



## PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION AND THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

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**ABSTRACT:** No religion is more deserving of philosophical attention than all others, and philosophy of religion should reflect a broad understanding of the religious experience of humanity. The field should also include within its purview these topics: future directions religion might and should take; whether religion can make progress; what this progress might consist in and how it might be facilitated; whether we human beings may be at an early stage in our religious development; and whether there may be skills or capacities or dispositions or the like we do not possess now but could possess in the future, and that might help us to make religious progress. So part of the focus of this essay is on expanding the scope of the field. However, as we pursue religious progress we should narrow our focus somewhat and pay special attention to traditions that are above a certain normative threshold, some elements of which I introduce. Drawing on recent work by John Bishop, I propose that a religion merits special attention in this context when moral progress is reflected in its metaphysical posits. Avoiding excessive confidence in our assertions about religious matters and avoiding denigrating attitudes to religious outsiders are also elements that may reasonably be considered essential for being above this threshold. Being above the relevant threshold and therefore qualifying for special attention as we pursue religious progress will be a matter of scoring highly in terms of all relevant elements.

**KEYWORDS:** religion, future, progress, philosophy, threshold

### **Expanding Philosophy of Religion**

Many scholars have argued of late that philosophy of religion needs to become less narrow in its focus. By now there may even be a consensus to this effect among people who reflect about such matters. The broader approach that many recommend would

involve recognizing that there is no single religion whose beliefs, ideas, experiences, and so on, are more deserving of philosophical reflection and scrutiny than those of all other religions. Nor is the coherence and plausibility of one religious perspective a more fitting object of philosophical inquiry than the coherence and plausibility of competing perspectives. The broader approach would involve increased attention to the variety of forms that religion has taken and now takes.

From this point of view, the Buddhist idea of a relational self is no more worthy of philosophical scrutiny than the Islamic idea of prophethood, or vice versa. Nor is the Navajo concept of the earth as our mother more, or less, worthy of reflection than the Jewish idea of a chosen people or the Christian idea of the incarnation. Someone who is especially interested in any such concept, perhaps because of a special interest in or association with the tradition within which it is deployed, might reasonably focus special attention on that concept, just as they might reasonably focus their philosophical efforts on probing the coherence or plausibility of a particular worldview. However, the field as a whole, in its pedagogy and scholarly endeavors, for example, should be on the side of wide exploration, and should range here, there, and yonder across the religious landscape.<sup>1</sup>

Philosophy of religion that is broad in this regard, taking religious content of many sorts within its purview, would be more useful on that account. For one thing, it would have a capacity to provide more people with ways to deepen, enrich, and assess their thinking and to better understand their own beliefs and concepts as well as the beliefs and concepts of others. It would be as relevant and as audience-friendly to religiously interested people in, say, Tehran, Istanbul, Sao Paulo, Singapore, Delhi, or Tokyo, and among indigenous peoples, as it is in, say, Dublin or Calgary or New Haven. It would therefore constitute a more valuable set of cultural resources. And this is so partly because it would include in its raw material – the content with respect to which it waxes philosophical – religious content from many religious perspectives.

Philosophical reflection, after all, is ordinary, everyday reflection raised to a higher level of sophistication and rigor, and enriched by the methods and resources of philosophy. And what has been recognized of late is that there is no single group whose ordinary, everyday reflection about religious matters is more deserving of this treatment than is the ordinary, everyday reflection of all others about such matters. Indeed it is unwise and even impolite for the field to be focused on the relevant reflection of some traditions while ignoring those of others. Here, as elsewhere, the thought that it is “all about you” is unbecoming.

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<sup>1</sup> For endorsement of a broader approach and some discussion of its value see, e.g. Lewis (2015, pp. 21, 39, *passim*); Loughheed (2022); McKim (2012, p. 155f; McKim 2017); Nagasawa (2017); Schilbrack (2014, pp. xif., 10–14, 178, and *passim*); Sikka (2017 p. 16f); Wildman (2011, p. xiiif); Wildman & Rohr, 2017); Wynn (2017). Gary E. Kessler assembled a pioneering anthology that aimed to reflect this approach (Kessler, 1999). Ninian Smart, John Hick, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith took a broader approach in their work decades ago. The University of Chicago has a doctoral track in “philosophy of religions” that aims to consider “philosophical issues arising from various religious beliefs and practices and from critical reflection about them.”

Philosophy of religion that casts its net widely in the respects mentioned would also be more relevant to the present moment in which migration, ever-increasing connections with others from other religious traditions, and the fact that information about many religions is more available than ever to anyone who pays attention, have the result that people are confronted by others and by their views on an unprecedented scale. It will have more to say to people who are experiencing such changes and who feel a need to respond to them.

Moreover, given the variety of religions, the range and scope of their claims, and the sheer abundance of their ideas, a broader philosophy of religion will be more interesting than philosophical reflection that is limited to a single tradition or to a single tradition and its close cousins. It is also likely to be of more interest to non-specialists. In fine, a broader philosophy of religion would be more useful, more relevant, more polite, wiser, and more interesting. Each of these considerations provides a reason why a broader approach is appropriate.

Consider some parallels. It would be absurd for anthropology of religion to confine itself to, say, European religions. And it would be equally absurd – not to mention depressing – for scholarly reflection about contemporary democratic institutions to limit itself to, say, the current political scene in the United States. Much the same applies to philosophy of religion. Academic fields and subfields, and the directions they take, are a collective responsibility of those who engage in them, and this includes philosophy of religion. To be sure, the case for a broader approach will take a different form in a field that purports to describe how things are from the form it takes in a field such as philosophy of religion that is less descriptive and more normative, focused as it is on questions of meaning, truth, plausibility, coherence, and the like. But here too the case is compelling. These observations provide the basis for another argument for a broader approach: failure to take such an approach is professionally unsatisfactory.

A familiar way to make my main point so far is that philosophy of religion should be *global* and the broader approach gestured at might be called “global philosophy of religion.” Other proposed names include “comparative philosophy of religion,” “philosophy of religions,” “post-colonial philosophy of religion,” “religious philosophy,” and “philosophy of worldviews” though scholars who deploy these terms do not all have in mind exactly the same expansion of the field. (For some discussion of these terms, see Schilbrack, 2014, p. 13f.)

Additional ways in which philosophy of religion might be expanded have also received attention recently. Thus there is the matter of taking account of scholarly reflection about religion as such, including scholarly reflection about the purposes and functions of religion as well as scholarly work that purports to interpret and explain religion. (See, e.g., Lewis, 2015, pp. 3, 6, 41, 65, *passim*; Schilbrack, 2014, pp. 21ff, 197–203.) It would be surprising if philosophy of religion had nothing to learn from scholarship of this sort. Attention has also usefully been drawn to the importance of avoiding a rigid conception of tradition, of looking beyond the thinking of elites as we interpret a tradition, and of being suspicious of how scholarly endeavors may involve attempts to advance particular interests (Lewis, 2015, pp. 140, 149). There has been

discussion of the importance of including practices and rituals (in addition to, say, concepts and beliefs) within the purview of the field. (Schilbrack, 2014, *passim*; Lewis, 2015, p. 22f; Burley, 2018, p. 4) Certainly religion has multiple aspects and philosophy of religion should attend to, and can help us to understand, its various aspects and the relationships among them; on the other hand it may be that philosophy of religion is best equipped to deal with religion insofar as it purports to say how things are in the areas of inquiry that religions endeavor to enable people to comprehend.

The little I have said so far about broadening the field has various intellectual and academic implications. For one thing it means that a broad understanding of the religious experience of humanity will be helpful to philosophers of religion. It is worth noting that the best way to acquire this broad understanding is for philosophy of religion to cooperate more fully with the academic study of religion, a field whose focus has long been broad.<sup>2</sup> The need for this sort of cooperation is yet more evident if we take account of another recently proposed expansion of the field. Mikel Burley plausibly proposes that philosophy of religion can expand its depth and range, avoid facile generalizations, and cultivate a fuller appreciation of what religion is and hence what philosophy of religion is philosophical about, by seeking out “thick” descriptions of the phenomena it discusses. A thick description goes “beyond the mere surface of a given situation or state of affairs,” shows “the various layers of meaning or significance that constitute its place within the broader context of human lives,” and therefore has a capacity to bring “the situation to life for the reader, affording an insight into the emotional demeanour and mutual interaction of the participants” (Burley, 2018, pp. 5, 15). What is under discussion here is acquiring a fuller, richer, and more nuanced grasp – which is just to say a more adequate grasp – of the phenomena about which philosophers of religion reflect. This requires drawing on social scientific work on religion and on the broad field of religious studies.

As already mentioned, a broader approach could be taken by the field as a whole while individual scholars restrict their focus to tradition-specific topics, perhaps to those uniquely associated with their own tradition. The field could be global while individual scholars have a more local focus. On the other hand, a scholar whose interests are narrow in the relevant respect probably will have a better understanding of tradition-specific topics if she broadens her perspective. She may understand those topics better if she sees them in relation to, say, relevant concepts and beliefs of various others. And she probably will understand herself and her views better if she takes account of how others, or some others, see her and her religion. Moreover, if a scholar who is mainly interested in a particular religious perspective endeavors to make a case for its plausibility – or for that matter its implausibility – it may be crucial to pay attention to many competitors. For example, a particular perspective may seem extremely plausible when compared to a single competitor. And yet there may be

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<sup>2</sup> A broader philosophy of religion would in turn be well situated to contribute to the academic study of religion. But that is another topic. I have made a few observations about this in McKim (2017).

additional perspectives that, if considered, would seem more plausible than either. Correspondingly, a case for any particular perspective will be enhanced if that perspective is shown to be superior to more of its competitors. These are among the reasons why someone whose interests are local might profitably incorporate global dimensions in their thinking.

### **Some Reflections on the Future of Religion**

Here is another respect in which philosophy of religion could, and should, broaden its scope. This is to include within its purview these topics: future directions religion might and should take, whether religion can make progress, what this progress might consist in, and how it might be facilitated. Philosophy of religion, as a field, can contribute to reflection about these topics. For one thing some issues that arise when we reflect about such matters are philosophical in nature or have philosophical aspects. There is philosophical work to be done here and who better to do it than philosophers? By playing this role, philosophy of religion might actually help humanity to make religious progress.

Human beings have not devoted much time or energy to systematic reflection about the future of religion. Why is this? Perhaps the thought has been that since there is no way to predict what is going to transpire in this regard, there is little point in thinking about it. But such reflection need not get into the business of making predictions.

Another reason that little time and energy have been devoted to systematic reflection in this area may be that the religions in the form they take at any given time and place understand themselves to be saying what currently needs to be said and currently needs to be understood, and maybe even what will *always* need to be said and understood. This thinking may be fueled by what J. L. Schellenberg calls the “end of history” illusion. People in the grip of this illusion think they have no further to go religiously, and indeed that there *is* no further to go religiously (Schellenberg, 2019a, p. 24; Schellenberg, 2019b, pp. 13–15).

To someone who looks at things in this way, pondering future developments and the directions that religion might take in the future will seem neither necessary nor worthwhile. It may also seem threatening, creating the impression that the current outlook and ideas, which may have seemed nonnegotiable and rock-solid, run the risk of being called into question. To open yourself to the possibility that the way that religions will be in the future will be significantly different from how religion, including the home religion, is in the present, and especially to the possibility that something better might come along, is to make the home religion in its current form seem somewhat negotiable, somewhat open to revision. So a paucity of systematic reflection about the future of religion is just what we should expect.

However, religions are constantly changing and all the evidence of the past suggests they will continue to do so. Barring some unlikely scenarios the currently existing

religions *will* change and will do so in ways that no one, including their current adherents, can now envisage. Why not ask what steps we might take to prepare for this change and, more important, what steps we might take to try to ensure that it will be change for the better? Our careful reflection about these matters might nudge future developments in directions that are, say, more imaginative or more constructive or more edifying or more insightful than would otherwise be the case. In fact, given the important role that religions have played, are playing, almost certainly will play, and indeed aspire to continue to play, in human life, failure to engage in such reflection, when it is open to us do so, seems unwise. We devote a lot of time and energy to thinking about the future of, say, our educational, political, and commercial institutions. Why shouldn't we do the same for religious institutions and for entire religious traditions? Why shouldn't we consider what they might become and what standards they ought to meet and the like? Moreover, someone who thinks that a religion in its current form says what it is currently possible to say, might concede that we should prepare to be able to say more in the future, and hence that it is worth our while to reflect on how we might prepare for doing so.

It is also worth mentioning that ideas that are considered central to and definitive of membership in a religious tradition, so that its members would not countenance abandoning them, sometimes undergo a radical reinterpretation even while being retained. So things stay the same in one respect while changing drastically in another. Consider, by way of example, the idea that God has established a covenant with a certain people: perhaps the idea is that God will protect those people provided they respond or behave in a certain way.<sup>3</sup> This idea could be retained while the understanding of the response or behavior that is required from the people in question changes drastically.<sup>4</sup> So even in the case of non-negotiable ideas there may be less reason than first meets the eye to eschew reflection about future changes.

I see little reason to defer to religious voices that contend there is nothing to be gained from reflection about the future of religion. To put the shoe on the other foot: religions might usefully play a role and have a say in the direction this reflection takes and might be partners in its pursuit. (I say a little more about this below at the end of the section entitled "Expanding the Idea of Religious Progress".)

I begin my reflections in this area with a brief sketch in this paragraph of a possible situation. Then, after a couple of clarificatory points, I ask whether this is the situation in which humans currently find themselves. I begin with a few remarks from J. L.

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<sup>3</sup> For an interesting analysis of how this idea has played itself out in various historical and political contexts, see Akenson (1992).

<sup>4</sup> For example, consider the covenant that many Jews believe was made between God and the Jewish people, and how it has been understood. Jerome Gellman contends that what the covenant requires from Jews, and hence what it means to say that God has chosen the Jewish people, has been misunderstood, with unfortunate ideas about Jewish superiority sometimes being invoked (2017). What the covenant actually requires, in Gellman's view, is that Jews "make known God's love to all peoples while making it possible for all nations to come to God in freedom and joy," a contention he elaborates on in detail (2017, p. 35). In that case, being chosen is very much a matter of being a service to others.

Schellenberg who has reflected at length, and in a pioneering and imaginative way, about the sort of situation I have in mind. He writes that “[we] may very well suffer from a large-scale religious immaturity that puts us close to the beginning of religious understanding [...] We might, so far, have only dipped our toes in an ocean of religious possibilities, with tens or hundreds of thousands of years of further development or more – perhaps much more – being needed before the deepest religious understanding available to our species can be realized” (Schellenberg, 2019b, p. 28; see also Schellenberg, 2013, p. 66ff.; Schellenberg, 2007, Chapter 4). Schellenberg also observes that “[maybe] everything we’ve seen so far in religion represents no more than the early stirrings of the human religious impulse” (Schellenberg, 2019, p. 84). So the thought is that we human beings are at an early stage, perhaps a very early stage, in our religious development and we are capable of going much further. (However, we should not assume as part of the possible situation sketched here that we will undergo all development we are capable of; for example, we might destroy ourselves or be destroyed before we make progress we could have made.) There are relevant skills or capacities or dispositions or virtues or strategies and so on we do not now possess or have at our disposal but that people could possess in the future. Or if there are people who currently possess such skills, capacities, and so on, to some extent, they could possess them to a greater extent, or there could be more such people. Hence people are capable of improvement in relevant respects. To say that the skills or capacities in question are relevant is just to say that if we had them – or if more people had them or had them to a greater extent – we would, or at any rate could, make religious progress we currently are unable to make. Moreover, there are abundant ideas and entire perspectives that are yet to be developed that would be better in important ways – maybe deeper or more accurate or more insightful or more imaginative or more inspiring or more edifying – than ideas and perspectives developed so far. At any given moment in our history, including the present moment, we human beings are best understood as representing a stage in the religious history of humanity; and there are, or at least can be, stages to come that are currently unknown to us and that would be far better than anything encountered so far. Religions that understand themselves to be the culmination of prior religious development and to have assumed the final form that human religious development is going to take are therefore misguided. In this area, we should instead expect the unexpected.

So much for my sketch of a possible situation. I will shortly consider whether this might be our current situation. But, first, two clarificatory points. Talk of our being at an early stage or undeveloped might be taken to suggest there is a goal or at least a fully realized state we might achieve, and that to become more developed would be to approach and ideally to achieve that goal or state. The idea of being immature, in particular, is suggestive of there being a fully mature state. Such ideas are unhelpful. However much we grasp, we could always grasp more: we might be able to do so by being a little more careful in our reasoning or a little more insightful or a little wiser or a little more sensitive. Even if we were to change greatly in ways that would promote

religious progress – say, by acquiring new relevant skills and capacities – further change in this and in other respects would always be possible. So, to clarify, I am not assuming there is a goal or a fully developed state we might achieve.<sup>5</sup> Here is a second clarificatory point. I am not making any assumptions about the processes that would be involved in our making religious progress, if it were to occur. Suppose our making progress involves learning that such and such is the case. We might acquire this new information when it is revealed to us by a deity. Or it might have been revealed in the past but only understood later. Or we might acquire it by reasoning or observation or from the testimony of pioneering thinkers. As I say, I am not making any assumptions about what would bring about religious progress, of this or of any other sort, if it were to occur.

Is our situation as described? Is this perhaps a *rough description* of our situation? It is difficult to say for sure but here are four lines of reasoning that bear favorably on the reasonableness of believing that the situation I have imagined is our actual situation. First, as mentioned, the evidence of the past suggests that the religions will undergo major changes in the future, especially over centuries and millennia. And even if, in general, the one thing it is reasonable to expect is the unexpected, presumably some changes that occur will be changes for the better. This strongly suggests that there may be some major religious advances ahead.

Second, it is a commonplace in many religions that some people are especially spiritually sensitive and especially spiritually insightful. These people are considered by their coreligionists to be exceptional and to see more deeply than others and, often, to have helped to make whatever religious progress that religion understands itself to have made. It also seems to be assumed in many religions that there could be many more such exceptional people within their ranks than there have been; indeed the thought may well be that everyone should aspire to being exceptional in the relevant respects so that what has been exceptional would be typical. In effect there is a good deal of openness to the possibility that people could develop in ways that would facilitate future religious progress. This in turn suggests an openness on the part of many religions to the idea that religious progress is possible. Of course, the fact that a number of religions agree on something hardly entails that it is so. Still, there is a line

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<sup>5</sup> If I am right, Schellenberg's mention of "the deepest religious understanding available to our species" (Schellenberg, 2019b, p. 28) seems out of place. I see no need to think in these terms. In his book *Religion After Science* Schellenberg has extensive discussion of these issues in the course of which he distinguishes two notions of immaturity. (Schellenberg, 2019a, Chapter 1, Chapter 5 and *passim*.) I cannot go into the details here but I note his contention that we might reach a point where the existence or nonexistence of a transcendent religious reality (of a sort he explains in this and other work) would be settled definitively. This is plausible. However, in the event that our distant descendants settle definitively on the idea that such a reality *exists*, there might be no end to achieving a better understanding of its character. So the process of settling the question of its existence could be complete while the process of coming to understand its character is not complete and might be impossible to complete.



of reasoning here that is likely to be congenial to anyone who thinks there has already been some religious progress and that exceptional individuals have contributed to it.

Third, another relevant line of thought draws on some points Schellenberg has made about various factors that, in his view, have impeded human religious progress. These include the brevity of human religious exploration, human flaws such as self-importance, dogmatism, proneness to rivalry, and lack of patience, and our tendency to seek intellectual gratification prematurely and to resist inquiry. We are attached to our beliefs: we focus on protecting them and on defeating the beliefs of others. Even virtues such as loyalty have been obstacles. (Schellenberg, 2007, pp. 72, 73, 74, 76f, 81; also Schellenberg, 2019a, Chapter 4). Schellenberg also mentions the end of history illusion in this context; if people think there is no progress to be made, they probably will not be open to pursuing it.<sup>6</sup> If even some of these factors have impeded religious progress, there is progress we could have made, have not made, and could still make. Indeed the fact that it seems easy to identify obstacles to human religious progress suggests we have not made progress we could have made and could still make.

A fourth point has to do with *practical progress*, central to which is progress in providing guidance in practical matters. Progress in this area in the case of a religious tradition will include, for example, leading its members to be wiser, kinder, more sensitive, more generous, more concerned about justice, more inclined to care for the earth, more inclined to oppose avoidable violence, more inclined to care about the welfare of other animals and about the global loss of biodiversity, and the like. Questions such as the following also need to be asked about each of the religions. How has the tradition, on the whole, behaved when its members are close to power or have a chance to gain power or when others are at their mercy? And are its members willing to be whipped up into a frenzy of hostility to the outsider? Unfortunately, the track record in the case of many religions in such matters leaves much to be desired, so that in all of these areas there is abundant space for practical progress. And this is so in spite of the fact that relevant impressive ideals are associated with each of the major contemporary religions, and each probably can point to some heroic and visionary individuals and movements associated with it.

Some will observe that it is not the fault of a religion that its members sometimes behave badly. And this, to be sure, is a murky and complicated area of inquiry. Participants in a religion are likely to see any abysmal behavior on the part of their co-religionists as an aberration whose origin lies in factors external to the religion and to take admirable co-religionists to exhibit its essence. Outsiders and especially outsiders who are critics may be inclined to make the reverse judgment. Still, all sides can agree that the religion – all religions actually – could improve greatly in the respects mentioned, and that is the point I am mainly interested in.

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<sup>6</sup> I comment on this aspect of Schellenberg's work in McKim (2019a, pp. 30–31; McKim, 2019b, pp. 46–48).

In considering practical progress, we can also usefully ask how many of the major new ethical insights of recent centuries has one or more religion been responsible for generating. Consider, say, the idea of universal human rights or of the rights of religious minorities, or recognition of the need for environmental protection and care for the earth, or sensitivity to the suffering of other animals, or the idea that we should try to stop the global loss of biodiversity. Much of the time the religions have had to rely on secular reflection for important new insights. The train of ethical change leaves the station with respect to some matter as it dawns on many people that we human beings have been blind or indifferent to important ethical considerations, and have failed to embrace important ideals that many now recognize. And sensitive and informed people of various perspectives come on board for the needed changes. In many cases, the religions and their members have found themselves chasing this train after it has left the station. (There are even cases where there is no awareness that there is a station or a train leaving it.)

Then there is the issue of implementing such new insights. When movements that give expression to them are formed, are the religions definitive of, and supportive of, these movements? Or do they play “catch up” in this respect too? Consider the impressive movement that is currently protesting the appalling scale on which other forms of life on earth are being eliminated by human beings. Are the major religions taking the lead in this movement? Or are they chasing *this* train after it has left the station? (Worse, are some unaware that there *is* a train or a station in this case?) A failure to have been a visionary force and to lead the way in developing a new insight can be compounded by a failure to provide guidance and leadership when that insight has been developed independently. All I will say here is that it is blindingly obvious that the major religions could all do with improvement in all of these areas.

These four lines of reasoning do not *show* that the situation I outlined is the actual situation. But they speak for this being the case and for being open to the possibility that it is the case. However, if there is even a good chance that the situation as described is our situation, we might as well act as if it is so. This is because there is so much at stake; it would be very unfortunate if we failed to make progress we could have made. And even if it *were* to turn out that human religious reflection will go no further than it has gone, careful thinking about the future of religion might yield valuable dividends for how the religions in their current forms conduct themselves, and for our understanding of how they should conduct themselves.

Most of what I have said so far is about expanding the scope of philosophical reflection about religion and I have identified a few respects in which this might occur. However, having preached the gospel of expansion, I will shortly propose a type of contraction, a certain narrowing of our attention. I propose that as we contemplate religious progress, and especially as we pursue it, we should pay particular attention to traditions that are above a certain normative threshold I will sketch. Indeed, I have already introduced an important aspect of what this threshold is best understood to consist in, namely making practical progress. The simple thought is that as we pursue

religious progress we do well to pay particular attention to religious traditions that are already making such progress.

### An Aspect of Religious Progress

John Bishop has recently probed some issues that bear on practical progress. He writes as follows:

Humanity cannot live by right ideals alone. We must also be able to have the faith that reality is 'favourable' to these ideals, in the sense that there is real point to hopeful steadfast ethical commitment, despite the vulnerability it often enough entails. If ethics is to give a full answer to the question of how we should live, it must therefore be concerned with *metaphysical posits* to the effect that reality is favourable in this sense. If we cannot take reality to be such that there are grounds for the hope that fulfillment may be achieved through living in accordance with virtue, and that it is possible for us to be 'saved' from whatever – within ourselves and without – threatens to undermine our fulfillment, virtuous ideals may be experienced as no more than a noble fantasy which no one with a proper grip on reality could rationally adopt as overriding. It seems, however, *to be the business of religion* to provide, through claimed revelation or its functional equivalent [...] metaphysical posits of the sort required [...]. (Bishop, 2017, pp. 99–100)

Bishop is proposing that it is the role of religion to posit dimensions to reality that play a role in sustaining our highest ideals. And he proposes that assessment of religions with respect to whether they are fulfilling this role should be a central task of philosophy. His reasoning is as follows. The task of philosophy is "to uncover and examine the presuppositions of the forms of living and thinking on which it reflects" (Bishop, 2017, p. 94). And what we find when we reflect on the presuppositions of the religions is that they posit metaphysical realities whose "key function [...] is to ground the meaningfulness of hopeful and steadfast commitment to ethical ideals" (Bishop, 2017, pp. 103, 100). Hence, the best sort of religion will be religion that best sustains, through its metaphysical component, hopeful and steadfast commitment to the best ethical ideals.

There are details here we could quibble about. That the *key function* of the metaphysical realities posited by religions is to ground ethical commitment seems questionable. This, it seems to me, is an important function that is fulfilled in many religions but not all. There are other functions of positing metaphysical realities, such as an explanatory function and a therapeutic function, and these seem no less

important than the function Bishop mentions.<sup>7</sup> Quibbles aside, Bishop is drawing attention to an important area of inquiry. I want to probe briefly his idea that the best sort of religion will sustain, through its metaphysical component, hopeful and steadfast commitment to the best ethical ideals, using this idea to develop a little further both the idea of practical progress and the idea of a normative threshold.

Actually, two proposals can be extracted from these remarks from Bishop. One pertains to – as I shall put it – the issue of moral depth. This is the proposal that religion at its best posits a reality that is favorable to the highest ethical ideals. Or, rather, religion at its best posits that *reality* is favorable to such ideals: what is favorable in this regard is not, say, a minor aspect of how things are. It is instead definitive of how things are at the deepest level. For if the posited reality that is favorable to ethical ideals were relatively insignificant in the grand scheme of things – for instance it might be an undistinguished minor member of a large pantheon – it would not do the work Bishop has in mind. This thought is captured in his wording: what matters is the “overall worldview” or “total interpretation of reality” (Bishop, 2017, p. 100). The relevant posited reality is assumed to be central to or definitive of an overall worldview or total interpretation of reality. An effect of endorsing a worldview that posits that reality at the deepest level is of this nature is that efforts to be faithful to their ethical ideals by those who posit that reality will, or at least can, be understood by them to involve aligning themselves with reality. Virtuous ideals can be seen as anything but a “noble fantasy.”

A second proposal adds a mention of benefits to the agent. This is the idea that religion at its best promotes steadfast ethical commitment by endorsing a worldview of the sort just mentioned – the sort that involves the right sort of metaphysical posits – that *in addition* provides for the fulfillment of the virtuous agent. This is closer to what Bishop has in mind though I prefer the approach outlined in the last paragraph where the focus is on moral depth. Robert Merrihew Adams makes a point that is relevant to why I prefer that approach when he says that “the fear of punishment is not the best of motives, either morally or religiously; and emphasis on it can lead to the suspicion that the obligations under discussion do not fully fill the emotional and motivational role that we expect of moral obligations” (Adams, 1999, p. 252). Much the same goes for the expectation of, or hope for, being personally fulfilled. Either element mentioned – fear of punishment or hope for fulfillment – can compromise the emotional and motivational (and perhaps other) roles we expect moral obligations to have.<sup>8</sup> Also, the second proposal – the one about agent-fulfillment – incorporates the

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<sup>7</sup> They may also seem no less important to members of the tradition in question. Also, if the positing of a reality that is favorable to ethical ideals is to be reasonably engaged in, it probably needs to have an explanatory function or at any rate something that legitimates it. Underpinning ethical commitment would not suffice for this purpose. However, it is beyond my present purposes to consider when such positing would be reasonable or justified or the like.

<sup>8</sup> I am aware that there is much here that merits further discussion. A belief that there is in place a mechanism that would, say, provide for the fulfillment of a virtuous agent, could serve to encourage pursuit of the highest ideals and promote steadfast ethical commitment without compromising the

former so the idea of moral depth may reasonably be seen as the core idea here. I want to probe some aspects of a normative framework that includes this thought, in effect highlighting an important respect in which religion can make progress, while also filling out a little the idea of practical progress.

I want to focus, in particular, on the appropriate relationship between, on the one hand, the metaphysical posits of a religion and, on the other hand, what its members have independently come to understand to be morally required, morally admirable, morally unacceptable, and so on. These need to comport with each other.

Consider the case of someone who has changed their mind about how they ought to conduct themselves with respect to some important issue, focusing by way of example on a matter on which many people have actually changed their minds in recent decades, namely, how we human beings should treat nonhuman animals. Many have decided that a number of independent lines of reasoning now converge on supporting vegetarianism or at any rate greatly reduced meat consumption. Greater concern for the welfare of animals and greater concern about their suffering, awareness of the harmful consequences of industrial agriculture and of the cruelty of factory farms, greater concern for the diversity of life on earth, along with the availability of plant-based alternatives to meat combine to make a compelling case for eating less meat or even no meat; or so many have concluded. If you come to this conclusion, a metaphysical posit that fails to reflect it – or worse, encourages ignoring it – will appear seriously defective.

Or consider the idea that there is a deity that would be placated or pleased or impressed by the sacrifice of a child. Requiring such a thing would be considered ridiculous and ghastly in the case of a this-worldly ruler. It is just as problematic in the case of an otherworldly ruler. Indeed the idea that a deity would wish for, or be pleased by, the sacrifice of any living thing – say, a goat or a cat or a sparrow or even a tree – will strike many today as ridiculous and backward. And rightly so. William James hits this nail squarely on its head:

After an interval of a few generations the mental climate proves unfavorable to notions of the deity which at an earlier date were perfectly satisfactory: the older gods have fallen below the common secular level, and can no longer be believed in. Today a deity who should require bleeding sacrifices to placate him would be too

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emotional and motivational roles mentioned. Indeed Adams insightfully observes elsewhere that “[the] conviction that every good person will be very happy in the long run has often contributed, in religious believers, to a cheerfulness and single-heartedness of moral devotion that they probably would not have had without it,” and he alludes to the “subtle demoralization” that may arise in the absence of this conviction (Adams, 1987, p. 156). The conviction he mentions involves at least the possibility of a benefit to the agent but that benefit is not, as such, the salient element he rightly singles out as having a capacity to foster cheerfulness and moral devotion. As I say, the matter is complicated and I cannot pursue it further here. I will just say that introducing any benefits to the agent into the discussion brings with it various potential problems that are avoided if we focus on what I am calling moral depth.

sanguinary to be taken seriously. Even if powerful historical credentials were put forward in his favor, we would not look at them. Once, on the contrary, his cruel appetites were of themselves credentials. They positively recommended him to men's imaginations in ages when such coarse signs of power were respected and no others could be understood. Such deities then were worshiped because such fruits were relished. (James, 2002, p. 257)<sup>9</sup>

A discrepancy between a new ethical insight and a posited reality calls for a response. One option is to conclude that the reality in question has something very wrong with it. A posited deity, let's imagine, has been understood, and is still understood, to be placated by child sacrifice. But now the devotees of this deity have embraced a normative perspective from which a deity that would be placated by child sacrifice appears unsatisfactory, deficient and second-rate. So they are stuck with a deity they deem deficient and second-rate. (They may feel a need to be careful not to say this out loud or even to themselves!)

A second response, which I take to be the one anticipated by James, and which probably is more likely to occur, is to judge that the deity has been misunderstood. People *thought* that the deity would be placated by child sacrifice. Now they consider this to have been a blunder. They failed to see what they now see, namely that it is out of the question that the deity would be placated by what they now consider an abomination.

Either response to the sort of discrepancy mentioned involves taking a step in the direction of deploying a normative stance in terms of which religions can be assessed; it is also a step in the direction of developing the idea of a threshold that religions can either rise above or fall below.

When the elements in question – namely, current ethical insights and judgements on the one hand and beliefs about a posited religious reality on the other – comport

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<sup>9</sup> James returns to this and related themes a number of times:

The monarchical type of sovereignty was, for example, so ineradicably planted in the mind of our own forefathers that a dose of cruelty and arbitrariness in their deity seems positively to have been required by their imagination. ... Not only the cruelty, but the paltriness of character of the gods believed in by earlier centuries also strikes later centuries with surprise. (James, 2002, pp. 257–258)

What with science, idealism, and democracy, our own imagination has grown to need a God of an entirely different temperament from that Being interested exclusively in dealing out personal favors, with whom our ancestors were so contented. Smitten as we are with the vision of social righteousness, a God indifferent to everything but adulation, and full of partiality for his individual favorites, lacks an essential element of largeness; and [associated forms of religiosity seem] curiously shallow and unedifying. (James, 2002, p. 270)

with each other, two conditions obtain. Or rather, two sorts of discrepancy are avoided. First, there is no discrepancy between, on the one hand, what people believe to be morally good, bad, wrong, obligatory, permitted, and so on and, on the other hand, what they believe about what a deity (or other religious reality) requires or expects or wants from them, or perhaps from everyone. Second, there is no discrepancy between what people believe to be morally good (etc.) and what they believe about the nature, character, activities, and so on, of the posited reality.

### **Expanding the Idea of Religious Progress**

This brief discussion of moral progress and of a way in which it might be reflected in the direction that a religion takes is an example of a proposal that philosophical reflection about religious progress might and, in my view, *should* yield. The key idea is that a religion would reflect impressive ethical insights and developments in its metaphysical posits. A number of additional elements have been mentioned above: being a *source* of impressive ethical insights, giving expression to any such insights that are developed by others, and leading the way in implementing those insights, thereby contributing to solving major current practical problems.

We can think of the idea of reflecting impressive ethical insights and developments in its metaphysical posits as a component of moral progress. But we can equally well think of it as something that would *facilitate* moral progress. The same goes for another condition, namely understanding whatever you need to understand to be a source of impressive ethical insights, or to lead the way in implementing those insights, and so on. Thus in the case of the global loss of biodiversity, a religion might make progress by being a source of impressive ethical insights in this area, or by leading the way in implementing those insights. And doing so would be facilitated by reflecting that progress in its metaphysical posits. It would also be facilitated by understanding, say, the scale on which humans are rendering other forms of life extinct or by understanding the connections between human destruction of habitat and mass extinction or by grasping that the current wave of mass extinctions needs to be understood in the context of five previous global waves of extinction, so that any confidence someone might have, for religious or other reasons, that this sort of catastrophe would never occur, is completely misplaced.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This idea of a facilitating condition is a broad one that merits further exploration. It would include anything that would promote moral progress of the sort under discussion. As mentioned, this would certainly include information that is relevant to this particular set of issues and that would provide a deeper grasp of them. But it would also include anything that encourages engagement with those issues, anything that strengthens your resolve to be engaged. Having had a good education or having inspiring family members or friends – matters that are general and not specific to the topic at hand – might be mentioned here.

There are numerous other aspects of religious progress, and I will sketch a few additional ideas about desirable elements that would make for better religions.<sup>11</sup> I thereby fill out a little the idea of a normative threshold, though I make no attempt here to provide a case for any of them or to provide a comprehensive account of this matter of a normative threshold. I propose that the list of desirable elements should also include the following:

avoiding excessive confidence in our assertions, being willing to revise our views, taking an exploratory approach, being intellectually humble in the face of our great ignorance, recognizing that our favored position comes with plenty of perplexities and that its tenets are debatable, and not thinking that we have all the answers;

combining endorsement of our views with careful, sensitive, well-informed, reflection that pays adequate attention to other relevant bodies of knowledge such as history and science;

recognizing that it takes a lot of effort for us to understand how things appear to others and to grasp their point of view and taking seriously the religious experience and possible insights of others - and especially of others whose own tradition seems to be above the relevant threshold;

avoiding parochialism and tribalism and avoiding denigrating outsiders.

Again, the relevant point can be formulated as a hypothetical. *If* you are persuaded of, say, the need to avoid excessive confidence in your assertions about religious matters, or of the need to avoid denigrating religious outsiders, the question arises whether a religious tradition - such as your own, for example - has the wherewithal to require these responses. And here too we can ask whether a tradition actually sets out to do so and whether such elements are reflected in its associated metaphysical posits.

Being above the relevant threshold will be a matter of scoring highly in terms of the full list of elements we are able to come up with; at best I have merely taken a few steps in that direction. We can look to religions that are above the relevant threshold to lead the way, especially if they have been above that threshold for a long time. Thinking along these lines involves to some extent locating the normative center of gravity apart from the religious traditions, which have often thought themselves to be central and definitive in this regard, and in an independent location from which the religions can partially be assessed. The understanding of this threshold, and of where it should be set, may well change over time. One hopes that expectations will be raised rather than lowered. Where it should be set is a fitting subject for ongoing discussion.

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<sup>11</sup> In McKim (2019b, pp. 50-54) I outline some steps one might take with a view to pursuing religious progress.



It might be asked why a religion should take seriously a normative stance that has developed independently of it, either in part or entirely. Actually here too the shoe is on the other foot. For example, those who have paid attention to the relevant science and have come to the conclusion that it is unacceptable for humans to continue rendering other forms of life extinct when they could do otherwise, and that all peoples and cultures need to rally together to protect the diversity of life on earth, will find unacceptable religions that fail to provide leadership in this area. That failure is compounded if it is the product of having nothing insightful to say about such a matter. It is further compounded if the religion has failed to grasp, and has failed to explain to its members what they need to understand to come to grips with an issue such as this.

So what is important here is not why a religion should pay attention to an external norm. It is rather that people who have taken the relevant step in their thinking and, in the case mentioned, recognize the enormity of the loss that the planet is facing will have no patience with religious perspectives and institutions that fail to take this step. Of course, religions may resist such moves: members may be outraged and the leadership may boil over with indignation. On the other hand, dissenting voices may counsel a wiser course and be receptive to the need to respond to a new challenge such as this one.

So while I am on the side of expanding philosophy of religion in the global direction, when it comes to making religious progress there is reason to pay special attention to religions that are above a certain threshold that I have at least gestured at. The appropriate focus in this case is narrower.

Traditions that are below the relevant threshold certainly may be interesting in various ways and their concepts and beliefs may be worthy of philosophical scrutiny. For example, such a religion might have a conceptually interesting notion of sacrifice – one from which others who think about sacrifice could learn. Also, people who belong to a religion that is below the relevant threshold may have reasons, even adequate reasons, to belong to that religion. I am not addressing that issue here.

It might be questioned whether it is useful to talk in general terms of a threshold which each religion, taken as a whole, might rise above or fall below. Surely many religions are likely to be mixed bags, above any relevant threshold in some areas and below it in others. So a religion might distinguish itself in terms of taking science, including the science of biodiversity loss, with the greatest seriousness and leading the way in responding effectively to that crisis while nevertheless denigrating outsiders. And a religion that overall is below the relevant threshold may have features or aspects that are above the threshold so that when it comes to looking for an exemplar that leads the way with respect to those particular features, that religion may warrant special attention. And so on. These are reasonable points. One approach would be to attend to what is positive and worthwhile, and try to build on it, wherever we may find it, rather than thinking in terms of a tradition as a whole being above the relevant threshold and hence as especially worthy of attention. In that case, rather than narrowing our attention to certain traditions that are above a threshold we would focus on constructive *elements* that are above the relevant threshold wherever we may find them. Really, though, this is best taken as a variation on, or embellishment of,

what I have proposed and the net effect will be that traditions with a *lot* of aspects that are above the threshold will be of special interest.

I have introduced the project of pursuing religious progress as one that philosophy of religion should undertake or at any rate ponder. But I have in effect been talking about another set of possible partners in the pursuit of religious progress, namely the religions. They can play this role by incorporating elements such as those mentioned. Each might recognize that it may represent an early stage in religious development and ask how it should conduct itself in light of this recognition. Such dimensions might become central to one or more religions in the future and might be incorporated into their practices. A tradition might combine all of this with hope or confidence or faith that it is the best religion we have available at present, or one of the best, that it uniquely contains certain valuable elements and that it will endure. It might also collaborate with other religions in the pursuit of religious progress. Indeed I am inclined to include a willingness to do so as itself part of the normative threshold under discussion. Cooperation will open up the possibility of learning from others. There is a challenging and potentially inspiring opportunity here for all of the religions. Incidentally, I am not suggesting that the pursuit of progress, exploration of the normative threshold, or collaboration with others in such projects should be the central or main focus of any religion. Rather these are endeavors that the religions, more or less as they are, can and should engage in.<sup>12</sup>

It is understandable that religions have not collaborated much in the past. Each has understood itself to be the purveyor of what everyone really needs. Many have also thought their tradition to be the culmination of prior religious development. But when you think of your tradition as, like all others, a stage – a moment, a temporary halting point – in the ongoing religious development of humanity, new opportunities for collaboration emerge. All the more so when there is a focus on pursuing religious progress and an openness to other forms of knowledge. Isn't it time for collaboration? Isn't it better for the religious future of humanity to unfold in ways that take account of careful reflection that has emerged from collaborative interreligious engagement and over which, therefore, many religions have some sense of ownership? From the point of view of members of religious traditions in the future, the current situation in which the religions are in competition with each other to a great extent may seem backward and unfortunate, representing a phase it was important to move beyond.

We might also ask what role an individual might play in pursuing religious progress. Are there ways of being religious that would be especially helpful to someone who endeavors to take this path? Perhaps incorporating an openness to future religious progress into your own religious reflections would be a good start. Actually there is a challenging and potentially inspiring opportunity here for each of us.

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<sup>12</sup> In thinking of the religions, more or less as they are, as possible partners in the pursuit of religious progress I align myself with Palmqvist who proposes a move along these lines while opposing what he refers to as Schellenberg's attempt "to recreate religion from scratch" (Palmqvist, 2022, p. 96 and *passim*). Schellenberg proposes "a new form of religion built specifically for immaturity" (Schellenberg, 2019a, p. 111). This new form of religion involves what Schellenberg calls ultimism and triple transcendence, and more besides. These are deeply interesting ideas but beyond the scope of this essay.

## Concluding Thoughts

You may think I am completely mistaken about the directions the religions should take and about what progress would consist in. To be sure, I am expressing my own views about these matters and not everyone will agree. One thing we can all agree on though is that as far as future religious developments are concerned, we should expect the unexpected. Future developments are likely to be as difficult for us to predict as current developments were to our distant ancestors. Wayfarers all, even if we are clever enough to discern what may be around the next corner or beyond the next hill, there probably are vast landscapes ahead whose features we cannot begin to guess at. Another thing we can agree on is that it is well worth our while to reflect on the future of the religions.

And we might probe questions such as the following. How should we set about making religious progress? Are there disciplines that might be pursued, courses of study that might be undertaken, training courses that might be made available, constructive social arrangements that might be cultivated, and so on, with a view to achieving such progress? Are there practices that would be conducive to progress and that can be incorporated into the religious traditions? Do we need new institutions, perhaps some that are partly the product of collaboration among existing religions? Perhaps collaborative attempts on the part of a number of religions to tackle major current problems have a role to play. Perhaps our distant descendants will understand vastly more than we understand; the situation is, though, that we have little idea what this might mean. What we can do though is make these matters a subject of reflection and try to prepare in collaboration with like-minded others.

I conclude by responding to a possible challenge to what I am saying in this essay. Someone might object that philosophy of religion and its practitioners should not presume to speak to the future of religion and that it is presumptuous to think we could say anything meaningful about how these vast multifaceted institutions with deep historical roots should conduct themselves in the future. (Who do we think we are?)

My response to this objection has two parts. First, as I said earlier, *why not* take a shot at reflecting collectively about such matters? If we do so we will be less at the mercy of whatever religious changes happen to come along. What happens to come along may not be dictated by considering what is true, what is edifying, what is inspiring, what is imaginative, and the like. It may instead be the product of, say, violence or power-grabbing or power-consolidation or attempts to exploit religious sentiments and loyalties for political gain or as vehicles for people to give expression to their grievances or resentments.

Second, the proposed area of inquiry is not totally different from reflection that has been going on all along in philosophy of religion. Many have attempted to argue philosophically that the religions should take some position or other on some issue or topic. A philosopher who advances what they think to be the best account of the relationship between God and time or between God and the universe likely thinks they have articulated the account that ordinary believers in God, and the traditions to which they belong, should endorse. So what we have in these cases is philosophy of religion

that aspires to provide future direction to religion, albeit of a sort that is limited to a particular topic. John Hick developed a pluralistic hypothesis and I think he wished the religions to embrace it in the future. And what have, say, the perennialists been up to other than specifying the direction they thought religion should take in the future? Indeed *everyone* who argues philosophically for a religious perspective is making a case for religion taking a particular future direction. All, or at any rate much, philosophy of religion could be seen as doing this.

But now – and just when we seemed to be getting somewhere in response to the charge of presumptuousness – a new objection raises its head. It’s not that the project is presumptuous; it is rather that it lacks sufficient presumption. It is business as usual. My response to *this* objection is just that systematic reflection about the future of religion, about how to promote religious progress, about how philosophers of religion might contribute to this progress, and about how the religions might join the endeavor, has not had a central place in the field. The proposed course of reflection would, at the very least, involve a new emphasis. On the other hand, if what I am proposing is not that different from what has been going on all along, then I have more allies than I realized. Among objections, one that on inspection boils down to the observation that you have more allies than you realized is not the most worrisome!<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Many thanks to John Bishop, Walter Feinberg, Douglas Jamieson, and Kevin Schilbrack for probing and thought-provoking comments and questions on earlier drafts.

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### How To Cite This Article

McKim, Robert. (2024). "Philosophy of Religion and the Future of Religion," *AGATHEOS: European Journal of Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 5–26.

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