

## Illicit Assumptions in the Philosophy of Religion

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By an *assumption* I shall mean a view treated by many in a field of inquiry as appropriately used, without special support, to help achieve well-grounded results anywhere in the field, whose acceptance by these many contributes appreciably to the shape of the field.<sup>1</sup> When I speak of inquirers *assuming* the truth of such a view in their field, I shall mean that they treat it as just described.

My aim in this paper is to expose seven views that function as assumptions in the philosophy of religion but which should not do so, where the norms governing ‘should’, ‘may permissibly’, and ‘should not’ are those appropriate to philosophical inquiry. (When I say of these views that they are illicit assumptions, I mean only that they should not function thus; I do not mean that they are never justifiedly believed.) What I shall have in mind is principally western analytical philosophy of religion as we see it today, though much of what I have to say may well be generalizable to other brands of contemporary philosophical inquiry concerning religion.

I begin by displaying how deeply the seven views have found their way into contemporary philosophy of religion precisely as assumptions, treated in the relevant manner both by many believing and by many nonbelieving philosophers in the field. Indeed, it will emerge that these views have, explicitly or implicitly, been used to achieve some of philosophy of religion’s best known and most widely discussed results, and have largely determined what is regarded as important and as *worthy* of discussion in the field. I then argue that, despite their popularity and influence, the seven make bad assumptions. Given this fact and the other results of this paper, some of philosophy of religion’s best known and most widely discussed results turn out to be far less important, and perhaps also much farther from being secured, than they often seem. Since, moreover, the views in question *have* guided inquiry in certain particular directions, excluding a great many others, it will follow that the excluded directions of thought deserve serious reconsideration by philosophers today, as we seek results that will make for genuine progress in the philosophy of religion.

### 1. Assumptions in the philosophy of religion

When philosophers of religion consider the goals of their field, they often respond much as Richard Swinburne once did: “The philosophy of religion is an examination of the meaning and justification of religious claims” (Honderich 1995, p. 763). Although, as we’ll see, Swinburne himself with his word “claims” suggests a neglected alternative, most who think of the justification of religious claims are thinking about the justification of religious *beliefs*, and, even more narrowly, about the *token belief states* of various religious individuals and groups, whether they reside in New Delhi or Grand Rapids. Are these belief states properly formed, in ways philosophers can approve, or do they fall prey to rational criticism, so that we should say religious believers are irrational or unjustified in believing as they do? What principles will help us determine this? I call the claim that such questions represent the main justification issue with which philosophy of religion should be concerned *tokenism*. (The central

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<sup>1</sup>I exempt views taken on board in some particular context with the recognition that others in the field may legitimately reject them, and views taken on board solely for the purpose of exploring what may follow from them.

allusion here is of course to token beliefs, but I will not mind if the thought of a token gesture toward acknowledgment of philosophy's true demands is also aroused.)

That tokenism has become an assumption in the philosophy of religion is evident. Beginning with criticisms of the religious beliefs philosophers still saw around them in the wake of logical positivism and then turning sharply in the direction of more favourable treatments, prominent among which was Alvin Plantinga's seminal article "Reason and Belief in God" (Plantinga and Wolterstorff 1983), there has long been a preoccupation among philosophers of religion with whether token religious beliefs are justified. The idea that it is at least as important that belief *types* – and perhaps a range of *other* types of response to religious propositions – should be investigated, so that people with a genuine interest in the truth could have the latest in serious philosophical investigation to help guide the formation of their intellectual attitudes, has received short shrift. Something along these lines was still in the minds of some philosophers when, prior to the Plantinga revolution, more attention was given to examining *arguments* for the existence of God or for the truth of other religious claims, and this orientation has persisted into our own time largely because of the work of Richard Swinburne. But Plantinga and many others today conceive of those arguments as having been given on the assumption that successful arguments supporting them are *needed* for token religious beliefs in New Delhi or Grand Rapids to be rationally justified, and since with the rise of an emphasis on how religious (token) beliefs can be "properly basic" this view is now widely regarded as false, a large shift away from investigating arguments for the truth of religious propositions can be detected. As indicated, this shift, and with it much of the present shape of the field, seems to be caused at least in part by a tokenist assumption. (If that is not the case, then such an assumption has certainly been its effect.)

The second assumption I want to expose is shared by the tokenists and many of their opponents, and thus even more widely present in the philosophy of religion than the first. Call 'the Divine' any reality, in any sense metaphysically transcendent of nature, the conception of which in the deepest, most basic, way invites (i.e., renders appropriate) religious concern. And let us say that if it is a necessary condition for the existence of the Divine that the Divine is *x*, then the Divine 'would be' *x*. Our second assumption is the view that the Divine would be a person or person-like, where for the Divine to be a person or person-like is for personal properties such as knowing, willing, and being morally good to be fundamental properties of the Divine. On this view, no other, non-personal properties the Divine might possess would be more fundamental, subsuming personal ones either ontologically or normatively. Call this view *personalism*.

Is it really the case that many contributors to the philosophy of religion assume the truth of personalism, and has the shape of the field been markedly affected by their doing so? A recent online study of practices in the philosophy of religion notes that in 262 of 280 cases in which the blog posts solicited from professional philosophers of religion referred to "ultimate reality," the word used was "God" (Wildman and Rohr 2017). Although some philosophers of religion may not agree that the being they refer to as God is a person or person-like, they are today decidedly in the minority. Typical today is a view like that of Peter van Inwagen, who in his recent Gifford Lectures speaks assuredly of the Divine as being a person. This, he thinks, is required to be unsurpassably great. As he puts it: "I myself would say, without the least immodesty, that I am greater than any possible non-person – simply because I am a person" (2006, p. 158). Consider also how often the characterization of the Divine as an 'omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect creator of the universe' (or some such) has appeared, and still does appear, in the literature of the field. Knowledge, power, moral perfection, and creativity are of course personal properties. Such characterizations are especially frequent in the arguments for

the existence of God and defenses of the positive epistemic status of belief in God that have so engrossed the attention of philosophers concerned with religion over the past fifty years.

This evidence supports the claim that a single rather specific understanding of the Divine, one developed by extrapolation from ourselves as persons, rather than either a more general and fundamental characterization or some larger disjunction of actual and possible understandings, is indeed a preoccupation of philosophers of religion today, and assumed by many to bring a correct picture of the Divine into view. Past discussions of the existence and nature of God often contained extraordinarily detailed analyses fed especially by the work of medieval western philosophers, who were of course very largely Christian. One might have thought that by now similarly detailed attention and comparable investments of time would have been brought to quite different – perhaps more fundamental – conceptions of the Divine. But, because of the widely shared personalist assurance, the trend is rather the other way. The membership and influence of the Society of Christian Philosophers and its journal *Faith and Philosophy* are such that in contemporary philosophy of religion even more detailed personalist discussion, and this of specifically Christian ideas like those of Trinity and Incarnation, has come to dominate. The Christian philosophers – and, it has to be said, many of their nonbelieving interlocutors as well, who once were Christian – evidently think that if there is a Divine reality it is not just God but the Christian God. Their activities display rather conspicuously that personalism as an assumption in the philosophy of religion is not going away but rather becoming even more deeply entrenched, and contributing if anything even more than before to the shape of the field.

Let's now add three more assumptions, which I have named generationism, physiocentrism, and anthropocentrism. *Generationism* is a view about what we might expect of the Divine in the way of production or generation. It says that the Divine would create or actualize or in some way generate a world ontologically distinct from itself. *Physiocentrism* is about the nature of that world – it says that any Divinely-generated world would prominently include a physical universe. And *anthropocentrism* commits itself on some of the contents of this universe, holding that a Divinely-created world with physical things would include human beings. Anthropocentrism can, and rather commonly does, come in a particular form, which I shall call *anthropocentric actualism* – the view that among Divinely-created human beings, should there be any, would be *we ourselves*. It may even be hard for us to discriminate between anthropocentrism and anthropocentric actualism!

All three of these new views, just like personalism, are assumed to be true by very many philosophers of religion (again, nonbelievers can be included along with believers) and clearly have helped to shape the field. If they were not assumptions in the philosophy of religion, would we not see at least the occasional argument for religious skepticism or disbelief developed from the denial of, or doubt about, one of these views? If we should not expect the Divine to generate a world, ontologically distinct from itself, then we do not need specific phenomena such as pain and suffering to make trouble for religious belief: the very existence of the world will do! And similarly for a world that includes physical things, and for one including human beings. Many such sources of reasoning are not receiving examination precisely because of the assumptions in question.

Not only absences are evidence of these latter assumptions. Presences are too. There is the presence among arguments for the existence of God not only of ontological arguments, but also of cosmological and teleological arguments as well as arguments from miracles (understood as violations of physical laws), the plentiful discussion of which displays that generationism and often physiocentrism too are being assumed. Why, for example, would we have all the talk – and talk of the sort we actually find – about the potential explanation theism affords of intricate physical phenomena,

whether the organization of the eye or the finetuning of the universe, if physiocentrism were regarded as still doubtful? Now it is true that one may bring God in as an explanation of some phenomenon either because God would be especially likely to produce it or because it would be unlikely to exist in the absence of God's action bringing it about. Swinburne (2004) points this out, making use of the distinction and not always plumping for the first disjunct. But not all philosophers are as subtle as Swinburne. And even Swinburne is not invulnerable here. For example, he slides swiftly from the idea that God would have reason to produce a beautiful inanimate – that is, completely unconscious – world into the idea that this would be a beautiful *physical universe* (2004, p. 121; cf p. 117), and from the idea that finitely free beings need to be able to expand their range of control in some public place into the idea that the latter would be a *physical* place (2004, pp. 124-127). The limits of human imagination, produced by our own unavoidable physicality, are very much in evidence as examples of familiar physical interactions, one after another, appear in Swinburne's account, making sufficient conditions appear necessary, and physiocentrism seem unavoidable (2004, see esp. pp. 125-126).

The assumption of anthropocentrism is visibly present in many places too. Take, for example, the many discussions of such problems as the problem of evil and the problem of divine hiddenness in which writers refer to what God would do or might do for *human beings* rather than, more appropriately, to what God would or might do for 'finite creatures' (or some such) – an expression which may accept generationism but at least gives God some options when it comes to *what* is generated! Even anthropocentric actualism is present in many of the discussions of contemporary philosophy of religion, almost never arousing complaint. Part of the problem here is that the evidence of evil we most often find ourselves talking about obviously involves experiences of actual human beings, so we are easily led (mistakenly) to infer that the *good* God would intend would be for the *same* human beings. A related problem can be spelled out as a *de re/de dicto* confusion (Schellenberg 1993, pp. 187-188). So the causes aren't all morally tinged, reflective of a lack of humility. Whatever the case, the assumption of anthropocentric actualism is responsible for many perhaps hollow triumphs in contemporary philosophy of religion. It is supposed, for example, that because *we ourselves* experience certain soul-making benefits or are motivated to make one or another move in (what is taken as) a relationship with God only given the permission of certain sufferings or experiences of doubt, there is a corresponding restriction on a God who wishes there to be *finite creatures* who experience soul-making or an interactive relationship with God (see, e.g., Dougherty and Poston, 2007).

Discussions of the problem of evil are actually full of evidence of the assumptions I am seeking to expose. Consider again personalism. That there *are* so many such discussions – that the problem of evil looms so large in the field – reflects that personalism is being assumed. Because very many philosophers, both believing and nonbelieving, assume that the Divine would be personal, very naturally the problem of evil is seen as extremely important: if it shows that there is no God, we can infer that there is no Divine reality and that religion, insofar as it needs such a reality, should rationally be given up. Something similar helps to explain the attention that the hiddenness problem has received. Few philosophers can be heard to say that we should not worry so much about the problem of evil or the problem of hiddenness since even if it is irresolvable some other Divine reality – other than God – may well exist.

In discussions of the problem of evil we also see a *sixth* assumption, which I call *libertarianism*. I am here extending the term as usually utilized in philosophy to cover relevant Divine preferences. And

so we have the view that at least some Divinely-created human beings – should there be any – would possess libertarian free will. Consider free will defences and free will theodicies like Plantinga’s, Swinburne’s, Hick’s, or Marilyn Adams’s and the many discussions thereof. All four of these writers build libertarianism into their well known views, and it is interesting to see how easily others – including even their opponents, who by taking these moves seriously and talking about them have helped to make them famous – are willing to go along on this point. If they had not been willing to go along, problems with libertarianism would surely be seen as the Achilles’ heel of such free will arguments, and numerous related discussions questioning how highly God would value libertarian free will would have appeared.

Plantinga’s Free Will Defense is the most famous of these arguments, and it is so widely regarded as being a secured or at any rate highly important result of work in the philosophy of religion that Gary Gutting recently included it in a book, aimed at a wide audience, with the instructive title *What Philosophers Know* (2009). Perhaps it will be said that Plantinga and his interlocutors assume only that libertarianism is *possible*. But the modality of value is thought, by many participants in these discussions, to ensure that the relevant value judgments are *possible only if true*. For example, the relevant status of the value we refer to if we say that a planetary environment including human beings with free will is *better*, all else being equal, than one with no free will at all does not vary from world to world: if it is so much as possible that this is the case, then it is necessarily so. God’s choosing, on account of the relevant facts about value, to create human beings with libertarian free will therefore doesn’t look like the kind of thing that could be *only possible*.

The last of the seven views I want to discuss I call *biblicism*. This is the view that the biblical God adequately represents the moral character a personal Divine would have. Biblical values have had a considerable impact on western culture and (of course) on western religion. Many who contribute to philosophy of religion in the west are themselves religious, or have had a religious upbringing, so the influence of biblical values on philosophy of religion, and in particular on its conception of the moral character a God would have, may be expected to be quite strong.

And this is arguably just what we find. Among Christian philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga, the Bible’s influence is palpable (Plantinga 2000). And Christian philosophers now outnumber others in the field. But there are more specific ways of making the connection. Some, but not all, involve Christian thinkers. Many in the philosophy of religion find it difficult to see how the hiddenness problem is very severe – can’t God be present to us in ‘his’ own good time, perhaps in the afterlife? Why should God *always* be open to some measure of conscious relationship with finite persons? That this view seems so natural to many people, even in the face of (non-biblical) counterarguments, which have proved easy to ignore or misinterpret, is well explained by the notion that they are drawing, consciously or unconsciously, on biblical strands of information. The biblical God, though compassionate toward a chosen people in the Hebrew Bible and loving to all in the Christian New Testament, lays down conditions for relationship and exhibits streaks of patriarchal masculinity. Occasionally present to those whom ‘he’ loves, ‘he’ is also frequently distant or seemingly absent.

A biblicist assumption may also help to explain the popularity of theodicies that insist life must be difficult for us, or of such attempts to sidestep the *need* for a theodicy as the so-called skeptical theism. For the biblical God, longsuffering is combined with sternness. ‘His’ human creatures are often letting ‘him’ down, and they are darkly responsible for much evil (more responsible than the social sciences have been able to confirm). Concern for the suffering of human beings, on the part of the biblical God, is combined with a willingness to allow its persistence, for reasons some of which –

involving such things as admonition or punishment, and also growth of moral character – are made known and others of which (so the whole tenor of the Bible suggests) may well be known only to God. If the God of the Bible is taken as a moral exemplar, we would expect such views to seem rather plausible, certainly more plausible than they otherwise would, and to influence how the problem of evil is addressed.

So is the assumption of biblicism also significantly present across much of contemporary philosophy of religion? I think we can say that it is.

## 2. Tokenism

I now plan to take up, in turn, the seven assumptions we have found to shape contemporary philosophy of religion, and to argue that they should not *be* assumptions. (My reasons will not always be of the same sort.) I begin with tokenism. This view is objectionable as an assumption because, as alluded earlier, there are reasons to think it false, which its status as an assumption prevents most philosophers of religion from noticing or seriously considering.

Whether this or that individual or group in such-and-such a context at some particular time can escape criticism for token beliefs is a part of what epistemologists of religion may legitimately concern themselves with, but this concern should be intimately tied to – and regulated by – another, which more directly addresses the content of those beliefs and considers the appropriateness both of the believing state and of other types of intellectual attitudes as a response to it. As just suggested, persons with dispositions engendered by philosophy might indeed be expected to *prioritize* the latter justificational concern, so as to be able to pass along the very best available information to those who wish to avoid criticism for their beliefs – perhaps including themselves.

People who are concerned about the status of their own religious commitments, or about the absence of such commitments in others, may regard their concern as a reason to do some philosophy of religion, and may find themselves focused largely on the tokenist concern, working mostly or exclusively on corresponding justification issues. But philosophers cannot afford to be activists for anything other than the most scrupulous truth-seeking. To make sure that what they do fits this description, that a more narrowly partisan or activist disposition has not taken over in these sensitive religious matters where non-rational factors so easily intrude, they need to recognize the value of, and to promote, the other concern, which would have us seeking to discern through collaborative discussion (and ultimately consensus in the philosophical community) the epistemic worthiness of various *types* of response to religious propositions. At this level the philosopher acts as a sort of ‘scout,’ exploring the metaphysical and epistemic terrain and rendering a verdict by which others can be guided. She is certainly not putting forward her own beliefs and trying to justify them!

To see what should be said about tokenism, simply consider whether from philosophy’s perspective it would be better to have both levels of activity in the philosophy of religion, with the discussion of token-justification informed by that focused on type-justification, than to have just one. I think an affirmative answer suggests itself rather strongly. But in that case tokenism is, at the least, highly questionable and a tokenist *assumption* in the philosophy of religion is inappropriate.

## 3. Personalism

Why should philosophers not take personalism on board as an assumption? In brief: because to do so would offer too great a concession to non-philosophical aspects of one of the world’s cultural

traditions or else to evolutionarily produced human cognitive propensities, and furthermore would reflect a failure both of philosophical imagination and of intellectual humility.

Personalism and non-personalism can both be found in various parts of the world, east and west. So, culturally speaking, what we might call 'the personalist tradition' is but one option, even if a familiar one that today radiates powerfully from the west. Why should philosophy be restricted to the religious ideas of just one of the world's cultural traditions? If, given human cognitive limitations, no other conceptions could be entertained by us or if none had been developed by human beings, things might be different. But it is a well known fact that neither of these possibilities is realized. Philosophers, who are, after all, on a no-holds-barred quest to uncover fundamental truths and reach fundamental understanding, therefore should, when discussing religion, be as open to non-personalist ideas of the Divine as to personalist ones, unless the former have already been ruled out after thorough investigation. And it is clear that they have not thus been ruled out: western philosophers, in particular, have not carefully examined non-personalist religious ideas, instead (in the majority of cases) simply ignoring them or offering superficial analyses at more than arms length.

Perhaps it will be said that this is to be explained by the fact that the personalist conception of the Divine is, after all, rather pervasive of human culture. The new subfield within cognitive science called cognitive science of religion (CSR) suggests that evolution may have predisposed us to find agency especially significant in matters religious and to think of the Divine as personal (Barrett 2004, Boyer 2001, Tremblin 2006). Indeed, it is well known that in most religions of the world – including Indian and other religions which are known for non-personalist conceptions of the Divine – personal gods are found in abundance at the level of lived religiousness. Suppose all this is true. Why should it lead philosophers doing philosophy of religion to endorse personalism as an assumption? Isn't it part of the job of philosophers to carefully scrutinize widely held beliefs and consider alternatives to them? Evolution may have predisposed us to conceive of the Divine as personal, but evolution might lead us to err here just as it does in the case of many recently identified cognitive biases. The argument from CSR results limps all too conspicuously.

Accepting personalism as an assumption would, for philosophers, also represent a rather large failure of imagination. This point is actually strengthened by the CSR results. For it is precisely where we find influential, unreflective, and widely exhibited dispositions in response to the question of what a metaphysical category contains that philosophers are especially called upon to *exert* human imagination in an attempt to confirm that that is indeed all or even most of what it contains. But quite apart from this, it seems a restricted imagination that can go no further than extrapolation from what we know of *ourselves* in imagining a Divine reality. Here it is important to remember that anyone who says that a non-person could be Divine need not deny that personal qualities (or properties analogous thereto) would necessarily have some place in a Divine reality. Perhaps they would be allotted a lesser role in some larger mix defined by valuable properties of which we have, as yet, no inkling (Schellenberg 2009, 2013). Philosophers concerned with religion should value the exploration of this and other non-personalist ideas. But then they should not make personalism an assumption.

In my reference, a moment ago, to ideas that go beyond extrapolations from our own nature and to ideas of which we may have, as yet, no inkling, there is also the basis for an independent point, which recommends intellectual humility. Intellectual humility (IH) has come in for considerable philosophical discussion in the last few years (see Whitcomb, Battaly, Baehr, and Howard-Snyder, forthcoming, and references therein), and virtually all of this discussion presupposes or argues for its value in areas of inquiry like philosophy. Personalism, for the reasons already suggested, does not look

very humble. But even were acceptance of personalism compatible with IH, it is clearly a way of exercising IH that should commend itself especially to philosophers to explore ways a Divine reality might be that have little or nothing to do with our nature, and to remain open to such unfamiliar and perhaps distant-seeming notions being exposed as important in the future. Neither the view that these ways of displaying IH should be pursued by philosophers of religion nor even the more modest, and clearly unexceptionable, view that we should leave *room* for such activities in contemporary philosophy of religion is compatible with granting personalism the status of an assumption in that field.

#### 4. Generationism

Why should generationism not be an assumption in the philosophy of religion? Mutatis mutandis, a number of the points made about personalism apply here too. With its idea of a world ontologically distinct from the Divine, generationism yields a form of metaphysical dualism that should be but one of a larger *set* of options on which philosophers reflect – a possible stopping point after other options are ruled out, not a starting point. And one of these options is that the Divine would be the sole concrete reality, wondrously great and rich and dynamic, perhaps even unsurpassably so, *but not in a manner that involves generation of an ontologically distinct reality*. Such an idea deserves careful and openminded exploration. But this it will not receive if we are busy assuming otherwise.

Perhaps it will be said that we have had consideration enough of such things. It has been argued, for example, that goodness is inevitably self-diffusive, and so a good Divine reality must inevitably generate something other than itself (Kretzmann 1997). Some will think this clinches the case for generationism. But it does not. Such reasoning might be persuasive if we had already established personalism and could think of goodness here in terms of the *moral* goodness of persons. If we think of the Divine as a *personal being who acts*, we may be led to think by analogy with what we would do if perfectly good: wouldn't we want to create other things? Well, maybe. But if we need to stay open to the idea that the Divine would be not a personal being but a reality of an altogether different sort, perhaps one not even conceivable to our minds as so far evolved, then all bets are off.

Now it may be thought that if a Divine reality must invite fundamental religious concern, then this itself shows that it would have to be treated as having in some way generated a world – and indeed *this* world and *us*. For one could not make anything a fundamental object of such concern, or regard it as appropriate to do so, without thinking of it as the source of one's own being. But one might think of an idea thus and treat it thus without building this notion into one's conception of the very nature of the Divine. What threatens here is a confusion of what a Divine reality necessarily must be with what the religious will contingently regard it as producing or doing, by making certain auxiliary assumptions. A conception will invite religious concern without actually eliciting it in the *absence* of such auxiliary assumptions – assumptions such as that the reality thus conceived has generated a world including those who have the concern. These are assumptions which, in the nature of the case, the religious must make. But philosophers need not be religious.

There is also in this vicinity an influence which might too swiftly lead just anyone at all find generationism plausible, of which we therefore should beware. This is simply the *familiarity of the world*. We can get so used to there being this world of contingent things that the thought of it surreptitiously follows other more explicitly considered ideas into every state we imagine that includes Divinity. Easily we may thus be lulled into thinking that the Divine is liable to generate something ontologically distinct from itself. In fact there exists a contingent world of the sort that, many think, would have to be ontologically distinct from any Divine reality. Suppose the many are right. It still does



not follow that the Divine would generate such a world. Perhaps in every possible state containing a Divine reality there is *no* such world since the Divine *replaces* it. Because of the familiarity of the good old world and all those in it who respond religiously to the thought of the Divine, regarding their existence as owed to the Divine, it may be difficult to imagine this. But this imaginative difficulty is precisely the sort of thing philosophers are committed to overcoming. And, if they do overcome it, they will see that the conception of a Divine reality invites further exploration and reflection, on relevant matters, of just the sort that taking generationism as an assumption would prohibit.

### 5. Physicocentrism

Things aren't much different when we focus on the physical – and this would be the case even if we were to set aside worries about personalism and generationism. Indeed, let's suppose for the moment, as many do, that the Divine would be a personal God and would create a world. If the familiarity of a world makes it seductively easy to assume that there must always be one, no matter the circumstances we are imagining, then something similar will operate even more forcefully in relation to the familiarity of physical things. We should flex our imaginations to avoid this. And in that alert condition we will notice how we should leave open a wider range of options for God, who would, after all, know of *many* possible worlds and not be influenced in choosing among them by having spent every prior moment as a physical being in a physical world. I don't think it can be emphasized too strongly that when thinking about how non-physical beings might behave we have virtually nothing to go on, and inevitably imagine interactions involving physical situations, just because that is what we have always experienced. So even our imaginations are of limited use here, except to push us beyond the known into the unknown and prevent us from reflexively rejecting the notion that the latter may contain the truth.

Perhaps it will be said that there are arguments by which physicocentrism has been established, which prevent it from making a bad assumption. But the arguments on offer do not seem to me to counter or render irrelevant our imaginative limits. Rather, they exhibit them. Is a physical world like ours going to be *beautiful*, and in a way that would make it sufficiently attractive for a Divine creator (Swinburne 2004)? 'Yes' to the first conjunct here, but 'Who knows?' to the second. Are we aware of all the other ways of configuring a world that would present themselves to a non-physical Creator? Have we reason to think that a physical world would be as beautiful as any of these others might be, or to deny that appealing features of non-physical worlds would outweigh, for a Divine mind, any lack in them of what we call beauty? The question answers itself.

How about the suitability of a physical world for *free activity* and for the presentation of *challenges* to those who display it, supposing a Creator might wish to challenge them (Swinburne 2004)? But the latter supposition, and the supposition that God loves free will, are not really established; rather, they are features of one sort of move theists make in response to the problem of evil, which – as we'll see in a moment – ought to be much more controversial than they are. And, quite apart from this, we face the same limits as were just alluded to when it comes to ruling out the idea that other, non-physical worlds would pose challenges aplenty to free beings.

But shouldn't we think that a God, if creatively inclined, would actualize *every* sort of good thing, and so produce a world that included *physical environments too*, among infinitely many other good sorts of thing (Kraay 2015)? Perhaps. I would not want to, and do not need to, declare this view false. But it is far from uncontroversial. And just to make it a bit more controversial: in a world created by a *non-physical* Divine who *embodies all good* there could be a set of good states and conditions

unlimited in size and richness without anything physical at all; such a God, if there were one, could spend eternity exercising unsurpassably marvellous creativity within strictly non-physical parameters, by endlessly tokening therein the types of goodness found in God.

My reference in the foregoing to non-physical conditions and states and worlds may seem odd, but in the present context such apparent oddness must vanish swiftly as we remember that we are talking about how a God, not limited by physical location or extension in space, would exercise creative power. Perhaps, indeed, oddness will come to attach to the idea that a non-physical Creator, conceived, quite independently of creation, as unfathomably good, would be drawn to the creation of *physical* things. Of course, this notion cannot be ruled out. But here my aim is only to show that it should not be treated as *ruled in*, and achieving this aim is compatible with such an admission.

## 6. Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism too makes a bad assumption in the philosophy of religion. Why so? Well, a number of reasons can be gleaned from previous sections; they apply here with, if anything, more force. *Who knows* what other beings a God might choose to create instead? A sort of imaginative humility would be most useful here. If we think the glories or the flawed charm of humanity appealing, who knows what other beings would display a similar glory or charm? And so on.

Anthropocentrism, as we've seen, can come in the particular form of anthropocentric actualism. But, clearly, even if God were to create human beings, these might be *other* human beings – maybe 'ready-mades', like Adam and Eve, or (if you think an evolutionary history is required for something to count as human) beings resulting from an interruption in human evolution, perhaps to speed it through its immature stages, in some other possible world containing humans.

A new application of the intellectual humility theme would seem particularly apt when considering anthropocentrism of any kind. We are prone to overestimating our significance, both as individuals and groups and at the species level. Alfred Russel Wallace (1889, pp. 476, 477), co-discoverer with Darwin of natural selection, speaks for many when he enthuses about "all this glorious earth" which "for untold millions of years has been slowly developing forms of life and beauty to culminate at last in man." Michael Ruse (2012, p. 108) reproduces a drawing of the tree of life by Darwin's German contemporary and promoter, Ernst Haeckel, which terminates with 'MAN' at the top. Without sensitivity to the bigger evolutionary picture, not thinking of other evolutionary possibilities of the future, we have often treated ourselves as representing the end of the evolutionary story, the apex of intelligent or non-intelligent design. After all, here is this sequence of hominin species – it looks like a sequence to us: we tend to ignore the bush-like structure of much hominin evolution, with branchings and dead ends as well as the familiar forward movement – with a continual increase in brain size and complexity, eventuating in the species whose brain is the largest and densest, *Homo sapiens*. How could a Divine creator *not* be drawn to the idea of generating something as impressive as human life?

Such thinking, like much of what we do, is folly – immoderate, unhumble folly. Something like it may of course also stem in part from non-moral causes, such as the simple fact that in all human religion the Divine is obviously and naturally going to be seen as related in one way or another, often salvifically, to *humans*. There is a lesson here. When investigating the fundamental beliefs of religion, philosophers must beware of carelessly taking *with* those beliefs, of seeing as *implied by* those beliefs, various other propositions which only those who rationally *hold* such beliefs can – for example, by

conjoining with them propositions about actual states of affairs and seeing what follows – immediately find reason to accept.

## 7. Libertarianism

Why does libertarianism make for a bad assumption? We might easily infer that it is true from anthropocentric actualism and the common belief that we ourselves possess libertarian free will, or – in another expression of hubris – from the latter alone. But, for obvious reasons, either argument would be faulty. It may be said that to see why the assumption is acceptable we need only consider all the good that depends on libertarian free will in our own lives – such as the good of moral responsibility and of deep interpersonal love or risky trust. But, as I have argued elsewhere, love does not depend on libertarian free will. Moreover, and relatedly, there are innumerable ways of experiencing the limitless good of an endless growing relationship with God, with or without moral responsibility or risky trust.

Perhaps it will help to make the force of these points clearer if we consider how close we ourselves are to lacking libertarian free will, even if we are sometimes able to exercise it, and what would be left to us were we to lose it altogether. It is obvious from the natural and social sciences that much in your experience and activity is already causally determined. So suppose that a change occurs and suddenly *all* of it is. Are you immediately turned into a feeling-less robot? Can you no longer see the reasons for being devoted to your child or spouse or a friend, or act on them? Can you no longer thrill to the wonders of the world, or deepen your understanding of it? Of course not. And if you were to come to know of the existence of a loving God, would you be unable to respond or be blocked from experiencing the profound joy and amazement, the intellectual and spiritual enhancements, consequent on learning deeply about such aspects of the wider world or of the Divine nature as God was willing to divulge to you? No, again.

Of course libertarianism might for all of that be true, but reflection of this sort, carried far enough, will at least serve to show its *optionality* in a way that reveals why we should not rest content with libertarianism as an *assumption* in the philosophy of religion, instead exploring the neglected issues lurking here far more thoroughly than we have.

## 8. Biblicism

What, finally, of biblicism? It should not be hard to see that, however things may be for theologians, philosophers must be open to learning from *all* relevant sources, including the biblical record, when considering what moral character a personal Divine would have. Would a God be just? How would Divine justice be expressed? Would a God love many, most, all? How would love and justice interact in the Divine case? And what are the implications of Divine love? As philosophers, we cannot rely on the Bible for answers to such questions. Perhaps the Bible gets it right when it comes to such matters, but it would be wrong for all or many of us to assume that this is the case from the get-go.

It can be easy to miss this point because of the influence the Bible has had on our culture and its values. Familiar with broad agreement between biblical values and our own, it may be tempting to take a biblical shortcut when questions arise as to how a God would or might behave. We may do so unconsciously. But there is, for philosophers, no alternative to the hard work of thinking for ourselves, with whatever help we can procure, about such matters. Just as serious progress in ancient Greek philosophy came only when the last vestiges of reliance on the myths of Greece were brought to consciousness and released, so it *may* be that serious progress in philosophy of religion, even on

matters long discussed in the west, will come only when something similar happens with the Bible. At any rate, we will free ourselves to become aware of this, should it be so, only by not making biblicism an *assumption* in philosophy of religion today.

#### 9. Consequences for the philosophy of religion

With the exception of tokenism, I have not offered arguments for thinking any of the seven views discussed in this paper to be *false*. I have argued instead, and more modestly, that each is an *illicit assumption* in the philosophy of religion: that we should not be treating these views as unexceptionable but should, as philosophers, be open to – and indeed should actively discuss – contrary views. If we do this, the shape of contemporary philosophy of religion most assuredly will change.

Noticing the undesirable influence of the popular views and making the needed adjustments, we will, first of all, look with fresh eyes on many lauded results, noticing round about them clusters of neglected issues which now call to us for attention. For example, with the loss of a tokenist assumption, ‘Reformed epistemology’, as devised and promulgated by Plantinga et al., will come in for a new kind of scrutiny. Even if the source of insights in the epistemology of religion, it is not – assuming philosophy supplies our criteria – as centrally important as many suppose it to be. Moreover, depending on the results of the presently neglected discussion of (what I’ve called) type-justification, the best information made available to conservative Christian believers by philosophers in the future may ask them to give up their religious beliefs instead of acquiescing in the experiences that generate them.

Other examples. Arguments for the existence of God may come to be seen as concerned with a single fairly specific form of religious belief rather than with the most fundamental, if a personalist assumption is given up. With generationism seen in a proper perspective, some popular arguments for the existence of the Divine will need extra premises which could prove hard to find in a plausible form. The problem of evil will be seen as perhaps having a different shape in some religious contexts than in others. And the undue influence of physicalism, anthropocentrism, libertarianism, and biblicism, once lost, will make many replies to the theistic problem of evil, as also to the hiddenness argument, much harder to sustain.

I have given examples of changes to existing discussions. But by the same token, we should expect large *shifts of emphasis* in the field and sharp discussion of new topics, neglected under the old regime. What some of these may be only time will tell, but it seems clear already that properly taking on the task of type-justification in relation to responses to religious propositions will mean a large expansion of the philosophy of religion. In part this is because, for most of its history, practitioners in the philosophy of religion have not even recognized certain important possible responses to religious propositions, such as nondoxastic faith, which need to be considered carefully both respect to the possibility of being justified and – should we come to be assured of that – the criteria of justification. It may also be noted that, as information about nontheistic religion comes to be better represented in our discussions, drawn from available but neglected information about religious traditions around the world today as well as religious possibilities nudged from a more fertile human imagination, discussion of new religious ideas may flourish even as the traditional discussion of theism wanes.

Knowing what we do about our nature and the circumstances of human life, none of this should seem shocking or extraordinary. Our tendency to assume the various things discussed in this paper may, as suggested earlier, reflect important biases analogous to those more general biases

progressively being exposed by cognitive psychology. When one thinks of how early a stage of investigation philosophy of religion today may represent, it is (as William Alston used to put it) the reverse of surprising that such biases should still be operative among us. One wonders why they were not exposed and taken account of long ago. But then... an insensitivity to the temporal immaturity of human inquiry, and to other actual and possible human immaturities which may come with it, is *itself* a limit on inquiry from which we have yet to be freed.

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