



## THEISM AND THE FUTURE OF PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION: THREE QUESTIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** Three interconnected issues are addressed: whether philosophy of religion needs to move away from theism; what could replace it; and how nontheistic conceptions of the divine should be incorporated in the field's future discussions. Among the central points made are these: that attention to theism should diminish as a large number of nontheistic topics receive discussion in the philosophy of religion; that theism's dominance in the structuring of our discussions should be replaced by a more deliberate focus on the aims of philosophy of religion, including in particular certain higher-level aims involving the resolution of problems in other areas of philosophy and the evaluation of religious practice; and that some of the most potentially fruitful ideas of the divine are not alternative conceptions of it per se, but rather are quite general ideas offering a framework for the discussion of alternative conceptions including theism.

**KEYWORDS:** theism, nontheistic, future, aims, alternative

### Introduction

This paper is written in response to three questions that were sent to me as parameters for the talk on which the paper is based.<sup>1</sup> In contemporary philosophy of religion these questions might be regarded as belonging to the zeitgeist – this is perhaps especially so in Europe, where my talk was given. They are in any event worth answering, and I shall suggest some answers here. Very slightly altered to suit the present context, the questions are these: (1) Do we need to move away from theism? (2) What could replace

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<sup>1</sup> The talk was part of a workshop on the future of philosophy of religion led by Georg Gasser and Sebastian Gäb and held at Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich in April 2024. I am grateful to all who participated in our discussion there, and also to an anonymous reviewer of the paper, whose comments helped me improve it.

it? And: (3) How should philosophy of religion incorporate alternative, nontheistic conceptions of the divine?

The first question identifies an issue, and the other two concern its resolution. I shall assume that the word “we” is intended to encompass philosophers of religion in general. But how should “theism” be understood? There are disagreements among theists as to what the theistic concept of God requires or allows in the way of content: think, for example, of the views of Richard Swinburne and Brian Davies, both at Oxford, both called theists, but speaking rather differently of theism. Davies, who endorses a view of God as, among other things, absolutely simple, atemporal, and immutable, is considered (by himself and others) to be by virtue of this emphasis a “classical” theist. Swinburne’s theism might generously be called “neo-classical,” but Davies would likely think this too generous: he has suggested for Swinburne’s theism, which he rejects, the label “theistic personalism” (Davies, 2020). Consider also how John Bishop and Ken Perszyk have recently been defending a conspicuously *non-personal* “euteleological” idea of God (Bishop & Perszyk, 2023), devoting a fair bit of time to support of the view that its proper home is still the theistic religious traditions of the world – something that Swinburne, and perhaps Davies too, would be inclined to dispute. But when selecting an understanding of theism in the present context, I needn’t be worried by all this controversy. For I can be guided by the questions just mentioned, which, as noted, provide the parameters for my paper. These questions presuppose that the theism in question is distinct from views that embody what these days are called *alternative* conceptions of God (views such as pantheism and panentheism),<sup>2</sup> and moreover that it is a highly *influential* view which might easily be thought to be *too* influential in the philosophy of religion. I don’t think any new controversy will be sparked if I say that this gives us a good reason to understand theism in a manner that brings it much closer to Swinburne than to Davies or Bishop and Perszyk. Personal and agential features, in particular, must be kept front and center. The upshot is that by “theism” I shall in this paper mean the following: the claim that a personal being exists who enjoys all power, knowledge, and goodness and is the source of any universe there may be.

### Questions (1) and (3)

So to Question (1): Do we need to move away from theism, thus understood? Reflection on this issue immediately exposes and demands a response to a couple of

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<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, also alternative ideas about what it takes to be an “alternative” conception of God. Some might think that the proper criterion is denial of God’s perfection (God’s perfection being something on which most contemporary philosophers of religion are agreed). But a major recent work on the subject (Buckareff & Nagasawa, 2016) does not take this as the criterion, understanding alternative conceptions of God fairly loosely as any that are distinct from the view I am here calling “theism.” I understand the notion similarly, though with a qualification involving degree of content that will emerge later on.

others: How is the philosophy of religion tied to theism now? And why might we think there is something wrong with this?

The first of these subsidiary questions won't take long to answer. If we think of all the work being done in philosophy of religion today, there can be little doubt that the majority of it is in some way concerned with theism as here understood. The theistic idea of God is usually at least lurking there in the background. And often enough the idea occupies center stage.

For clear evidence of theism's dominance we might consider our introductory textbooks. Most of them – the textbook authored by Davies supports my point by being a rare exception – are written by people who were taught or otherwise influenced by theistic personalists such as Swinburne or Alvin Plantinga. Thus we find a personal and agential focus in textbook discussions of the divine attributes and of arguments for and against the existence of God, including the problems of evil and hiddenness. But theism is also there, if less focally, in discussions of religion and science, where personalist forms of western religion dominate. It is furthermore embedded in the topic of faith and reason, whose discussion is focused on the rationality of belief or faith in the personal God of theism; and in faith and reason's late-born child Reformed epistemology, of which the same may be said. By now we've listed the majority of topics found in our introductory texts today. The topics found in these texts are sometimes described as a grab bag, with nothing to unify them, but it might plausibly be said that it is precisely the focus on *theism's God* that unifies them. And the same holds for the topics addressed by most of the other books on philosophy of religion published by our major presses and by most of the articles in philosophy of religion journals. (Perhaps this journal will be an exception; we shall see!)

So why might we think there is something wrong with this? That, you'll recall, was the second issue immediately raised by thinking about Question (1). Why might we think there is something wrong with theism's firm grip on our collective consciousness?

Well, for one thing, it is part of our job as philosophers to sit loose from cultural preoccupations – loose enough to allow for critical reflection on such preoccupations, which are variously and often less than rationally motivated. Clearly a preoccupation with theism's personal God is woven right through Western culture. Think particularly of Western religion as most commonly practiced. So it is part of our job as philosophers to sit loose from *this* cultural preoccupation. But what we do so often reflects it instead. Our activities reflect cultural currents rather than, in that other sense of "reflect," encouraging us to reflect critically on them. Now one might object that this ignores the fact that, in the philosophy of religion, theism is both defended and opposed. (The problems of evil and hiddenness, for example, are arguments *against* the existence of theism's God.) However, it will take but a moment to see that a narrower version of the point from before about theism's dominance which focuses on the *defence* of theism or the *presupposition of its truth* or clear *acquiescence in its cultural influence* could be made to fly just as well as my broader statement. Indeed, with the

wide influence today of Anglo-American Christian philosophers and analytical theologians, who tend to take commitment to the personal God of theism as a starting point in their inquiries, the narrower point has, if anything, recently gained in power.

Theism's dominance in the philosophy of religion therefore signals a too comfortable cozying up to certain cultural preoccupations – that, at any rate, is part of what's wrong with it. Notice that this is best viewed as a negative point: about what should be avoided by our discussions but isn't. The other side of the coin here, which adds some positive content, is about what we *might* be discussing but aren't. We owe it to the world to expose and discuss ever so many ideas involving religion in which theism is nowhere to be found. In saying this I am already touching on Question (3), about nontheistic conceptions of God. And, indeed, one might initially think that those other ideas we owe it to the world to expose and discuss are precisely the alternative conceptions of God which have begun, ever so modestly, to infiltrate our discussions. (Notice that given how our questions have led us to define "theism," even the often-ignored classical theists who champion ideas more commonly emphasized in the Middle Ages than today might regard themselves as offering an alternative conception of God.) But at this point an important caution begs to be issued. Ideas about religion that don't involve the theist's God aren't always going to be other ideas of God. *Various* new topics will appear on a suitably expanded agenda for the philosophy of religion of the future. So there's no single straight and direct and short path from the recognition that we ought to move away from theism, to the topic of alternative conceptions of God. Instead, there are many pathways moving off in various directions, with question marks at the end. *One* of those question marks may be traded for the topic of alternative conceptions of God.

How should the other question marks be removed? I think some should stay there for a while, just to stimulate our imaginations. But at least a taste of what might appear on an expanded agenda that allowed us to "move away from theism," in the relevant sense of freeing ourselves from its suffocating embrace, is afforded by a couple of lists of topics Paul Draper and I put together for a recent paper in the old EJPR. Here is one list, which is drawing out aspects of what we called the philosophy of *religion per se* (as opposed to this or that form of religion):

the definition of 'religion;' whether non-doxastic, fictionalist, and naturalistic forms of religion are possible; relationships between religion and philosophy, science, morality, law, art, violence, and oppression; the proper place of religion in political debate; how religion might make progress; whether all or most religions share a common propositional core, pursue any common goals, or respond to common forms of mystical or numinous experience; and the philosophical significance both of the diversity of religions and of scientific and historical work on the origins or development of religion. (Schellenberg & Draper, 2022, p. 16)

A little later we offered another list of somewhat more specific topics potentially illuminated by blending concerns of the philosophy of religion with those of the history of religion:

religion in the Paleolithic and its relations to our definitions of religion and our beliefs about how religion can evolve in the future; the extent to which religion historically has appealed to transcendence not just transmundanity, which is compatible with naturalism; the forms that religious experience has actually taken around the world and whether they match our categories; the extent to which religiousness has involved or does involve real *certainty* or even *belief*, as it is often assumed it must do. (Schellenberg & Draper, 2022, p. 18)

Such topics as these could be discussed without ever mentioning theism, though of course there are also theistic illustrations for some of their themes. Indeed, to avoid an overreaction, it will be good to remind ourselves that we can seek a release from theism's embrace without going so far as to send it out of the room, denying it a voice in the larger conversation and a place in the larger set of relationships that we rightly hope to cultivate in the future. (Moving away from theism in the relevant sense does not entail expelling it from the philosophy of religion.) If there is something wrong with theism's dominance, it is at least in part that it has prevented us from seeing the importance of, and fully exploring, the wide range of alternative topics inviting discussion in the philosophy of religion.

Now, again, *one* of these topics is the topic of alternative conceptions of God. My point is just that we should imagine it situated in the midst of a large network of topics. Even when thinking specifically of the nontheistic side of things, we should notice that the notion of alternative, nontheistic conceptions of God is subordinate to the notion of alternative, *nontheistic topics*. Here we see, in particular, that we could not hope to do justice to all of the philosophy of religion by seeking to bring it under the umbrella of the *total* set of conceptions of God, theistic and nontheistic. One can imagine that this might sometimes be the ambition lying behind someone's introduction of the topic of alternative conceptions of God. But, if so, the ambition is much too large. (A quick qualification may be appended here: namely, that how things actually turn out in the far future of philosophy of religion will be affected if we get some interesting new positive results in our thinking about alternative conceptions of God between now and then, and one of these possible effects *is* a new framework for the field's overall discussion fashioned from those results and embraced by our intellectual descendants. But here and now we must of course be thinking about how we should regard our field at the present stage of its development.)

Summarizing, then, what we have done so far: we have refined our understanding of Question (1) "Do we need to move away from theism?" and answered it with a clear "yes." And in exploring that "yes" a little further, we have also arrived at one answer,

if a somewhat vague answer, to Question (3) “How should philosophy of religion incorporate nontheistic conceptions of the divine?”, which answer is that the topic of nontheistic conceptions of the divine should be contextualized within a *much larger* set of topics in the philosophy of religion, including many other nontheistic topics. It is good to note well the contingency of our focus on God in the philosophy of religion. The survival of this field of study does not depend on theistic activity. Indeed, it is not dependent on any activity involving the idea of a transcendent reality, whether theistically or otherwise construed. We can imagine a philosophy of religion of the future that makes no mention of God or the divine at all: philosophy of religion might in the future be, for example, entirely naturalistic or non-realist in orientation. Given suitable changes in the culture, even from some small emerging emphasis of today such as religious fictionalism a thousand new flowers could grow and spread across the entire field. I don’t myself favour such a result, at any rate for the nearer future, since, as I shall be indicating shortly, I think there is a place for continuing discussion of God and transcendence in the philosophy of religion. But that result *is* found in one possible future.

### Question (2)

I said that we have already provided answers for Questions (1) and (3). It may seem that, at any rate by implication, we have also already addressed Question (2): “What could replace theism?” For surely we might say that what could and should replace theism in the future of our form of inquiry is the *whole large set* of topics that we sampled a few moments ago (including topics involving theistic and alternative conceptions of God). We ought to allow ourselves to feel the embrace of them all.

Yes, we might say this. But here some nuancing is needed in connection with that notion of replacement. When thinking in the manner just suggested, we are considering what should replace theism as the *central object* or *focus of attention* in our field. We might think instead about what should replace theism as the most salient *structural feature* of our field, or as the central object or focus of attention in the narrower context of God-talk, or as the *central point of reference* in that context, or as delivering a conception offering a *suitable framework for investigation* in that narrower context – and in this sense its most salient structural feature. Theism has played all these roles, and they are subtly different. Not only have we allowed it to dominate our attention in the philosophy of religion but we also have allowed the various things we do to be structured by theism – as we saw before when considering the implicit unifying structure of our textbooks – and we have allowed it to dominate our attention, more specifically, when explicitly addressing issues about God; and we are influenced by it when interpreting and judging other ideas in the context of God-talk; and, finally, we often ignore those other ideas, alternative conceptions of God, in the context of God-talk, working solely within the framework or the structural parameters that

theism affords, exploring mostly various alternative versions of theism such as open theism and Molinist theism. Accordingly, we can think of theism's *replacement* as involving its replacement in any or all of these roles. Let's call the different forms of replacement that result, respectively, attentional replacement, structural replacement, attentional replacement relativized to God-talk, interpretational or evaluational replacement, and structural replacement relativized to God-talk. I won't be talking about all of them. But let me address structural replacement at the general level of the field as a whole and then, in light of that, both attentional and structural replacement relativized to the context of God-talk. What I have to say about the former topic will at the same time provide a bit more precision for our answer to Question (3).

So: structural replacement at the general level. This, again, is the idea that theism ought to be replaced as the most salient structural feature of our field. I want to offer an alternative. We saw that right now the way our field is structured is made visible in our textbooks. So as we go through this it may help to think about how the discussion in our textbooks might be structured in a rather different way.

The central thought is that we should be giving much more careful and deliberate attention to the proper *aims* of philosophy of religion, which, if made general enough, can structure the discipline; and that when this task is undertaken, we will find theism subsumed by the result and indeed quite dispensable within the larger picture of our proper activity.

Various aims might be mentioned. Elsewhere I have distinguished aims associated with the resolution of prolegomenous issues (of which our present issue concerning aims is an example); with the meaning of religious propositions; and with their evaluation and the evaluation of various types of response thereto as well as of persons making such responses (Schellenberg, 2005, chap. 7). Already we can see how the structural significance of theism recedes. But these aims, as I have suggested, are properly viewed as "lower-level" aims – no doubt worth pursuing for their own sakes but also, importantly, for the sake of certain other aims naturally labeled "higher-level," which bring most clearly into view how the overall structure of the field might be non-theistically conceived. I shall here refashion what I have said elsewhere about these latter aims and apply the result to our present question.

The first higher-level aim, which with reference to the direction of movement it requires we might call the Religion-to-Philosophy or RtoP aim, involves *investigating the theoretical potential of religious ideas in other areas of philosophy* – which is to say their potential contribution to the resolution of theoretical problems in metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and so on. (Certainly *someone* in philosophy should be doing this, and if not philosophers of religion, then who?) And the second higher-level aim, which has us moving the other way and so might be called the Philosophy-to-Religion (PtoR) aim instead, involves using philosophical resources to *rationally evaluate religious practice*, both as found concretely embedded in the various religious traditions and as more abstractly represented by what Draper and I have called religion per se. (Isn't it supremely important for philosophers to undertake this job, given the ubiquity of

religious practice, the great goods with which it is associated, but also the many challenges it faces in our culture? And again, if the job is not to be done by philosophers of religion, then by whom is it to be done?)

Notice that although work of these two types might be interpenetrating or mutually reinforcing in various ways, there is no obvious entailment between endorsements of the two aims I have distinguished. But it has still been easy to conflate things inappropriately here, which gives us a good reason to make the distinction carefully instead, putting everything in its proper place as we structure our thinking about what philosophers of religion are doing or could be doing. For an interesting specific example of inappropriate conflation, consider the seeming tension between an emphasis on making *natural theology* successful and the suggestion of *Reformed epistemology* that such success is dispensable. These ideas are often thought to conflict, but really they don't. When this apparent disagreement is discussed with awareness of the present distinction, we will come to think of Reformed epistemologists as moving PtoR, from philosophy to religion rather than the reverse: nothing in philosophy requires that the religious practice of intellectually responsible adult theists be infused with the relevant arguments, they are saying. (Perhaps they should be saying it without using the word "epistemology," which suggests an RtoP interest, but there it is.) Now *you* may be interested in religion and a philosopher, and wondering, say, whether religious claims deserve respect in metaphysics; whether they can do any *work* in metaphysics. If you don't see that the Reformed epistemologists are moving PtoR and that your direction of thought is instead RtoP (moving from religion to philosophy), you'll think you disagree with the Reformed thinkers. For such respect in metaphysics naturally may be contingent on the availability of powerful arguments of the sort that natural theology seeks to provide. But by recognizing the distinction I'm pressing, you may come to realize that your basis for disagreement is removed. After all, whether token states of belief found in a religious community are in good order is one question; what may speak for religious propositions in a manner that makes them theoretically usable in metaphysics or elsewhere in philosophy is quite another. We should not conflate these different things. And we should not assume that the answers to such different questions must in some way coincide.

The RtoP/PtoR distinction helps to bring into view a good alternative way of structuring our field, one that leaves plenty of room for God-talk and specifically for theistic God-talk without being in any way tied to the latter. So where *might* God-talk come in? This, by the way, is where we can get a somewhat more precise answer to our question (Question (3)) about how philosophy of religion should incorporate nontheistic conceptions of God, to which I responded before somewhat vaguely as follows: the philosophy of religion should incorporate nontheistic conceptions of God in the context of *the much larger set of topics* that philosophers of religion should be investigating. When contemplating that much larger set of topics we can now look for RtoP and PtoR topics. Some of them will involve determining what various particular



religious traditions might contribute to philosophical understanding or what investigation within the context of religion per se might show that is philosophically enlightening – RtoP. And this possible contribution will include the contribution of *God*-ideas from the various concrete religions, including nontheistic religions, and also *possible* *God*-ideas not previously considered or religiously instantiated. Meanwhile, doing justice to the other direction of thought, PtoR, will demand applying philosophical insights evaluatively not just to Christianity or other theistic traditions but also to various non-Christian religions and possible religions and, furthermore, in a large number of ways to religion per se. The alternative topics listed before, from the Draper/Schellenberg paper, are illustrative here. And of course *God*-oriented practices are among those needing to be evaluated. (Notice again that if we avoid the inappropriate conflation mentioned before, we may find that a positive evaluation is in order in the latter PtoR context even where no good arguments are available. For the practice in question might not involve, or claim to involve, anything like the knowledge or even the epistemically justified belief prized in theoretical contexts.) So, how should the philosophy of religion incorporate nontheistic conceptions of *God*? One clear answer is that we should discuss them in the context of RtoP and PtoR, incorporating them into both the examination of religion’s philosophical potential and the examination of philosophy’s contribution to an evaluation of religious practice. That is my somewhat more precise answer to Question (3).

### **More on Question (2)**

So much about the structural replacement of theism at the general level, and about how our results deepen the answer suggested for Question (3). Keeping our main focus on Question (2), on the topic of theism’s replacement, let’s turn now to attentional and structural replacement relativized to the context of *God*-talk, beginning with the former.

Fairly swiftly we may become inclined to say that what could and should replace theism’s claim on our attention in the future of *God*-oriented inquiry is the whole large set of conceptions of *God*, including the theistic conception. We ought to allow ourselves to feel the embrace of them all! And having made the RtoP/PtoR distinction, we may now notice that attentional replacement – something similar may be true for the other sorts of replacement – might look somewhat different on the RtoP side of *God*-oriented inquiry than on the PtoR side. In the former context direct attention to the various conceptions of *God* and the corresponding claims and epistemic criteria for determining their theoretical utility will dominate, whereas in the latter context attention will be given to how conceptions are embedded in practices and to philosophical criteria – not all of them epistemic – for the evaluation of such practices. Certainly, we can’t properly suppose, on either side, that some one or other *particular* conception from that broad set we have been referencing could attentionally replace

the theistic idea of God. Presumably the proper selection of one such particular conception would require everyone or almost everyone in the God-oriented dimension of the philosophy of religion to reject theism and accept that alternative picture of things as being in the best intellectual condition, in whatever is the relevant sense of “best intellectual condition.” Such a result is at the least a long way off precisely because there are so many alternatives, some perhaps unconceived, and since detailed alternatives to theism are underexplored and require much more attention before they could be regarded even as in better shape than theism is, let alone as generally superior.

Thus, for the time being, the attentional replacement of theism in the context of God-talk should involve quite a large set of God-ideas. Interestingly, we can affirm this while allowing that it might be good for theism to remain a *sort* of reference point in this context, at least for a while, and at least on the RtoP side of things. (So what I earlier called interpretational or evaluational replacement need not be made complete, right away.) This is because as we fan out laterally we will benefit by *comparing* new ideas with the previously dominant theism, both descriptively and normatively. We will, in particular, want to consider whether this or that alternative is superior to theism by relevant philosophical and religious criteria. (Later, of course, if theism recedes because some alternative is thought superior, we could compare new ideas that emerge with the latter instead of with theism, and so on, moving further into the future.) Here I am influenced by having read Travis Dumsday’s stimulating work on *Alternative Conceptions of the Spiritual* (Dumsday, forthcoming). Dumsday engages recent discussions of polytheism, animism, panspiritism, and theophanism, comparing the best they have to offer with theism, and making suggestions for future discussion. Something similar can, I think, be seen in the work of Bishop and Perszyk on euteleology, and in the work of Carl-Johan Palmqvist on neopaganism (Palmqvist, 2023). And there are others. The idea is just that we’ll make more progress on this side of God-oriented inquiry if, instead of simply adding much discussion of other ideas of God, at every stage we see if we can *improve* on influential ideas of the recent past, beginning with theism. Discussion could in this way be comparative, with attention to relative intellectual and perhaps also religious advantages and disadvantages, thus bringing the PtoR side of things in as well. Of course if we come to think theism provably false – that would be quite a *disadvantage* for theism! – just about any alternative that doesn’t suffer the same fate will seem to offer an improvement to God-oriented inquiry in the philosophy of religion. So perhaps – who knows? – theism’s continual relevance as a reference point may be short-lived.

Still thinking about Question (2), let’s now turn to the *structural* replacement of theism in God-oriented inquiry. Earlier we saw how philosophers of religion today often work solely or mostly within the framework or the structural parameters that theism offers, which includes exploring various alternative versions of theism such as open theism and Molinist theism. Another example would be how theism is the shared, more general idea giving intellectual life to both perfect being theism and

forms of theism – such as Swinburne’s – that don’t utilize the idea of personal perfection in the way that perfect being theism does. Often this sort of activity is found on the RtoP side of things, but it can be discerned on the PtoR side, too. If difficulties appear in a form of theistic religious practice due to features of its detailed understanding of God, a philosopher of religion may suggest changes to that understanding, always presupposing that the result must conform to the more general theistic idea of God. Take, for instance, how conformity to the religious teaching about God as an angry Judge who deposits many humans permanently in a literal hell would today be treated by a fair number of philosophers, who find it at odds with acceptance of the notion of God as perfectly good.

Now given the need to bring into our discussions many new or unduly neglected ideas of God, it is inappropriate to imagine theism continuing thus to structure all God-talk. But can it be replaced in this structural role, as a framework idea, by some other idea of God? Earlier I suggested that the correct answer is no. But we were then considering *particular, filled out* conceptions of God. (This is the most natural way to think of alternatives to theism’s idea of God, which is of course itself quite a detailed idea.) It is worth noticing that there are yet more general ideas of God than theism or the particular alternatives we have begun to discuss. And the various particular theistic and nontheistic God ideas are related to some of these general ideas in the same way that open theism or perfect being theism is related to theism simpliciter: the particular ideas entail the general, but not conversely. Ultimism is one of the more general ideas. So is the idea I have called “triple transcendence.” (Transcendence is here taken as a property that involves in some way surpassing the world of nature explored by science.) The three kinds of transcendence, ultimized in ultimism, are metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological forms of transcendence. Their union, better than any one of the three emphases alone or any other combination, brings into clear focus a religious emphasis. Or so I have argued.

It will be noted that such emphases, though they offer important content for a religious idea, still leave us with something quite general. Ultimism and the notion of triple transcendence, in particular, are much more general than theism and its alternatives. These general religious ideas, and in particular ultimism, have sometimes been criticized as simply schematic, more abstract versions of theism. But this feature – and the fact that ultimism bears the same relation to plenty of other God-ideas – is precisely what I *valued* in that general religious notion when I began to urge its employment. (Similar points apply to triple transcendence, but let’s stick with ultimism for now.) The idea is to identify in a more general way what in theism appears more specifically as God the creator (this is metaphysical ultimacy), God’s personal perfection and worthiness of worship (axiological ultimacy), and God as redeemer in history (soteriological ultimacy). It is helpful to identify the more general idea which refers *only* to triple ultimacy, since it could be true even if theism is false. Moreover it marks out a possible area of investigation that accommodates both theism and various alternative conceptions of God such as pantheism and panentheism and

euteleological theism. This is where the distinction between what I have called simple ultimism, whose content is triple ultimacy alone, and the notion of various elaborated ultimisms comes into play. Simple ultimism offers a possible framework for God-oriented discussion, and various elaborated ultimisms could be the result. More elaborations might continually be identified and discussed. And whatever becomes of *them*, ultimism itself, or whatever other general ideas are selected,<sup>3</sup> remain in place. One can always have recourse to such more general religious ideas when particular conceptions fail; with them we leave the door open to greater success in the future.

Again, ultimism (to stick with this option for the moment) – and I mean simple ultimism – could be true even if theism is false. Indeed, it could be true even if all our current elaborations of it, all our alternative ideas of God, are false. Since ultimism could be true even if theism is false, it is compatible with atheism, in the restricted sense of theism’s denial, though of course it does not entail atheism. Notice in this connection that going general with some such view as ultimism is therefore compatible with theists continuing to explore – and even coming up with a better version of – their *personal* ultimism in the future.

I first made my proposals about ultimism in 2005. More recently, as suggested earlier, I have come to think that triple transcendence might be an improvement, or at any rate an alternative that some philosophers may find useful. (Perhaps the notion of God as ultimate is another influence of theism that can be put into question; we might at any rate leave room for the question.) And triple transcendence allows for a simple/elaborated distinction too (Schellenberg, 2019a). My principal interest in this connection, however, is not in defending any one of these contenders – perhaps something better than what I have proposed at the general level will come along – but in the idea that we should be paying attention to alternative, *bi-level* ways of structuring our discussion of God ideas. If we pick something here, in future discussion treating it as our framework idea while recognizing that theism has often been treated thus, we will in this structural respect have replaced theism. (And notice that we might make use of more than one such idea. None of them needs to put itself forward as accommodating all that belongs or could belong to the idea of God – it just needs to accommodate *more*, through multiple possibilities of elaboration, than do the other ideas.) The thought that we should or might replace theism in this way therefore offers a distinctive answer for Question (2).

So, to summarize what we’ve just said in response to that question: theism could be replaced in its structural role by a more general idea such as ultimism or triple transcendence, or some other idea that does an even better job of filling that role. And when it comes to the lower-level role that theism might still fill, and has certainly been thought to fill, of detailing the nature of the divine, the field’s attentional

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<sup>3</sup> Ultimistic ideas and their application are of course themselves subject to critical examination. For relevant discussion, see, for example, Dole (2013), Elliott (2017), Rottschaefer (2016), as well as Schellenberg (2019b).

preoccupation with theism should be replaced by attention to the whole large set of conceptions of God, including the theistic conception, many of which remain quite unexplored due to theism's previous dominance.

### A Few Loose Ends

Several issues remain here, and I shall conclude by briefly addressing three of them. First, one might wonder whether the more general religious ideas I have mentioned and the notion of a bi-level structure can make a contribution both on the RtoP side of philosophy of religion and on the PtoR side. The answer, it seems to me, is yes.

My initial recommendations about ultimism and a bi-level structure may have seemed mostly relevant to the RtoP side – to how philosophical theorizing might be fed by religion. In *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Schellenberg, 2005), I went so far as to suggest that we might use ultimistic ideas when formulating a definition of religion suitable for philosophical consumption. (I also expressed some doubts about its universal serviceability.) But the general notions we have been concerned with are not restricted to service on the RtoP side. Along with certain other even less content-full ideas which seem correspondingly less capable of rendering much service on the RtoP side, such as ineffabilist ideas, the ideas of ultimism and of triple transcendence can, when developed and applied on the PtoR side of things in evaluative discussions of the spiritual life, serve to refute Hume's suggestion, at the end of the *Dialogues*, that an intellectually vague or general proposition about the divine is religiously worthless. (This I might hope to have shown in particular with my defence, more than a decade ago, of a form of religion I called skeptical religion, which embraces simple ultimism in nondoxastic faith (Schellenberg, 2009)). Thus even were the general ideas to which I have referred be rejected as framework ideas for RtoP investigation, they might still do good *PtoR* work. We might say that such general realist ideas, developed carefully and with philosophical sensitivity, are always available as a sort of spiritual protection for realist versions of the religious life, whatever the vicissitudes of this or that particular conception of the divine.

A second residual issue. Should we think of God, when developing our alternative conceptions of God, as necessarily (or by definition) transcendent? Theism clearly does think of God this way, and my suggested framework propositions do too, but it may seem that we should be prepared to consider a further loosening of things here as we move into the future, accommodating, perhaps, even entirely naturalistic conceptions of God.

Well, here we face a decision. It really is our decision, because the idea of God is our idea. We can decide what notions we want to carry with us into the future. And I will propose a reason to bring transcendence into the definition of divinity, at any rate for a good long time yet, that might be a bit different from most. It is grounded in two assumptions: (1) that a transcendent God would be a lot more interesting and

important than any non-transcendent God could be (this should seem evident fairly quickly); and (2) that we have barely got started in thinking about transcendent possibilities. Especially given all those underexplored alternative conceptions of God out there that assume transcendence (as well as plenty of undiscovered such conceptions, for all we know) it is, in short, *far too early* to give up on the idea of transcendence when thinking about God in the philosophy of religion. We would do better to think hard about what kind or kinds of transcendence we want our idea of God to incorporate.

A third and final residual issue. How things *should* happen in the future, and how they *will*, or realistically *might*, are different things. We have been looking at various ways in which theism should loosen its grip on our collective consciousness. But what can we do to make it more likely that this actually occurs? Here I am influenced by the thought that the theistic emphasis in philosophy of religion, pretty clearly, is held in place by something even more specific: namely, the influence of classical Christianity. So if we want to make room for discussion of alternative conceptions of God and enable a clear sense of how much further development in our field is possible and called for, I suggest we will need to do something about that influence. We need new work to broaden what today is called Christian philosophy into something that might credibly be called the philosophy of Christianity, by rigorously developing both arguments favouring classical Christian doctrine *and arguments opposing it*. I have recently offered a number of new arguments falling into the latter category (Schellenberg, 2024). With such new ventures in the philosophy of Christianity – many more will likely be required – I suggest we may succeed in unsettling the current consensus, awakening many from their dogmatic slumbers, and thus change the Christian climate of our field sufficiently to allow a great many new ideas about religion to be exposed and receive the attention they deserve.

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