of traditional unquestioning acquiescence than of justified supposition, as a growing number of philosophers—including some eminent ones—have been arguing.⁴

bedeviled by religious doubt, someone might take matters into her own hands, voluntarily grafting onto that doubt an attitude of acceptance or imaginative assent or whatever it might be, and with other necessary features for it still in place, continue on as a person of faith

The force of their argument comes in part from the fact that the attitude of believing a proposition includes what William James called “the sense of reality.”⁵ One has the sense that things really are as the proposition describes them. And such a sense is involuntary. You can't work it up at the drop of a hat, just by trying to. (Otherwise life would feature much less misery!) By the same token belief can be whisked away whenever the evidence relevant to a proposition no longer seems to support it adequately. And, rather disconcertingly, this can happen just when one most needs to have faith, as we discovered in that earlier thought experiment.

Such reasoning might not carry much conviction if those who defended the idea of nondoxastic propositional faith didn't have something to *substitute* for belief in cases like this. But they do. Some speak of a voluntary *acceptance* of a proposition; others of voluntarily *trusting*; others still of voluntarily *assuming*. I myself

⁴See, for example, William Alston, “Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith,” in *Faith, Freedom and Rationality*, ed. Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); J. L. Schellenberg, *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Robert Audi, “Belief, Faith, and Acceptance,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 63 (2008) 87–102; and Daniel Howard-Snyder, “Propositional Faith: What It Is and What It Is Not,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50 (2013) 357–372.

⁵William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) 913.

have defended the idea of voluntarily holding a certain picture before one's mind—in the case presented at the beginning of this paper, the picture of your son found and brought back home—and resolving to think accordingly. It doesn't matter here which of these is right. They may *all* be right, with different attitudes fitting different personalities or different cases of nondoxastic propositional faith. The fundamental point is that propositional faith—faith that a proposition is true—comes in both involuntary *believing* and voluntary *nonbelieving* forms.

And if that is so, why should we exempt religious faith? Bedeviled by religious doubt, someone might take matters into her own hands, voluntarily grafting onto that doubt an attitude of acceptance or imaginative assent or whatever it might be, and with other necessary features for it still in place, continue on as a person of faith. Taking this point together with the first move discussed earlier, which exposed ultimism to our view, we have the result that even a skeptic about ultimism could have ultimistic religious faith.

RELIGIOUS IMMATURITY

I hurry on to the third move. It comes at a crucial juncture, just when you may be inclined to respond to the first two moves somewhat as follows: "Sure, all that is technically possible, and maybe it fits a few odd cases of religious doubt, but why suppose it to be of more general importance? How, in particular, can the idea of nondoxastic ultimistic faith or skeptical religion avoid appearing as a distant second-best, religiously, and as equally pitiable from a strictly rational point of view, which might lead us to bemoan its seeming desperation?"

At this point it is science to the rescue. This is useful, since science *embodies* rationality for many, and also somewhat ironic, given how today's most ardent foes of religion often idolize science. Allowing for small variations in time-related estimates, the scientific results I have in mind are, fortunately, consensus results, so there need be no fear of a new onset of skepticism at this level for anyone committed to the goals of inquiry. These results come to us from the evolutionary sciences, which allow us to infer that the history of religion, which spans perhaps as much as 50,000 years, comes in the last fifth of the 250,000 (or so)-year history of *Homo sapiens*, and at the very beginning of the enormously long period our species may have in which to continue its religious inquiries. On average, mammals on our planet survive for a million years. All of religion so far, even if it takes up 50,000 years, fits inside just *one-sixteenth* of the time that, by this standard, human religion may yet have. So we can say that religion is, temporally, at a stage of development rather like that of a five-year-old who may live to be eighty. Of course both the species and the five-year-old may die sooner, but if they do, they will die temporally immature.

Now 50,000 years will still seem like a very long time indeed. But it will seem long only if you're presupposing a *human* timescale determined by progress through a human life, for which years and months and even hours and minutes

can be highly significant. What we're getting acquainted with here are *scientific* timescales. Once able to convert from one to the other, we will see the extreme temporal immaturity of human religion.

But so far it's *only* temporal immaturity we're talking about. What about developmental immaturity? Here we're not talking about how long a time our species or various of its preoccupations have lasted, but about what we've gotten done and what we've become in the time we've had. Might human religion, or some aspect of it such as theistic belief or Christian practice, be developmentally *mature* even if religion is temporally *immature*?

Yes, this could be. But how plausible is it? Here we need to recite to ourselves from the long list of developmental immaturities manifestly displayed by human religion of the past and the present. Think only of all the petty and (in the moral sense) small disagreements within religious communities, the vast ignorance of what is held precious by other religious communities, and the horrible violence that does not leak into the present from the past but flows freely. And I have not even mentioned our remarkable ability, full of ourselves as we are, to ignore how we *might be* spiritually immature—how religious development might, for all we know, proceed at a pace better measured according to scientific timescales than human ones. Even those who tout evolutionary ideas are, to their discredit, silent on the subject.

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And that brings us to the *irreligious*. What of them? Here, at least in the present, there is much less violence, but there is considerable ignorance of what is being rejected, and as great a lack of intellectual and spiritual empathy as the religious frequently display toward each other. Science is clung to as a savior from the past, which in some respect it may well turn out to be. But in their enthusiasm for science, many have acquired the expectation that everything real can be reduced to the natural processes science is fitted to expose, rejecting religion both because it claims there is *more* to reality than this and because its most visible representatives often oppose scientific results. If this admittedly potted characterization seems to capture something familiar, then you will conclude with me that there are strong signs of religious-developmental immaturity both among those who favor religion and among those who oppose it.

From the relevant evidence provided here (and much that I could not provide)⁶ I draw a conclusion that will turn out to be rather helpful to skeptical reli-

⁶But see J. L. Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) chaps. 1–5.

gion: namely, that both the commitments human beings make to conventional forms of religion, with their highly detailed and conflicting accounts of ultimate reality, and those they make to irreligious outlooks are *highly premature*. And this holds whether the style of commitment is doxastic or nondoxastic. Given our immaturity it is eminently reasonable to remain open to there being a religious dimension of reality and also to many different ways of characterizing it, most of which might, for all we know, not yet be in our possession. The more we come to see this—that is to say, the more that forward-looking evolutionary thinking spreads and deepens—the more a *skeptical* orientation on matters religious, in the double sense clarified near the beginning of this essay, may come to seem unavoidable. Perhaps with a mixture of surprise and excitement, the evolutionary skeptic will see that our species' best religious ideas may very well lie in our future rather than in our past.

In these circumstances it would be useful to have before us a general religious idea that states more precisely what we are skeptical about and yet open to when we are—as I have said we should be—both skeptical about and open to “a religious dimension of reality.” Ultimism offers itself for use in this way. It would also be good to have a framework idea that can, as it were, hold the religious possibilities we want to investigate further, both the known and the unknown. Again ultimism seems to provide what is needed. And those who, in these circumstances, are interested in religious commitment will need to find a way of being religious that is compatible with religious skepticism. What I have called *skeptical religion* is clearly one such.

Indeed, in the new dispensation of evolutionary sensitivity, being religious in this way must come to appear remarkably attractive. From a religious point of view, ultimism has the advantage of stability: it is more likely to survive the intellectual vicissitudes of the future than any detailed elaboration. And for theists it offers a measure of continuity, as we've seen. Certainly there is no need to scorn the deepest apparent insights of the past when signing on. From *all* points of view what can be seen is the power of skeptical religion to preserve and enhance the best in us. For it offers a way to express and honor and also *further develop and support into the future* the fragile, beautiful, and indeed value-laden complexity that can be seen in the process of becoming human, as realized at various levels in individuals, communities, and the species at large. Notice especially the last part of this summary. Skeptical religion will toughen us for a loving assault on the next 10,000 years. It looks not for consolation and an escape from the world as it is but for a pioneering hope and determination that may be spent on behalf of others and a world still being born.

THE QUESTION OF EVOLUTIONARY RELIGION

What I have described in this essay could be seen as a reason for excitement: new things are still possible in Western religious thought! (The word “still” should

by now appear amusing.) But no doubt there are other new things waiting to be seen. Moreover, the option I have described is—as I want to briefly explain in conclusion—itself just one possible answer to a question about the form of religion most appropriate to our time. And the question I regard as more important than the answer.

This question arises in the context of the new evolutionary perspective outlined above. It is the question whether there might be a way of being religious that is appropriate *precisely given religious skepticism and precisely for such immature beings as we still are at the present stage*, which, perhaps due to our immaturity, we have so far overlooked. I mean the term “evolutionary religion” to apply to anything satisfying this description and so supplying an affirmative answer for the question—a question which accordingly I call “the question of evolutionary religion.”

The notion of evolutionary religion should not be conflated with skeptical religion, as described in the present essay. Skeptical religion offers one answer for the question of evolutionary religion, one candidate for that status. Even if it were a successful candidate, skeptical religion might be no more than *one way* of realizing evolutionary religion. And, obviously, even though both notions—skeptical religion, evolutionary religion—originate in the West, neither need be unfriendly to non-Western ideas. Quite the contrary. Thus understood, evolutionary religion can be a subject of investigation that many from around the world address in diverse ways. We can even speak of the *quest* for evolutionary religion!

Returning to theism and atheism, those who sign on for the quest will find that the terms for their discussion are completely changed. Though theistic faith in one form or another might itself be presented as a candidate for evolutionary religion, we must now also take seriously the thought that God may someday correctly be regarded as just the last and greatest of the personal gods populating early human religion, when humans were still looking for their own image in the divine. And of course even today there are plenty of atheistic arguments that purport to find in the concept of a divine person a reason to suppose no such person exists.

Suppose some such argument is widely accepted, or that for some other reason theistic forms of religion are disqualified in the quest for evolutionary religion. Even so, other forms of religion, including skeptical religion, will beckon. Seeing this you will understand what I mean when I say that, properly conceived, atheism and life without God might mark not the end but rather the *beginning* of human religion. ⊕

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