Working with Swinburne:
Belief, Value, and the Religious Life

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I. Richard Swinburne supervised my DPhil at Oxford back in the late ‘80s. His supervision was exemplary in every way, and I am deeply grateful to him for his guidance and support, which were amply forthcoming despite his disagreement with my atheistic conclusion. In this paper I express my gratitude and also pay tribute to Richard and to his penetrating work in philosophy by building on his implicit response to a problem I myself would ordinarily treat differently: the problem of how religion, so often infused with barren certainties or fertile hatred today, could be realized more rationally and less harmfully in the future. One way to deal with this problem is by developing new forms of religious faith. This is the direction my own work has recently taken. Another way to do it is by seeking to give to traditional religion an interpretation that the future can more easily bear. This is an enterprise to which Swinburne can be seen as having contributed in his important book Faith and Reason. And it is one that I propose to take further here.

A feature shared by Swinburne’s work and its proposed extension in this paper is a certain attenuation of the emphasis ordinarily found among faith’s defenders on propositional beliefs and their rational status. Swinburne has argued, it is true, that the existence of God, as traditionally conceived, is more probable than not, and that the same holds for central Christian doctrines. This links him very firmly in many minds with the rational defense of traditional religious belief. It would therefore be natural for those who know of this to suppose, before considering what he has to say on the subject, that propositional belief would have a very significant role in his account of faith. But Swinburne’s account of faith is very general – he is concerned with the most fundamental notion in this neighborhood: that of a religious life. And when it comes to the shape of the religious life, including the Christian life (which it has been his central aim to defend), we see him arguing that what is most important are the purposes one finds valuable and to which one becomes or remains committed, and that belief is subservient to these. Moreover, to serve Christian purposes, belief need not be straight out belief that some Christian proposition is true. What is needed, and what the Christian should seek reason to support, is rather the belief that no religious creed distinct from the Christian creed specifies a path more likely to reach goals as valuable as those of Christianity.

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2The sort of faith we have here seems much the same as what Robert Audi distinguishes as “global faith,” which is, he says, what we have in mind when we speak of someone as “a person of faith.” See Robert Audi, Rationality and Religious Commitment (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), pp. 53, 57-58.
At this point a light may seem to go on for those who remember that Swinburne’s approach to the defence of God’s existence and various Christian propositions is probabilistic and Bayesian: in Faith and Reason he is simply adapting Bayes for the purpose of talking about action, and applying Bayesian decision theory! So if belief is attenuated in anything he says, this is only because of the nature of such an approach, which in the right circumstances will allow for rational action even when one’s degree of belief as to the success of whatever means to one’s goal one has chosen is low.

But Swinburne himself denies that he is employing Bayesian decision theory. Though some of his own central concepts – goals, values, probability -- are formalized in it, he explicitly says, in Faith and Reason, that “it will not be helpful to use Bayesian decision theory in this book” (p. 82, n. 24). That is because, in his view, the formal apparatus of such an approach is not easily or naturally applied in the religious case, and more reliable judgments of rationality than it would deliver are, in this domain, independently attainable. Thus when it comes to the nature and rationality of faith, there is no need to stay with Bayes to build on Swinburne. Indeed, I will be arguing that Swinburne’s own emphasis on ‘value first’ should lead us further beyond Bayes and the associated concepts of probability and propositional belief than he himself is prepared to go.

In making this argument – so as to work with Swinburne in this piece – I will assume that all of the other arguments I (and others) have ever made that, to my mind, tell in favor of the falsehood of Christian beliefs are actually unsound, and properly seen as such by those who investigate. Against that background, I will argue that Christian faith – a species of the fundamental religious faith Swinburne has in mind, which comes down to a religious form of life or religiousness – can authentically be realized entirely without the metaphysical beliefs usually thought to be required for it, and also without the epistemic beliefs Swinburne requires, so long as certain important evaluative and conative conditions are satisfied. I will also try to get clear about the shape it might have when this is the case, noting the consequences of my results for a current movement in philosophy of religion emphasizing the possibility and importance of non-doxastic propositional faith. I will conclude by delivering myself of a mini-sermon on the besetting sins of philosophers – including both Swinburne and myself – that can prevent us from seeing how a flourishing faith without the cognitive states of which we are so fond is possible.

I should underline that my focus here will be largely on the nature of religious faith. And so when, for example, I speak of what a Christian “can do” in the absence of certain beliefs, I will generally have in mind what can be done while authentically exhibiting Christian faith, not what such a person can do rationally. But having got clearer about this, we will also be in a position to point out, near the end of the paper, some important consequences for the rational evaluation of faith.

II.
Let’s begin by seeing to what extent and in what way Swinburne himself thinks a life of faith can manage without propositional beliefs. The one who is on a religious way and so exhibits religious faith, he says, is pursuing the goals of religion, which centrally include salvation or deep well-being both for oneself and for others (p. 160). Belief’s role, according to Swinburne, is to function as a

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3Swinburne does not always make as clear as he might that to have faith one need not actually be acting in one way or another; being disposed to act in the relevant way is enough. But that this is his view is confirmed here and there – see, for example, p. 141.
guide of action (pp. 9-15), and this in religious matters as much as in any others. He recognizes that there are, in the world today, various creeds specifying quite different means to the end of salvation. Which one, if any, should a person with that end in view follow? Without some belief about the relative intellectual status of his options, so he thinks, one could hardly be expected to act at all. In having Christian faith as opposed to Buddhist faith or Hindu faith or some other sort of faith, one has to form a belief about the Christian creed that permits one to follow the Christian path to salvation rather than one of the others.

What belief, exactly, must one form in such cases? Assuming (for the moment, and for simplicity) that salvation has the same value however construed by the world’s religious traditions, the one who has Christian faith must believe that what the Christian creed taken as a whole directs one to do – the total set of actions entailed by the conjunction of all its items – is at least as likely to lead to salvation as what any alternative creed commends (pp. 197, 225). One’s creed must also, Swinburne says (p. 197), be regarded as more likely to do so than at least one other option (if this were not the case then its selection could not be favoured over doing nothing, which he regards as a ‘way’ of proceeding here) – but for simplicity’s sake I shall ignore this second requirement hereafter. Swinburne takes all this to imply that when having Christian faith, the Christian believes that the Christian creed taken as a whole (the conjunction of all its items) is at least as likely to be true as any other religious creed taken as a whole (p. 225).

Does any of these beliefs, on his view, add up to believing straight out that the Christian creed is true? Swinburne regards belief as a contrastive notion (p. 5) with the relevant contrast expressible, at least by mature believers, in terms of probability: in believing that p one believes p to be more probable than any alternative to p (p. 7). Normally the alternative with which p is contrasted is its negation, not-p, but sometimes – and here the religious case is of course illustrative – the contrast will be with a range of alternatives, and Swinburne argues that in the latter situation one should be said to believe that p even if one does not believe it to be more probable than its negation (and so does not regard it as more probable than the disjunction of those alternatives): in that sort of situation one may be said to believe that p if one believes that p is more probable than each of the alternatives (pp. 6-7). So, to begin to answer our question: one may, on Swinburne’s view, be said to believe straight out that the Christian creed is true if one believes it to be more probable than not, but also if one believes only that it is more probable than each alternative creed, for one might believe that it is at least as likely as any alternative – and do this while not believing that it is more likely than each of them (pp. 197-198). It follows that, on Swinburne’s view, one may have Christian faith without believing that the Christian creed is true. Indeed, at one point he suggests that one may do so while, strictly speaking, believing that the Christian creed is false – for one might believe it to be at least as likely as any alternative while believing it less likely than the disjunction of alternatives (p. 227).

This generates an important interpretive conclusion. We have seen that the minimum required for faith in the way of belief, on Swinburne’s view, is less than this. On his view, one may have Christian faith even if one does not believe that the Christian creed is more probable than not or that it is more probable than each alternative creed, for one might believe that it is at least as likely as any alternative – and do this while not believing that it is more likely than each of them (pp. 197-198). It follows that, on Swinburne’s view, one may have Christian faith without believing that the Christian creed is true. Indeed, at one point he suggests that one may do so while, strictly speaking, believing that the Christian creed is false – for one might believe it to be at least as likely as any alternative while believing it less likely than the disjunction of alternatives (p. 227). Here we see Swinburne’s open door to the idea that faith – and even religious faith – can in the relevant sense be non-doxastic. This point is somewhat obscured by his inclination to call the

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belief had by a person of Christian faith even in the case where she has the minimum required for Christian faith weak belief in the Christian creed (p. 225, cf. p. 197). But it follows from everything else he has said that this label is not, strictly speaking, appropriate. One who believes the minimum required for faith might not in any Swinburnian sense believe that the Christian creed is true.

Nonetheless, she has a belief. She must have a belief, on Swinburne’s view, an epistemic comparative belief, if she is to act in pursuit of her goal. We need now to consider whether that is in fact the case, or whether we and Swinburne should move even further beyond belief about religious and related propositions, when thinking about faith, than he does in Faith and Reason. To smooth the way and also confirm what we’ve heard from him about the central importance of the conative and evaluative dimensions of a religious life, let me conclude this first section of the paper by offering three broad comments. First, as I have argued elsewhere, one cannot understand religion without taking account of its soteriological features. Philosophers who treat claims such as the claim that there is a God as contributions purely to metaphysics do not rightly see themselves as dealing with a religious claim. And religion’s soteriological features are of course tightly linked to the goals and evaluations of religious people. Second, as any up to date (or even quite out of date) religious studies textbook will show, work in that field richly supports the claim that religion at its heart features practices of various kinds. This has been so, as far as we can tell, ever since religion originated in human evolutionary history many tens of thousands of years ago. And although people’s beliefs about the world will here be relevant, one certainly cannot understand a practice without asking about the goals and evaluations underlying it. Third, and on the basis of the first two points, if our understanding of religious faith is to be grounded in basic truths about religion rather than in doctrinal proliferations and prejudices of recent times, which have so focused our attention on religious truth claims and the appropriateness or inappropriateness of believing them, we would do well to put our emphasis on the goals, evaluations, and practices at the heart of it. A corollary of my third comment is that respecting such an emphasis is more important than such things as finessing the distinction between “faith that” and “faith in,” which is found in ordinary language and has recently been debated obsessively by philosophers (including my former self).

III.

With these points as part of our background, we can see, I think, that Swinburne is on the right track. But what should we say about his view that, in religious faith, certain beliefs – comparative epistemic beliefs, specifically – remain necessary? If we endorsed his general conception of belief, we might find it easier to go along with this, since for Swinburne all beliefs are epistemic in nature: believing always involves giving one proposition a higher status than some other. I don’t agree with this, and have indicated as much and why elsewhere. That said, I don’t plan to make it an issue here. Instead I will look for a reason supporting Swinburne’s view about comparing one’s own creed with alternatives that does not depend on his general conception of belief.

We may be able to find one in the following passage: “To pursue a way in order to achieve the goals of religion, someone needs to believe that it is at least as probable that pursuit of that way

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will attain those goals as that pursuit of any other way will.... It would not merely be foolish or irrational but logically impossible to pursue a religious way *in order to* obtain a certain goal, if you believed that pursuing that way would make you less likely to obtain the goal than you would be otherwise” (p. 197). A little argument is, if not intended, at any rate strongly suggested here:

(1) If you believe that pursuing a certain way in order to achieve the goals of religion will make you less likely to obtain those goals than you would be otherwise, then you cannot pursue that way *in order* to obtain those goals.

Therefore:

(2) To pursue a way in order to achieve the goals of religion, you need to believe that doing so will make you at least as likely to obtain those goals as you would be otherwise.

Unfortunately, the conclusion of this argument does not follow. One way to avoid the belief that pursuing your path will make you less likely to obtain your goals than you would be otherwise is to go all the way over to the other side of believing that it is at least as likely that your path *will* get you where you want to go as that any other will. But it is not the only way. A sufficient condition for not believing that p is believing that not-p. But this is not a necessary condition. For one might avoid believing that p simply by not having *any* belief on the matter at all. It follows that you might avoid believing that the pursuit of a certain way in order to achieve the goals of religion will make you less likely to obtain those goals than you would otherwise be simply by not having any belief on the matter at all.

But is it really possible in the present case to avoid the relevant belief in this way? Can you pursue a religious path in order to obtain a religious goal while not having any belief at all in some way specifying the likelihood of your action’s success compared to that of other actions? If not, then Swinburne can simply say so explicitly, thus providing an extra premise that will help to make the argument his text suggests valid.

I want to explore the view that this really is possible and that such a premise would be false. The first and perhaps most obvious point to be made is that one might find the relevant probabilities *indeterminate*, and if I am in doubt about how likely my creed is compared to others, then clearly I lack a belief on what the relevant likelihoods are. However in that case I might still have the belief that my creed is *not obviously less likely* than others, and Swinburne could easily transition to the view that this at least is required. Indeed, such a claim is close enough to his implied view to count as a version of it here. So our first point won’t carry us very far.

A stronger case for the possibility we are exploring will come from a closer look at how powerfully dominating one’s religious purposes and evaluations might be, especially when attended by relevant emotions. Years ago when I was a student, I heard a religious studies

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6In doing so, I have been helped and encouraged by Jonathan Kvanvig’s recent essay “Affective Theism and People of Faith,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 37 (2013), 109-128.
professor say: “religion involves both a way of living and a way of seeing.” It’s natural to suppose – and I supposed then – that the way of seeing referred to must involve religious beliefs (in particular, religious metaphysical beliefs). Or, after reading Swinburne’s *Faith and Reason*, we might suppose that it would have to at least involve comparative epistemic beliefs about religious propositions of the sort he emphasizes. But as Swinburne’s own work suggests, the ‘way of seeing’ referred to might also or rather feature certain broadly *evaluative* beliefs about things religious: beliefs about such things as the extraordinary value of religious goals, the meaningful depths of experiences encountered along the way, how certain religious actions or dispositions are the actions or dispositions one should be doing or cultivating, and so on. And although a ‘way of living’ will certainly involve actions or action dispositions, it too can be taken more broadly: in particular, if one’s way of living is shot through with emotions, then the former could hardly be described properly without reference to the latter.

Now, and this is important, when a religious person loses religious beliefs as usually construed, if she does, she might *keep* these other beliefs (evaluative beliefs are often very firm, and resistant to being lost), and *keep* important components of her emotional life. And it seems that if she does keep these things, she might continue in religious practice and the pursuit of religious goals as before, too, and this without any intervening epistemic calculations – provided she does not acquire the belief that religious claims are *false*, or that some other path to a comparable set of goals is *more* likely to reach it (after all, the premise of the little argument stated earlier is very plausible). Here, as you can see, some weaker conditions related to the epistemic condition emphasized by Swinburne are allowed – negative conditions involving an *absence* of certain beliefs about religious propositions or their relative likelihoods, and perhaps also the belief *that* the former beliefs are absent: “Well, at least I don’t believe that there is *no* God!” We might add that the religious person should be expected often to *entertain* religious propositions – to have them pass before her mind – in the contexts of religious experience and practice, but this too is a relatively weak condition if belief is what was emphasized before. Similarly for the point that such a religious person would be *disposed* to believe various religious or epistemic propositions – that is, be ready to come to or return to belief of them in appropriate circumstances – which, as Robert Audi has demonstrated, is quite distinct from believing them dispositionally.7

It will be good to work here with a more concrete example. So imagine a Christian – let’s call her Esther – who, because of her contact with skepticism about Christian doctrines, over time slowly and involuntarily loses her Christian beliefs. She no longer believes, for example, that God was incarnate in Christ, though she doesn’t disbelieve this either (and it is important to her that she doesn’t). Her honest response to the evidence has left her in doubt on the matter, not knowing what to think. She doesn’t have the concept of ‘credences,’ but even if she did, she wouldn’t be able to make use of it in her own case; if you asked her about this, she’d reply that she has no clue how much credence to give to any of the relevant propositions.

Now it would be hard – and in any case unrealistic – to imagine that Esther isn’t at some level troubled by being in religious doubt. Her former believing way of being a Christian, which

did feature the usual propositional component, is gone. But in the circumstances this only paves the way for a new way of being Christian to be adopted. Her Christian goals and Christian evaluative beliefs, so much a part of her, take on a new salience, and together with the attendant emotions, which are revealed as very strong indeed, they enable her to continue to engage in Christian practice. Perhaps we need to reverse the order of goals and evaluations to see how this could occur. So think about Esther’s evaluations. Though she no longer believes the doctrine of the Incarnation, her very entertaining of it during the time when doubt came has led her to see afresh what a wonderful and glorious idea it is: that God in compassion and humility would take on the form of a human being – this thought when she entertains it evokes powerful and rich emotions, and she thinks it would be simply the most tremendously good thing for it to be true. Certain associated thoughts Esther reacts to similarly. Take, for example, the thought that God became a human being so that human beings might transcend their limitations and become like God, and the related thought that she herself, by seeking to become more like Christ through Christian practice, can move ever deeper into an intimate relationship with God. Here we see a little more of what Swinburne would call a Christian creed, and part of it concerns what we need to do to obtain what Swinburne would call the Christian version of salvation. These things Esther continues to do, led into a continuation of Christian practice including the pursuit of Christian goals despite the loss of Christian beliefs, because of the freshly experienced power of her Christian evaluations and emotions.

Do we have to suppose that she has any thoughts at all about alternative creeds, let alone their relative probabilities of being true, to explain Esther’s continuing practice? It seems not. Swinburne’s idea that one cannot follow a particular creed in pursuit of this or that religious purpose without thinking it to have a certain chance of being the right one when compared with alternatives, though plausible in the abstract, does not seem confirmed by concrete examples. Indeed, it is disconfirmed. And, ironically, it is his own important claim about the centrality of evaluations to religious faith, considered further, that leads to this result. Esther may not ever have thought about alternative creeds, only (say) about the problem of evil. Or she may have considered alternative creeds only as additional sources of doubt about Christian doctrines, not as alternative ways to salvation. Here we need to notice that this idea of salvation, too, has been treated quite abstractly by Swinburne and tends to be thus treated by most philosophers of religion, including myself in previous work. Esther is not likely to think of it in the same way – and this even if intellectual virtue is everywhere manifested by her mental and other behavior: one need not think in all ways as a philosopher in order to be intellectually virtuous! In fact, here too we can draw on information about the possible conative and evaluative features of faith to help us see the point

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8 Or at least not by religious examples. Perhaps in mundane cases – or in some subset of mundane cases – we will find that it is impossible to pursue a goal by a certain means without believing that that means is at least as likely to allow one’s goal to be obtained as any alternative. It seems plausible that the move from the mundane to the transcendent – from particular purposes to the most general and most emotionally powerful governing purpose of one’s life – might affect whether consideration of alternatives must come into a practice. But I have no space to discuss this issue further here.
more clearly. Precisely because of how strongly she responds, emotionally and evaluatively and in other ways, to Christian goals and Christian ideas, when Esther thinks of salvation it is only the Christian version of salvation that is before her mind, and when Esther thinks of how salvation is to be obtained it is only the Christian means that she entertains. These are the things she values. Indeed, she might regard it as absurd if someone were to suggest to her that there are alternative non-Christian ways of reaching her goal, ways that have nothing to do with the incarnation of God in Christ!

But doesn’t this sense of absurdity itself suggest that Esther believes those alternative ways to be less likely to lead to her goal than the Christian way to which she is devoted? Actually, if she thinks of them at all, she must regard them as being quite irrelevant to her own goal – understandably followed, perhaps, by those whose hearts are otherwise directed, but irrelevant to her own practice. The comparative judgment of “less likely” that the critic refers to here may follow from the irrelevancy claim, but there is no reason to think that Esther must make that inference and believe the result. (At most, she might be disposed to do so in the Audi sense.) Even if she did believe it, that belief would no more play a role in her faith or its cause than the belief that going to the rotary club twice a week is less likely to lead to welfare than the path she pursues, or that the action of petting a dog or kitten every day has that status.

It may help to add plausibility to what I’ve said about Esther if we consider an analogy. So think about someone who together with others is pursuing the purpose or goal of ending war. You ask her whether she really believes that war will cease, or that her way of pursuing this goal will work or make a useful contribution to achieving that end, and she says she honestly doesn’t know whether she believes either of these things – from which you rightly infer that she does not believe either of them. (Of course others in her camp may feel differently; I am not suggesting that everyone who pursues her purpose will feel similarly any more than I am suggesting that every religious person is secretly like Esther.) But she adds, and with great fervency, that it would obviously be hugely important and a tremendously good thing if war were made to cease, and if her way of pursuing this goal would turn out to make some contribution to the achievement of that end. This is what she focuses on, and this is what keeps her going in the important project of trying to end war. Now it may occur to you as you listen to her that she must not believe that war will not be made to cease; and when you see that she and her people are pursuing their goal in their own particular way (say, through the strategy of nonviolent demonstration, which they have lovingly honed over many years), it occurs to you that she must not believe that among the clear alternatives is a better way of pursuing their goal. And you will naturally and rightly think that these negative conditions help to explain the nature and continuation of her activist practice. But seeing how much she is devoted to the ideal of the cessation of war brought about through nonviolent protest, you also see that you don’t have to suppose that she has thought much about these things (certainly you don’t have to think that she has made relevant epistemic calculations) in order to explain her behavior. Being moved to action by what we might as well call love in this context, love of an end and of a certain means of pursuing it, as also in Esther’s religious context, is a bit like being subject to the principle of inertia in physics: the movement continues unless some external force – in this case, coming to believe that the relevant view is false or that some alternative practice is more likely to be successful – can effectively be brought to bear.

Perhaps it will be replied that my inertia analogy can be used against me: if the only reason
Esther continues to practice in inertia, then teleology has been given up – Esther is no longer on the Christian path for the sake of any religious goal. How could she be, if she doesn’t any longer even implicitly give some credence to such propositions as that her engaging in Christian practice will lead to her achieving her religious goals?  

This sort of objection has some rhetorical effect because ‘doesn’t give some credence to p’ can easily lead one to ‘gives no credence to p’ and thence to ‘gives to p a credence of 0.’ But though the latter move may psychologically follow quite naturally, its content does not follow logically. Indeed, the negation of that content follows. In particular, Esther gives no credence to the relevant propositions only in the sense of not assigning any probability to them at all, not even 0, because she is in doubt – in the familiar state of not knowing what to think. Another problem with the objection is that it tempts us to construe religious practice entirely in terms of behaviour segregated from such things as emotions and desires – a temptation I have already suggested we ought to resist. Esther is not just robotically producing certain behaviours. Her behaviour is part of a bundle of dispositional states including also these other things. And these other things keep her purpose – to achieve a deep relationship with God – very much alive and make it the case that she produces those behaviours that Christians regard as promoting Christlikeness in part for the sake of that purpose. The fuzziness of the relevant evidence is not enough to kill it. Clear evidence against the relevant propositions would be required to do so, just as it would be in the case of the anti-war activist and in many other examples we can think of – such as the following. A woman may continue to pursue the success of her marriage, a goal to which she is deeply devoted, by loving her wife or husband the best she can even when circumstances have placed the achievement of her goal very much in doubt. Her devotion may suffice to make this true unless and until she has strong evidence that her goal will not be achieved – say, her spouse leaves her and marries someone else. And, of course, while in the grip of such devotion, talk of other people with whom she might achieve a successful marriage and the thought of comparing relevant likelihoods here will simply leave her cold.

But perhaps the position I am defending can in some other way be shown to be false or in need of revision. Here’s one more way of trying to accomplish this result. Even if Esther can get by without Christian beliefs, metaphysical or epistemic, someone may say, surely she still needs some form of faith that the relevant propositions are true – in this case, a non-doxastic form of propositional faith of the sort that various writers, including Bill Alston, Robert Audi, Dan Howard-Snyder and a certain Schellenberg fellow, have been championing recently. Thus the relevant cognitive states cannot altogether be avoided, and the move beyond religious belief cannot

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9 I thank Paul Draper for this objection.

be taken nearly as far by the Christian apologist as I am suggesting.

Here I am reminded of an episode from the year 2005. The second edition of Swinburne’s *Faith and Reason* came out that year, and so did my *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion*. We traded copies of our books, and I recall that one of Richard’s comments on mine was to the effect that the concept of faith-that – one I had analyzed but that he himself had not employed – deserved a place in such discussions. He seemed to think that he should have brought it up. Naturally, I agreed! But after reading his book again while preparing for this paper and thinking about it even more carefully than before, I’m not so sure I do anymore. So to Richard I say: Don’t be too certain that faith-that is of any great importance in these discussions! Let’s first push the discussion of your more fundamental issues further. Perhaps it will turn out that, in these matters, the pioneer is closer to getting it right than the new kids on the block.

Here’s why that might be the case. Religious faith – the fundamental set of dispositions identical with a religious form of life or personal religiousness – can be variously instantiated, as my own examples show. It would be overly narrow to suppose that it must include beliefs of the sort in question. But I now think that it might well be another sort of narrowness or dogmatism to suppose, as many do, that the religious life must include propositional faith. And this whether the latter be regarded as entailing a voluntary and nonbelieving sort of mental assent (as I once maintained, allowing that in many religious minds belief takes the place of propositional faith) or more irascically as capable of being instantiated believably or nonbelievably, through some disjunction of acceptance, assumption, trust and relevantly similar states in the latter case (the views of Alston, Audi, and Howard-Snyder seem to fall here).

Think again of Esther. To understand how she evinces religious faith in the new dispensation of doubt we do not need to introduce the idea that she has some continuing disposition of acceptance or assumption or trust or imaginative assent in relation to religious propositions or comparative epistemic ones, any more than we have to think of her as believing them. What is constant in her are religious goals and evaluations and emotions, as well as dispositions to act in pursuit of those goals. Of course she is *entertaining* religious propositions all the time, and it is hugely important to note that she entertains them with a powerful and rich pro-attitude, which all of the participants in the movement I have mentioned would regard as one of the essential components of propositional faith. But for propositional faith as they understand it, a cognitive component tied up with the relevant propositions is also needed. Esther, by their lights, needs to be in some way disposed to take a stand on the truth of some such propositions, but I cannot now see that she is. The *goodness* these propositions represent is so much on her mind that, lacking the belief that they are false (and perhaps also occasionally reminding herself of this fact), she feels no need continually or frequently to represent to herself their *truth*. Even if in some moment of the complex, shape-shifting phenomenon that is an instantiation of religious faith she passes mentally into a truth-valued state in connection with this or that religious proposition, as distinct from her constant pro-attitude and the actions it makes her disposed to perform, I see no reason why, every time such a state arises, it must be the same one. Perhaps once it is mental assent, another time assumption or trust (whatever exactly a truth-valued version of the latter would be), and so on. Here I anticipate the reply that we can say she has a non-doxastic attitude of propositional faith toward religious propositions even if it is manifested in different ways at different times. But for this to be the case, we would still have to be thinking of a *continuing disposition*, and it is not at all clear that Esther must have one of this sort.
Another reply that Howard-Snyder in particular might be inclined to try, given his latitudinarian approach to the question as to what might count as "a positive cognitive stance toward p,"\textsuperscript{11} is that some relevant part of Esther’s thinking about Christian propositions being doubt-worthy might itself provide an instantiation for the relevant cognitive attitude. Notice how it’s very important to her that these claims not be discernibly false -- that they be only doubt-worthy.\textsuperscript{12} But this move seems a bit strained, fed more by the assumption that Esther must have propositional faith, which generates a willingness to be excessively latitudinarian, rather than by any plausibility in thinking of what Esther has got as a cognitive attitude toward the relevant Christian propositions that could fill the bill here. What if we dropped that assumption, recognizing that there can be faith without propositional faith, much as there can be propositional faith without belief? What if we admitted that the really fundamental faith concept is Swinburne’s which, as I’ve noted several times, is more general, and can be instantiated variously? Then we could tighten the requirements for propositional faith and make our understanding of it more appealing and plausible, allowing that the cognitive component of propositional faith, even if non-doxastic, should at least be belief-like (manifested by a positive state toward the relevant proposition rather than just one that is not negative -- e.g., the assessment ‘not discernibly false’). Then, also, there would be no question as to whether Esther has propositional faith.

A more specific response can be made here too -- one more sensitive to the details of the Esther case. When we look closely we can see that Esther’s doubt (and any associated state including it) is the result of losing her old form of Christian faith, which did have a propositional element, namely, belief. Doubt signals the end of her old faith; it is much less naturally construed as a cognitive part of the new. Of course in a sense it permits the new. For it allows the value Esther places on her practice and its ideas (and her love for these things) to take on a new salience for her and allows the practice to continue. But this is a causal relation. Doubt remains part of the causal background to the new faith here rather than a cognitive part of it. If that doubt changed to disbelief, her new faith would probably end. But this relationship too can be understood causally. As for evaluative matters: with Esther, the epistemic part of our evaluation ends when (hopefully!) we conclude that her move from belief to doubt and the loss of her old believing form of faith were epistemically appropriate. Her new way of being a Christian, which follows after, requires us to shift our attention to other, more value-oriented considerations. And this itself suggests that her new way of being a Christian is more radically new than any attempt to stretch propositional faith to fit could allow.

\textsuperscript{11}See Howard-Snyder, “Propositional Faith,” 367.

\textsuperscript{12}In this same connection it might be argued that Esther is ‘taking a stand’ on the truth of Christian propositions. But if (since her time of wrestling with doubt) she hasn’t been thinking much about truth, then it seems a bit odd to say this. If it nonetheless seems right to say it, perhaps that’s because it’s one way of describing from the outside what’s going on with Esther. If she, personally, has taken a stand, this involves deciding to stay in her church (and in the Church) and to live out her Christianity in an unusual way. In doing so she identifies herself with a larger body that is taking a stand on the truth of Christian claims, but it doesn’t follow that she herself, personally, is taking such a stand. (Perhaps there is here a sense in which someone’s church -- or perhaps it should be the Church -- can have faith, propositional faith, for its members. But I don’t have space to consider this interesting idea any further in the present context.)
The upshot? Although the faith-that/faith-in distinction is well entrenched in the ordinary language of today, we should not impose it on our most fundamental analyses of religious faith. This isn’t safe, since the latter is often much more concerned with the good than with the likelihood of truth. More to the point: if I love the goal I am pursuing, and this certainly – perhaps preeminently – includes religious goals – then that may explain why I pursue it, and a reference to propositional attitudes of the sorts and with the objects we have been considering won’t be needed to understand this. And of course if my religious goal is worth loving that much, something a Christian could hardly deny when it comes to a Christian goal like Esther’s, then the religious faith that grows from my pursuit of it may also be rationally defensible in ethical terms (more on this in a moment), and this without questions about the justification of religious metaphysical beliefs or relevant epistemic beliefs ever coming up.

IV.

Our extension and revision of Swinburne’s emphasis thus allows for a form of Christian practice that is grounded primarily in a sort of love, and remains thus grounded even in the absence of religious propositional beliefs or faith and comparative epistemic beliefs or faith related thereto. If in the future religious skepticism were to gain an even deeper hold, this sort of Christian practice might remain possible. And so we can see Christians like Esther as experimenting with a form of Christianity that may be much more widely realized one day.

In conclusion, with an eye on these thoughts, I want to deliver the mini-sermon promised at the beginning. This was to be about the besetting sins of philosophers – including both Swinburne and myself – that can prevent us from seeing how a flourishing faith is able to exist without the cognitive states of which we are so fond (states such as belief that one’s creed is more probable than others or faith that one’s creed is true). Our sins, in this regard, are many, and I shall have to restrict myself to the more important, leaving aside such venial sins as our tendency to overdo conceptual fastidiousness, and the way we still so often bow to ordinary language. The first of the two graver sins I have in mind I will only mention, since it is amply illustrated in earlier parts of this paper and will, I think, immediately be understood. This is a tendency to what might be called over-intellectualization. Sometimes in our analyses of religious faith, we veer, I think, into a description of faith for philosophers – a form of faith that is full of cognitive states and truth-valued attitudes, whose rationality therefore, naturally enough, depends largely on whether these states and attitudes are appropriately formed, with due sensitivity to the facts. Simply by thinking about Esther and others like her, we can, I suggest, see the inadequacy of such an approach if it is intended to produce an analysis of faith with a fully general application – or even if it is intended, more narrowly, to cover rational forms of faith.

But the sin I want to focus on is a somewhat different one. We philosophers of religion commit this sin whenever we forget that philosophy of religion includes not just the metaphysics of religion and the epistemology of religion, but also the ethics of religion.¹³ When in its grip, we think about religious faith but are not in a good position to notice – as Swinburne to his credit has done – that religious faith is fundamentally about what states of affairs are most deeply valued, and

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¹³One who has not forgotten is John Bishop. See his defence of the view that the proper evaluation of religious faith is moral in his Believing By Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
the goals and action dispositions and emotions formed in relation thereto. Of course cognitive
states are not just inadmissible. For one thing, they appear wherever religious evaluative beliefs are
found. But we should not assume, as we may be inclined to do as metaphysicians or
epistemologists, that religious faith must include serious attention to the truth-values of claims
about the world, and that some such claims must be believed or mentally embraced through some
belief-like state.

So what might we learn if we repented of this sin? Well, the ethics of religion, taken most
generally, may be seen as involving these two things: the application of insights from moral
philosophy in philosophical work on religion, and also the reciprocal endeavor on the part of
philosophers to understand what religion might have to contribute to moral philosophy. Let me
make one relevant point from each side.

Applying insights from moral philosophy, we might recognize that the philosophical
evaluation of religion should be just as much about how moral virtue is or can be exemplified
religiously as about religion’s capacity for intellectual virtue. It is easy to get hung up on whether a
Christian justifiably believes, say, the doctrine of the Incarnation, or on the metaphysical intricacies
involved in the latter, and to fail to notice that some Christians don’t believe the doctrine at all
while managing nonetheless to be related mentally to it in a way that is religiously and morally
approvable. Esther, for example, places great value on the ultimate humility and compassion she
associates with that doctrine, in effect holding that it would be good for these character traits to
penetrate to the very heart of reality. Moreover, in connection with this evaluation, she commits
herself to making it the case that these traits penetrate to the heart of her own reality – to the heart
of the life that she lives. And with the deep emotions that attend this evaluation and this purpose,
she displays the fact that this is already to some extent the case. How could her religious life, if it
includes these features, fail to be both religiously and morally approvable in a very deep way? But,
onesidedly applying insights from metaphysics and epistemology, largely forgetting about ethics,
we will fail to notice this important point.

How about what religion may contribute to ethics? The point I want to draw out here has to
do with the way in which a religious life, quite without metaphysical propositions believed or taken
as true on faith, offers itself as a candidate for the center of a good life – one that may seem
especially appropriate when we consider how short, so far, has been the journey of intelligence on
our planet and how much further our species may have to travel in the future of evolution. My
description of Esther’s life, which again functions paradigmatically, doesn’t reflect a non-
cognitivism of the sort we have seen before in the philosophy of religion, which allowed no place
for such a thing as the doctrine of the Incarnation taken literally, but rather involves a shift of
emphasis: a shift to the goodness reflected in that doctrine taken literally and to the religious
purposes that the entertaining of it may subserve, and away from a bare consideration of its truth.
And this sort of emphasis will perhaps more easily be noticed by moral philosophy as potentially
forming the center of a good life.

For moral philosophy to take fresh interest in religion in this way, it will be necessary to
bring out and make conspicuous one more point about purposes. A religious life of the sort in
question offers itself to ethics not just as providing ethical benefits deriving from the pursuit of
distinctively religious purposes, but also as especially (and perhaps uniquely) conducive to the
fulfillment of a variety of aims that, on independent grounds, we can see are deeply appropriate for
beings like us, finding our way at an early stage of evolution. Swinburne is right to associate the
religious life with religious purposes, but the religious life may gain some of its attractiveness from how it serves many other purposes too – such as the purpose of a fully expanded imagination, or of carrying out a wholehearted commitment to the human good, or of making a fully appropriate responsive gesture to what *ought to be* true in respect of our own lives, our religious experiences, the human species, and the universe, even when it is very much in doubt whether it will be true.

Sermons are supposed to end with uplift, even if they began with admonishment. Perhaps reflection on what all these points have to say about the promise of a new or renewed ethics of religion will be sufficient to make for uplift among philosophers – and also for stimulation and provocation! If so, don’t thank me. We have been working with Swinburne. Thank him instead.\footnote{Here I would also like to thank, for their help with this paper, Michael Bergmann, Jeff Brower, Paul Draper, Dan Howard-Snyder, and Trent Dougherty.}