

A pre-publication version of a piece that appears here:
International Journal for the Study of Skepticism 10 (2020), 268-282.

On Religious Skepticism

J. L. Schellenberg

In this paper I defend five theses about religious skepticism that have not previously been discussed. Reflection on them, if I am right, will contribute substantially to the achievement of understanding in this part of the philosophical terrain.¹

1. *The most religiously relevant and philosophically interesting religious skepticism is broader than any attitude toward theism but still restricted to a non-naturalistic understanding of what religion is.*

Academic attention to religion has in the last century greatly widened its focus in religious studies, but in western philosophy – certainly in western analytical philosophy – it remains fixed, more narrowly, on the idea of an omni-agent: the omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent deity of traditional theism. When philosophers speak of God, this is what they tend to have in mind. (It is what I shall have in mind when speaking of God in this paper.) One might think the explanation of this fact has something to do with the current popularity of the kind of philosophizing about religion associated with theists such as Alvin Plantinga, who are mainly concerned with their own religious views (see, for example, Plantinga 2000). But philosophers who discussed religion were preoccupied with God long before Plantinga came along. And it is not obvious that this has merely

¹ Virtually any negative intellectual response to religion including a general religious disbelief is in one context or another assimilated to religious skepticism. I shall not assume much about the nature of such skepticism in this essay, but I do assume that religious skepticism includes an *attitude* toward religious claims and that the attitude it involves is the *nonbelieving* suspense of judgment with which skepticism is, in the history of philosophy, most commonly associated.

or mostly been a matter of western religious chauvinism. The idea of an unlimited personal agent has often provided a basis for theoretical work in metaphysics – and to some extent this has also been the case in other areas of philosophy, such as ethics and epistemology.²

These general trends naturally have had an impact on how religious skepticism is conceived in philosophy. Just as in many philosophical contexts “theistic belief” can safely be substituted for “religious belief,” so “theistic skepticism” or “skepticism about theism” might very often be used in place of “religious skepticism” without any hearer or reader being the worse for it. It is not hard to understand why this should be so. If philosophers have concerned themselves with religious belief mainly because of the theoretical consequences of belief in God, then it would be rather surprising if the religious *skepticism* they professed or discussed were not usually skepticism about God. And the antecedent of this conditional, I have suggested, is true. Notice that its truth is strongly supported by the focus on God in the religion section of hundreds of introductory textbooks, and by the fact that the sole religion question in the PhilPapers survey of the views of contemporary philosophy recently undertaken by David Chalmers and David Bourget is “God: theism or atheism?” (Bourget and Chalmers 2014).

Now there is nothing wrong with thinking about theistic belief in philosophy, whether by working through the theistic proofs in metaphysics or the theistic divine command theory in ethics or Descartes’ theistic answer to deceiver skepticism in epistemology, or in some other way. There is nothing wrong with philosophers exploring the theoretical potential of the idea of God. Indeed, they would be remiss were they not to do so. And by the same token there is nothing wrong with

² Richard Swinburne’s work has resurrected such theoretical work in contemporary philosophy, and he interacts with many predecessors in the western philosophical discussion about God. See, for example, Swinburne (2004).

thinking about the merits of theistic skepticism. But the philosophical importance of religious belief and of religious skepticism goes beyond the importance of matters theistic, and our understanding of religious skepticism should be adjusted correspondingly.

One reason for this is that human religion is a good deal wider than theism, and claims found in nontheistic religion – for example, claims about Brahman or about the Tao – are often at least as initially plausible as theistic claims and also appear to be as full of philosophical ramifications. Another reason for making the proposed adjustment is perhaps more obviously philosophical. It is in the nature of philosophy to examine the most fundamental ideas in every area of human experience, and theism is not the most fundamental religious idea. It is a *version* or *elaboration* of more basic notions, such as the notion of a transcendent reality but also the more content-full idea I have elsewhere called ultimism – the idea that there is a metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate reality. Though theism entails ultimism, the converse does not hold. There could be such a triply ultimate reality even if theism is false, and it would of course be very interesting and important, philosophically, if there were. Contra Hume in the *Dialogues*, whose Philo suggests that even an attenuated theism would be too vague to have much impact on human life (Hume [1779] 2007, 12.33), the affirmation of religious propositions as general as ultimism can have important theoretical and also practical consequences (Schellenberg 2009, 2013).

These points should affect how, as philosophers, we think of religious skepticism. In particular, it would be a confusion if, having appropriately enlarged our religious frame of reference, we continued to suppose that skepticism about theism is either necessary or sufficient for this condition. It is not necessary, since even one who disbelieves theism may be unsure about the religious conceptual landscape *beyond* theism, evincing nothing stronger than doubt when faced with the proposition “Some religious claim is true.” And it is not sufficient, since even someone in doubt about theism may *believe* propositions logically equivalent to the just mentioned proposition, such as

this one: “Either theism or some other religious claim is true.” And anyone who believes a proposition entailing that some religious proposition is true is only misleadingly described as a religious skeptic. In short, we should distinguish between theistic skepticism (or skepticism about theism) and religious skepticism.

If in our understanding of the nature of religious skepticism we should go beyond theism, *how far* beyond should we go? Here one interesting question concerns naturalism. Understanding by “naturalism” the view that in our culture most commonly goes by that name, which portrays concrete reality as a single physical system structured by laws discovered (or discoverable) by science, should we allow that religious claims about whose truth our religious skeptic is skeptical may include both metaphysically non-naturalistic and metaphysically *naturalistic* claims?

I think not – and this despite being happy to agree that certain naturalistic forms of life might, in one or another context, deserve the label “religious” (Schellenberg 2019a, chap. 8). Indeed to think otherwise would involve misunderstanding the nature of the philosophical debates in which religion participates. Naturalistic forms of religion, if there are any, precisely by being naturalistic fail to deliver to these debates any relevant *claims*. The interesting fact about religion, from a philosophical perspective, is how it purports to give us access to realities beyond the world of nature as understood or understandable by science, suggesting ways of dealing with problems in metaphysics, ethics, epistemology, and other areas of philosophy that outstrip those available to any naturalistic approach. Religious *belief* and *disbelief* accordingly achieve significance in philosophy principally in relation to such problems and solutions. As a consequence, so does religious *skepticism*. Thus for the purposes of philosophical discussion, it seems best to think of religious skepticism as restricted to a non-naturalistic conception of what religion is. (Notice here that given how I am understanding naturalism, pantheistic views like Spinoza’s, which think of nature or Nature as infinitely transcending the realm of the physical, are not excluded from the religious domain by this

conception.) A preoccupation with theism is, as we have seen, too narrow, but the non-naturalism that theism has represented for us in the history of philosophy should continue to be front and center.

2. *Religious skepticism includes a general metaphysical skepticism though, on account of the axiological and soteriological content of religious claims, these forms of skepticism remain importantly distinct.*

Among possible skepticisms is a general metaphysical skepticism. This is a skepticism characterized by the absence of any positive belief about what are the most general features of reality – any belief which, like naturalistic belief, affirms some specification of the most general features of reality. One finds relatively little discussion of this brand of skepticism in philosophy, perhaps because religious skepticism, which *is* discussed, seems so similar to it. Certainly when the latter is broadened as I have just been suggesting it ought to be broadened, there may appear to be little daylight between these two. In particular, won't a religious skeptic who understands her condition be a general metaphysical skeptic as well? And won't a general metaphysical skeptic by the same token be a religious skeptic?

The answers to these two questions, I suggest, are Yes and No, respectively. *Yes*, a competent religious skeptic, having suspended judgment about religion, will lack a positive belief about the most general features of reality. Someone who has such a belief will at least be able to say whether the general features of reality are religious or not, and our religious skeptic cannot. And *no*, a metaphysical skeptic who understands religion properly may consistently reject religious skepticism, affirming instead that all religious claims are false. This is because a religious claim, in addition to its metaphysical content, has content affirming the *value* instantiated by the religious reality in question and also content affirming that certain *benefits* will be accessible to anyone who properly relates herself to it. Since one can consistently be sure what reality is not while remaining in doubt as to what it is, one might consistently hold that no such benefits are accessible to human beings or that no such inherent value is realized and thus regard all religious claims as false, even while being quite unsure about which *other* metaphysical propositions *do* correctly depict the most

general features of reality, and so continuing to deserve the appellation “general metaphysical skeptic.”

Philosophers, in their preoccupations with metaphysics, often disregard the axiological and soteriological content of religious claims. They should not do so. Religion, after all, is *practiced*. It not only offers a description of reality but also offers a motive to bring one’s life into conformity with what is real, as religiously construed. Theistic religion, for example, regards God as supremely good and as the rewarder of all who diligently seek for God. And other religious traditions have their own ideas about the nature-transcendent axiological and soteriological properties of the beings or states they regard as real and hold before us. Perhaps if these facts were duly noted, there would be more general metaphysical skeptics in philosophy. Seeing that general metaphysical skepticism does not commit one to doubt about religion, those who reject religion would be able to take such skepticism more seriously. At the same time, there might be fewer advocates of religious skepticism if those who presently side with it for broadly metaphysical reasons were to properly take account of the axiological and soteriological content of religious claims. This content some of them might judge more than dubious, perhaps because of considerations like those creating a problem of evil for theism. In other words, even when the purely *metaphysical* aspects of religion seem to someone to resist evaluation because of general skeptical worries, it may seem clear to her that religion’s promises are going unfulfilled and so that religious claims are false. Such a person is a general metaphysical skeptic but not a religious skeptic.

3. *Cultural evolution, especially in the domains of science and morality, has produced changes that should affect how we today assess religious skepticism, but it has opposite consequences for general religious propositions and specifically theistic ones.*

Though as noted earlier, investigation of nontheistic religion is underrepresented in philosophy, it might at least be *easier* to conclude that religion fails to fulfill its promises and so to avoid being a religious skeptic in the manner described at the end of the previous section if we could be sure that

the religious ideas found in human culture as so far developed are all the religious ideas there are (or even all that shall ever arise for human beings) – or at any rate are in some relevant sense representative of all there are (or all that shall ever arise). But developments in the natural and social sciences and in the moral dimension of human life are conspiring to throw up a good deal of doubt about this issue instead.

What we have learned is that the present stage of human existence is an early one. It is early in a purely temporal sense, since our few thousand years of “civilization” are but a very small fraction of the million years that mammal species, on average, survive, and they come at a point in our history when less than a third of that million-year period has been traversed. But it is also early developmentally, since our large ambitions often have combined with a decidedly mixed record of performance to prevent us from achieving even as much as in that short time we could have achieved, if we had put our best foot forward. In relation to human religion in particular, such things as dogmatism, sexism, violence, and inadequate investigation must be mentioned alongside profound prophetic insight and self-sacrificial compassion. Moreover, as attested by recent work in the cognitive science of religion (Barrett 2004), humans appear to have an evolved attraction to personal, agential conceptions of the divine. Perhaps there would be many more non-theistic conceptions of the divine, and much more investigation of a wide range of religious possibilities, were this not so. The upshot is that what we might call the *human religion project* is still quite immature (Schellenberg 2019b).

Now perceived human shortcomings in the religious domain have often contributed to an outright rejection of religion on the part of observers – not religious skepticism but rather a general religious disbelief. But careful reflection on human immaturity suggests that this is a misstep: precisely because we have not developed very far in the religious domain, neither believing nor disbelieving pronouncements can carry much weight. It is doubtful whether human thinkers have

yet had access to a representative range of religious ideas. Much more sophisticated metaphysical, axiological, and soteriological thought than is in our present philosophy may appear not just in heaven but in the future of human culture. And who knows what would be the proper result of reflection on such future developments? Our religious immaturity, in short, is two-sided, involving both shortcomings and potential.

The support for religious skepticism increases still further when we combine such thoughts about human religious immaturity with what we already know about human limitations (Schellenberg 2007). If we have to admit a poor track record in the area of religious investigation, we would at least want clearly advanced capacities for insight on the biggest questions before making a judgment about religiousness. And if we have to admit that our capacities are severely limited, we would at least want a deep history of competent, fairminded investigation. But we have neither.

So the evolution of culture and our growing awareness of it tend to favour a forward-looking religious skepticism. But even as cultural evolution is pushing the boundaries of religious awareness and skepticism outward, it is *restricting* options in narrower domains, generating new support for the outright *rejection* of certain religious propositions more specific than the proposition that some religious claim is true. Of considerable importance here is the new support for rejecting traditional theism.

Perhaps surprisingly, this is coming not from science but from developments in the social and moral domains of human life. Take, for example, our growing intolerance for violence (Pinker 2011), which I will here understand in terms of sensitive creatures being treated harshly and with rude force instead of with gentleness and respect. Human beings, and in their own ways many other organisms too, are exquisitely complex and sophisticated entities, often with a perspective on the world and accompanying beliefs, desires and purposes. Violence toward such beings was once much more common among us, and even today we often take it for granted. But more and more we are

coming to sense how immensely bad is the violent treatment of such a valuable entity, with its rich inner life and – where the perspective on the world is joined to memory and anticipation and guided by reason – a life-narrative sheltering hopes and dreams.

Violence obviously appears in certain human behaviors and dispositions. But it is also in the behaviors and dispositions of non-human animals (a lion's way of tearing apart a gazelle is violent). Moreover, it appears in analogously harsh natural events such as species-decimating asteroid impacts or a suddenly disabling lightning strike. We might call these human violence, animal violence, and natural violence, respectively. Multiple examples from each category populate every minute. And so it has been for millions of years. For the badness of all this violence a God would bear the responsibility, if there were such a being.

Notice that although violence and pain or suffering are often causally linked, the corresponding notions are conceptually quite distinct, and so the problem here is not reducible to what has generally been discussed in connection with the problem of evil. Worlds are imaginable in which the natural state involves the most dreadful suffering from the beginning to the end of life, without violent acts or events being needed to bring it about. Even in the actual world the agonizing pain of certain diseases approaches slowly and gently. It is also the case that violence can occur – and be bad – without pain or suffering. It is precisely the badness of violence *as such*, with its violation of creaturely dignity, that moral evolution has made obvious to us. Moreover, violence would be bad even without the other thing with which the badness of violence is sometimes wrongly conflated: the abrupt ending of valuable lives. Imagine that the harsh blunt impact of a hammer wielded in anger causes for your cat or dog or young child an immediate but temporary loss of consciousness, during which its effects are repaired. There is no pain or suffering or shortened life to complain about here. But evidently we would or should object to what happened nonetheless.

So long as we are willing to apply to the idea of God what we are learning about personal goodness, these points support the development of a new (moral) evolutionary argument against God's existence (Schellenberg 2019a). Valuing gentleness and respect more, and thus more sensitive to the fact that such qualities would have to be exemplified by any God there may be, how could we ever imagine God ordaining or permitting processes which have the result that for millions of years animals rudely tear each other to shreds and natural forces harshly exert a similarly rude, crushing, and demeaning force, so opposed to the dignity of complex living beings? And there may be other atheistic arguments of the same general type.³ Indeed, if we mentally push the idea of God as a perfect personal being through the history of moral evolution, gathering new insights into our conception of God's goodness as we go and considering them alongside the world we know, it may come to seem rather clear that traditional theism – omni-God theism – is false.

It may be objected that our moral sensibility could still be quite undeveloped, much like our religious thinking. But there are reasons to think that the apparent insights relied on here would not prove misleading given further moral progress. I have responded in detail to this worry elsewhere (see Schellenberg 2019a, chap. 4); here two points must suffice. First, new sensitivities, once developed, are harder to lose than to add to. Second, and perhaps more important, early advances can be easier to identify as real. Take computer technology. That we were making progress in this area was pretty obvious when we left behind the Commodore 64. Leaving violence behind strikes me as a similarly discernible bit of early progress in the moral domain.

Does the new reasoning suggested here, if successful, have the power to show that no *other* religious claim is true *either* – especially given the axiological and soteriological content that a

³ I have suggested elsewhere that the presently much-discussed hiddenness argument may be one of them. See Schellenberg (2015) and Schellenberg (2019a).

religious claim by definition must possess, as noted in the previous section? I think not. To see why not, we need to consider the problem presented by violence for God's existence within the larger context, sketched before, of human limitations and immaturity. The problem of violence for theism becomes so severe because we are working with a precisely defined religious idea that makes use of our concept of a person and grants that person ultimate status – including, as part of this, unsurpassable goodness. Some religious ideas are of persons but not of ultimate persons, others are not ideas of persons at all. Still others are not precisely defined, heralding, with their imprecision, the possibility of new specific religious ideas emerging in the future – including, perhaps, ideas we are not presently capable of formulating. So the distinction between “Is theism true?” and “Is any religious proposition true?” once more shows its importance. Even if we answer the first question negatively, and even if cultural evolution enables greater confidence on that score, we should respond to the second question more doubtfully, and we can call on the results of cultural evolution to support such doubt.

An analogous situation is described by Paul Russell and Anders Kraal in a piece on Hume's religious views (Russell and Kraal 2017). Nothing other than theism was a live option for Hume, but Russell and Kraal distinguish between “robust” theism, which is the ultimistic idea I have been working with, and “thin” theism, which postulates a creative nature-transcendent mind but volunteers no additional information as to its attributes. Concerning the former, they argue, Hume was a disbeliever, and concerning the latter he was a skeptic in the usual sense (which they recognize as such), the sense that involves a complete suspense of judgment. We today, I have been arguing, have even more reason than Hume had to disbelieve what Russell and Kraal call robust theism, and we today have even more reason to pair this specific religious disbelief with a more general religious *skepticism*, one that is sensitive to the many religious possibilities lying beyond *either* kind of theism. And for both results recent cultural developments are responsible.

This asymmetry has some important philosophical consequences, given the results already achieved in previous sections of this paper. Instead of religious skepticism in philosophy continuing to amount to skepticism about traditional theism, which even after Hume it often has been, what is permitted to evolve is a decidedly *atheistic* religious skepticism, a position combining the rejection of traditional theism with doubt about the disjunction of other religious possibilities. If this is how things turn out, space for theistic philosophy, which presupposes what Russell and Kraal called robust theism, must be sharply diminished. At the same time, the importance of a wider religious investigation and (by the same token) the forcefulness of religious skepticism's challenge to naturalistic *belief* will become more clear. For given the points about the nature of religious skepticism made in the first section above, "Some religious claim is true" entails the falsehood of naturalism just as surely as does "Theism is true." If we see this and find ourselves skeptical about the former proposition, we will be skeptical about naturalism too.

4. *Religious skepticism may be joined to nondoxastic religious faith, but whether it reasonably appears in this form depends on various issues that will properly be resolved quite differently in different cases.*

I come now to some more practical issues about how religious skepticism should or may be lived. A striking development in recent philosophy of religion is the emergence of various conceptions of nondoxastic religious faith with possible application to the circumstances of religious skeptics (see, for example, Alston 1996, Audi 2011, Howard-Snyder 2017, Schellenberg 2013). Instead of belief, we are hearing about other positive propositional attitudes compatible with nonbelief and capable of undergirding religious faith, such as acceptance, assumption, and imaginative assent.

But religious skeptics are not created equal. There are many special circumstances that can make the adoption of nondoxastic religious faith reasonable for some skeptics but not so reasonable or even unreasonable for others. Was our religious skeptic formerly a believer? Was she part of a religious community? Has she had powerful religious experiences? Does she have religious desires? Has she experienced much suffering? Is she aesthetically sensitive? Does she lack encouragement for

disciplined moral activity in nonreligious contexts? Does she have other aims that faith would help her to further?⁴ Taking the extreme and most vividly illustrative cases: we might say that someone who correctly answers each of these questions with a Yes is more likely to reasonably make the transition in question than someone who answers each question with a No.

This fact is connected with the fact that the arguments being made for skeptical faith are usually pragmatic in nature. The religious skeptic's skepticism already registers her basic *epistemic* response to the disjunction of religious propositions. And perhaps it is only to this disjunction (or some proposition equivalent to it) that her faith is to be attached. If this is not the case, our skeptic will of course want to ensure that the specific religious proposition(s) inviting faith are at any rate not in *worse* shape, epistemically, than that disjunction. Suppose this result seems achievable. What remains to be discussed, in the general case or this specific one, are the various non-epistemic goods⁵ that nondoxastic religious faith might further. And whether these become relevant is something that is much more likely to vary with personal circumstances than are reasonable responses to epistemic matters. For example: whether one reasonably responds positively to the idea that skeptical faith allows one to pay tribute to the value of a family member or partner loved but tragically lost will depend on whether one has or has not experienced a tragedy of the sort in question.

⁴ A large number of possibly relevant aims are discussed in Schellenberg (2009), parts III, IV, and V.

⁵ By "non-epistemic" I mean only that these goods have nothing directly to do with being placed in a condition of justified belief or knowledge. They may still have something to do with it indirectly, and indeed some of the goods that have been discussed involve epistemic goals. See, for example, Schellenberg (2009), chaps. 7 and 11.

What we are seeing here is a *repositioning* or *repurposing* of religious pragmatic argumentation – that is, a recognition that such argumentation may be more appropriately discussed in connection with skeptical religion than in connection with religious belief, to which older writers such as Pascal and James still sought to apply it. This is significant. And it has the consequence that, going forward, the overall orientation associated with religious skepticism in philosophy will have to be understood much more flexibly and less uniformly than before.

5. *A religiously skeptical disposition that amounts to irreligion is in certain not uncommon circumstances in much better shape, practically speaking, than philosophers sympathetic to religion might suppose – and strikingly it is so even from a religious perspective.*

A fairly dramatic illustration of the last section’s final point awaits us. We have seen that there are reasons on the basis of which someone who is genuinely a religious skeptic may become religiously engaged in a major way by adopting religious faith. Is it also possible for a religious skeptic to be rationally quite *disengaged* – even irreligious? I want to conclude the paper by exploring and defending an affirmative answer to this question. As we will see, it is the combined bearing on the honest skeptic’s skepticism of religion’s axiological and soteriological content and recent cultural evolution, mentioned before, that helps to make this answer credible.

But what shall we mean by “irreligious”? In philosophy this is sometimes taken to suggest a hostile attitude toward religion (Russell and Kraal 2017). But dictionary definitions suggest a broad meaning, and treat hostile irreligion as a variety. I will follow this approach here, calling hostile irreligion “hard” irreligion and the alternative “soft” irreligion. Soft irreligion is simply a disposition of disengagement from or a lack of regard for religion-relevant activities. Someone exhibiting soft irreligion is not hostile toward religion but that is mainly because – at least after arriving at religious skepticism, let us suppose reasonably – she pays little or no attention to it, living largely as though religion were not even a part of human life.

Now suppose that none or few of the religion-conducive factors mentioned in the last section – having formerly been a believer, having had powerful religious experiences, and so on – are operative in our religious skeptic’s life. Such a condition, if not common, is not exactly uncommon either. In that case a move into non-doxastic religious faith is not going to hold a very great benefit for the skeptic’s present life even on the assumption that some religious claim is true. True, it would then still afford a sort of alignment with reality, as much as is compatible with the absence of the corresponding belief. But as we will see this is arguably more than matched, in such a case, by the benefits of soft irreligion on the same assumption.

We have already started the reasoning that might be used to defend soft irreligion in the relevant circumstances. And here is how it might continue. Cultural advances prevent the idea of a deity who demands belief and obedience or of a wrathfully punishing deity from being a live religious option, as it probably still was for Pascal when he formulated his Wager. And similarly for prudentially bad consequences of soft irreligion that might once have been associated with other brands of religion. The idea of axiological transcendence or ultimacy, interpreted in the light of values we today have reason to accept, militates too strongly against such notions. At the same time, and to some extent by the same token, there is good reason to affirm the age-old connection made by religion between the fulfilment of its soteriological promises and a metaphysics that includes an afterlife for human beings. That is to say, if some religious claim is actually true, then the actual world must have room in it for an afterlife. This is not just because of the unrelieved and uncompensated pain and suffering found in every human earthly life (there is of course more of it in some lives than in others) but because there is reason to link a soteriologically fulfilled state with knowing *that* a religious state of affairs affords it, even if the specific character of this state of affairs should remain incommunicable. Religion could not otherwise do justice to what we today rightly see as the value of knowledge, especially on the most important matters, or show proper respect for our

right to know what so fundamentally concerns us. But as the honest religious skeptic's skepticism itself evidences, earthly life seems not to be a location appropriate to the release of such information, if any exists. It follows from all this that if some religious claim is true, we may expect to discover this after death, and without being any the worse for having learned it only then. Indeed, our skeptic is entitled to infer – given the assumption that some religious claim is true – that it is part of the economy of salvation that this earthly life not be conducive to its explicit pursuit. Perhaps, then, even if some religious claim is true, there is a way of being quite well aligned with reality that involves pursuing the good as best one can by earthly lights and without reference to religion. Given moral evolution, those earthly lights have brightened of late. Moreover, if one's life really will include a stage following death with the possibility of soteriological fulfilment, then it would be a way to *enrich* one's overall experience to allow such wondrous good news to attend its beginning. Nothing, therefore, is lost and arguably something is gained, in the case we are considering, by choosing soft irreligion rather than non-doxastic faith in the present life, even on the assumption that some religious claim is true.

We can now complete our own Wager argument by considering how things stand for soft irreligion if instead no religious claim is true. They stand very well indeed. For on that assumption one could hardly live a better life than by living irreligiously. (Of course *hostility* to any genuine religious possibility is not called for. Even if religion as historically instantiated were largely lamentable, as many suppose, how could real axiological and soteriological transcendence be other than admired?) An irreligious life must in this scenario be the one that is best attuned to the nature of reality. For a seeker of wisdom living irreligiously must, on our present assumption, be much more attractive than choosing a non-doxastic faith that will inevitably turn out not to be conformed to reality, and that furthermore – as we are supposing – promises little in the way of independent pragmatic value. The upshot: whether some religious claim be true or not, the life of soft irreligion

for a case of the sort we are imagining is rationally preferable to skeptical religion. We have, in other words (the words of decision theoretical reasoning), a “dominance” argument for that conclusion.⁶

Of course we have left aside here all the pragmatic arguments that can be made for skeptical faith, assuming them to be largely inapplicable. It is not always so. It may not often be. But it is interesting to learn that given the cultural circumstances in which we find ourselves, the irreligious life may in certain not *uncommon* personal circumstances rationally commend itself not only to disbelief but to doubt – and that it may do so with religion’s blessing!

Reflection on religious skepticism therefore is still in a position to yield new and interesting results in philosophy. We have discovered five such results that, between them, bear on the nature, the assessment, and also the practical consequences of religious skepticism. Much more may yet be revealed by exploring outward from the points here made.

References

- Alston, William P., “Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith,” in Jeffrey Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder, eds. *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).
- Audi, Robert, *Rationality and Religious Commitment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011).
- Barrett, Justin, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2004).
- Bourget, David and David J. Chalmers, “What Do Philosophers Believe?” *Philosophical Studies* 170 (2014), 465-500.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel, “The Skeptical Christian,” in Jonathan Kvanvig, ed. *Oxford Studies in*

⁶ The reasoning here is at odds with my reasoning about Pascal’s Wager in chap. 9 of Schellenberg (2009), which was insufficiently sensitive to the extent to which the consideration about variations emphasized in the previous section holds true.

- Philosophy of Religion* 8 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- Hume, David, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings* (1779), ed. D. Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- Pinker, Steven, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011).
- Plantinga, Alvin, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- Russell, Paul and Kraal, Anders, "Hume on Religion," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/hume-religion/>](https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/hume-religion/).
- Schellenberg, J. L., *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).
- Schellenberg J. L., *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).
- Schellenberg, J. L., *Evolutionary Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- Schellenberg, J. L., *Progressive Atheism: How Moral Evolution Changes the God Debate* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019a).
- Schellenberg, J. L., *Religion After Science: The Cultural Consequences of Religious Immaturity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019b).
- Swinburne, Richard, *The Existence of God*, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).