

## **Religious beliefs and philosophical views: A qualitative study**

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### **Abstract**

Philosophy of religion is often regarded as a philosophical discipline in which irrelevant influences, such as upbringing and education, play a pernicious role. This paper presents results of a qualitative survey among academic philosophers of religion to examine the role of such factors in their work. In light of these findings, I address two questions: an empirical one (whether philosophers of religion are influenced by irrelevant factors in forming their philosophical attitudes) and an epistemological one (whether the influence of irrelevant factors on our philosophical views should worry us). My answer to the first question is a definite yes, my answer to the second, a tentative yes.

### **1. Introduction**

Philosophers value rational belief-formation, in particular, if it concerns their philosophical views. Authors such as Descartes (1641 [1992]) and al-Ghazālī (1100 [1952]) thought it was possible to cast off the preconceptions they grew up with. Descartes likened the beliefs an adult has acquired since childhood to apples one can cast out of a basket one by one, to critically examine which ones are rotten and which ones are sound. Al-Ghazālī wrote in his autobiographical defense of Sufi mysticism that

he started questioning the beliefs he acquired through his parents the moment he realized their pervasive influence in how religious views are formed:

... as I drew near the age of adolescence the bonds of mere authority (*taqlīd*) ceased to hold me and inherited beliefs lost their grip upon me, for I saw that Christian youths always grew up to be Christians, Jewish youths to be Jews and Muslim youths to be Muslims (al-Ghazālī, ca. 1100 [1952], 21).

Al-Ghazālī and Descartes assumed that mere reflective awareness of the role of irrelevant influences in one's religious beliefs is enough to counteract their distorting influence. Yet there is an increasing recognition that philosophical viewpoints and arguments are embedded within a broader cognitive and socio-cultural context, and that one cannot simply cast off the beliefs one has acquired as a result of this context.

This has become especially clear with the development of experimental philosophy, a philosophical method that aims to shed light on philosophical intuitions and background assumptions using empirical means. One branch of experimental philosophy has focused on intuitions (the so-called "intuitional program", Sytsma and Livengood 2016). The intuitional program has uncovered substantial variations in intuitions about knowledge, beliefs, moral responsibility, and free will, depending on factors such as culture (Machery et al. 2004, Machery et al. 2017), and perhaps also—but more contentiously—gender (Buckwalter and Stich 2014, but see Adleberg et al. 2015).

Experimental philosophical studies have put pressure on the tacitly accepted view that philosophical positions are solely arrived at through careful reflection and argument. For example, Schwitzgebel and Cushman's (2012, 2015) experiments on framing effects in trolley scenarios demonstrate that philosophers are not immune to contextual factors when they make philosophical judgments. In these experiments, philosophy PhDs and MAs, non-philosophy PhDs and MAs, and people without PhD or MA degree, were presented with a series of trolley scenarios involving a personal harming action (pushing

a man off a footbridge to stop a train that would otherwise kill five people) and scenarios involving no personal contact (flipping a switch to divert a trolley from a track that has five people on it to just one person). Participants were then asked to what extent they endorsed the doctrine of double effect (whether using one person's death as a means of saving others is morally better, worse, or the same as killing one person as a side effect of saving others) and whether harming people in a personal, face-to-face way is morally better, worse, or the same as harming someone at a distance (the personal principle). Philosophers were less likely to endorse the doctrine of double effect and the personal principle if the push scenario was presented prior to the switch scenario. They did so even when they were encouraged to reflect on this task, and in spite of the fact that the doctrine of double effect can hardly have been new to them.

There is thus increasing evidence that philosophers are subject to non-rational factors in their work. Several authors have argued that philosophy of religion is particularly vulnerable to the pernicious influence of factors such as personal beliefs and upbringing, and emotional investment. For example, Draper and Nichols (2013) contend that philosophy of religion, more than other philosophical disciplines, is affected by cognitive bias and group influence. Levine (2000) diagnoses analytic philosophy of religion with a lack of vitality and seriousness in its treatment of topics, notably the problem of evil: if philosophers of religion weren't already convinced that God exists, they would not accept or formulate the rather slipshod solutions to the problem of evil. The worry these authors have is that philosophy of religion is a thinly veiled form of apologetics, where the conclusions philosophers draw are already accepted in advance.

A related concern is that philosophy of religion may be intellectually impoverished, reflecting the beliefs of its practitioners (primarily, Christian theists and a minority of scientific naturalists), rather than a much richer palette of religious views that remain unanalyzed. Most analytic philosophers work in an environment where Christian theism and scientific naturalism are the two main metaphysical views on offer, which may explain why these are the only ones that have been subject to systematic philosophical

scrutiny. Alternative positions such as pantheism, deism, or ietism are rarely mentioned (Schellenberg 2015), let alone thick theological views as can be found, for instance, in Hinduism or Mormonism. Next to this, philosophy of religion may be too narrowly focused on the rationality of theistic beliefs at the expense of other questions (Schilbrack 2014). This focus on rationality might be motivated by a defensive attitude in some philosophers of religion to desecularize academic philosophy, and in others (of a naturalistic inclination) to restore it to its former secularized state (e.g., Smith 2001).

Recent studies suggest a non-trivial role of such contextual factors in shaping the views of philosophers of religion. For example, philosophy of religion has disproportionately many theists compared to other philosophical disciplines (see e.g., Bourget and Chalmers 2014, see also subsection 4.2 for how the present survey compares to these findings). Philosophers of religion are influenced by their religious beliefs in their evaluation of religious arguments, with theists reacting more positively to arguments that are in favor of God's existence (Tobia 2016) and atheists evaluating arguments against the existence of God more positively (De Cruz and De Smedt 2016).

These findings indicate a correlation between irrelevant influences and philosophical views, but do not as such demonstrate causation. Qualitative data that directly look at the role of contextual factors in philosophy of religion can shed light on how factors such as upbringing, personal experience, and emotional attachment shape philosophical views. This, in turn, can help us to tackle a broader normative question, which has received attention in the recent epistemological literature: is the role of such factors in shaping philosophical views rationally permissible? This paper presents a qualitative survey with philosophers of religion to help answer two questions:

*Empirical question* To what extent are philosophers of religion influenced by non-philosophical factors, such as upbringing, personal experience, and emotional attachment, in forming their philosophical attitudes?

*Epistemological question* Is the role of such influences in philosophy of religion rationally

permissible?

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2 I examine how irrelevant factors might shape views in the philosophy of religion. Section 3 discusses the methodology of the qualitative survey; section 4 provides a detailed analysis of its findings. In section 5, I assess concerns that philosophers of religion might be influenced by personal religious beliefs and upbringing. I argue that some of these worries are exaggerated, but that others present a serious epistemic challenge. I address the broader question of whether irrelevant influences on philosophical practice might interfere with our ability to rationally maintain philosophical beliefs.

## **2. Irrelevant Influences on Philosophical Practice**

Epistemologists debate to what extent evidence should determine what we could rationally believe. Typically, when a subject *S* believes that *p* she does so on the basis of justifying reasons, such as arguments or evidence for *p*, and also as a result of other (non-justifying) reasons, such as wanting *p* to be true. Broader causal factors also play a role, for example, *S* may believe that *p* because she was raised in a culture where belief that *p* is prevalent. An often-discussed example comes from Cohen (2000, 16–18), who mused that the majority of Oxford graduate students of his generation accept the analytic/synthetic distinction, whereas most Harvard students tend to reject it. On the face of it, it seems problematic that one's acceptance or rejection of this philosophical thesis is dependent on the graduate school one happened to attend. For the purposes of this paper, I will denote non-justifying reasons and broader causal factors as irrelevant factors (IFs). These are defined by Vavova (2018, 136) as follows:

An irrelevant influence (factor) for me with respect to my belief that *p* is one that (a) has influenced my belief that *p* and (b) does not bear on the truth of *p*.

Should philosophers be worried about the role of IFs in their work? This question relates to the permissivism/uniqueness debate in epistemology. According to proponents of uniqueness, a total body of evidence permits only one rational doxastic attitude: for a given proposition  $p$ , “there is just one rationally permissible doxastic attitude one can take, given a particular body of evidence” (White 2014, 312). Uniqueness is a strong thesis; it is stronger than evidentialism, which says that  $S$  is *justified* (not necessarily required) to take a doxastic attitude to  $p$  iff taking that attitude is epistemically fitting, given her total evidence (Ballantyne and Coffman 2012). White (2014) has argued that cases where IFs play a large role in belief formation are akin to ingesting a pill that randomly leads to a belief that  $p$  nor *not- $p$* , or swallowing a pill that would randomly lower your credence that  $p$  to .1 or increase it to .7. The randomness of such pill-popping cases, White thinks, is not dissimilar to accidental factors outside of our own control, such as the religious background of our parents.

By contrast, permissivists (e.g., Schoenfield 2014, Vavova 2018) argue that there is some latitude when we form our beliefs and credences. In some cases, we can rationally respond to a given body of evidence in more than one way, coming from a variety of starting points, and perhaps also use different epistemic principles to arrive at our reasoning. Proponents of permissivism offer both intuitive and formal considerations for their position. Intuitively, it seems obvious that there are many instances where people rationally disagree, such as scientists coming to divergent conclusions based on their differing evaluations of sources of evidence. To dismiss such disagreements as unreasonable, or to deem the scientists’ conclusions irrational because of background factors beyond their control, seems implausible. Formally, many theories of rationality (e.g., coherentism, subjective Bayesianism) require that permissivism is true (Schoenfield 2014).

However, the claim that it is *sometimes* permissible to have more than one rational response to a given body of evidence does not mean that this would *always* be the case. Indeed, as Schoenfield (2014) argues, there are many situations where finding out that

one has been subject to IFs when forming the belief that  $p$  is a proper cause to lower one's confidence in the credence that  $p$ . For example, suppose a voter was targeted by a tailored political campaign (based on her FaceBook likes, posts, and private messages suggesting she is anxious and xenophobic) with fake news suggesting that Muslim immigrants are swamping the country. After days of seeing such misleading news articles and ads, the voter comes to the belief that this is indeed the case. When she finds out that she was the target of a tailored campaign, it seems commendable for her to doubt her belief that Muslim immigrants are swamping the country, and she would probably do well to double-check the news sites and other alleged sources of information she saw. While there are a few claims in the literature that higher-order evidence is irrelevant when evaluating first-order evidence (e.g., Kelly 2005), most authors argue that not every attitude formed as a result of IFs is rational (e.g., Kelly 2014, Horowitz 2014).

Permissivism is thus a general claim that it is sometimes permissible to have divergent rational responses, but fleshing out the specifics of when the evidence permits multiple rational attitudes has been tricky. If IFs were like White's (2014) pill-popping cases, it would be difficult to maintain our beliefs formed as a result of IFs in the face of knowledge about their origins. For one thing, a pill-induced belief (if such a belief can exist) is highly isolated, because ingesting the pill is a single event quite distinct from our other actions. By contrast, religious and political beliefs are the result of a rich tapestry of IFs such as the religious beliefs of one's parents and friends. Moreover, they are closely connected to other beliefs. Some authors (e.g., Simpson 2017, Vavova 2018) have attempted to outline general principles that might help us distinguish situations where permissivism is plausible from situations where we should be genuinely worried about the role of IFs in our belief formation. Simpson (2017), for instance, thinks that one can be a permissivist about a given question  $Q$  if the agents involved disagree about  $Q$  because they have different cognitive abilities and apply different standards. In this

paper, I adopt a moderately permissivist attitude<sup>1</sup>, i.e., I hold that there is often more than one way to rationally respond to a given body of evidence, but that not all IFs are equally epistemically benign.

The role of IFs may be prominent in philosophical domains that intersect with opinions laypeople commonly hold and express in everyday life, such as ethics, political philosophy (see Cohen 2000, for a discussion of this), and philosophy of religion. I will concentrate on philosophy of religion as it has recently been criticized for its perceived lack of impartiality and neutrality.

### **3. Methodology**

To address the empirical question, I have used an open, anonymized survey that was exclusively aimed at academic philosophers of religion (i.e., at least at the graduate student level, working in a university context)<sup>2</sup>. The survey was structured as a series of open and multiple-choice questions, as follows:

#### *Open questions*

1. How would you describe your current professional position, including your function in

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<sup>1</sup> There is disagreement about what would constitute a moderate degree of permissivism. According to White (2014), strong permissivism means that different people could, in some cases, believe  $p$  or  $not-p$  based on the same body of evidence, whereas moderate permissivism means that they can have different degrees of confidence that  $p$  is true. Horowitz (2014) and Kelly (2014) see moderate permissivism as the view that rational responses can be situated within a certain range. Other forms of moderate permissivism (e.g., Vavova, 2018) focus on the sources of IFs rather than how people respond in the face of IFs and evidence. I will adopt a source-permissivist position in section 5.

<sup>2</sup> A detailed examination of the role of qualitative research in philosophy lies outside of the scope of this paper. For a thorough overview of the prospects of qualitative studies in experimental philosophy, see Andow (2016, 1229), who says about qualitative surveys, “The most straightforward way of gathering qualitative data would be via surveys which incorporate open response questions.” The present study utilizes this method.



the department (e.g., assistant professor), the type of school where you are working (e.g., a small liberal arts college, a research-intensive department, a regional teaching-oriented state school)? Is the school faith-based?

2. What are your primary areas of interest within philosophy?

3. Can you tell something about the factors that contributed to your specializing in philosophy of religion?

4. How would you describe the reactions of others (e.g., your advisor, your colleagues) when you considered to specialize in philosophy of religion?<sup>3</sup>

5. How would you describe your personal religious beliefs, or lack thereof?

6. Do you consider yourself to be a member of one or more religious denominations or secular organizations with ideological content? If so, which one(s)?

7. Did your religious beliefs change over time, especially in the time since you were a philosopher? Could you describe this change (if applicable)?

8. How would you describe the relationship between your personal religious beliefs, or lack thereof, and your work in philosophy of religion?

9. (Optional) Are there any additional anecdotes or personal observations that you think are relevant for this study?

*Multiple choice questions for demographic data*

What is your age (in years)?

What is your gender (male/female/other)?

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<sup>3</sup> In the framework of this paper, the responses to this question were not analyzed.

How many years have elapsed since you received your PhD? (I am still a graduate student/less than 1 year/1-5 years/6-10 years/11-20 years/more than 20 years/I am not a PhD in philosophy and not a graduate student).

In what country do you work? (Dropdown list of countries)

As can be seen in this survey, I explicitly ask participants to reflect on the irrelevant influences that have shaped their philosophical thinking. Thus, the survey relies on self-report, which has limitations that have been discussed in detail in the psychological literature. The most prominent of these are:

(1) Inability to identify some of the IFs: given that experimental philosophers are uncovering IFs that philosophers were previously unaware of, which play a role in their evaluation of philosophical scenarios (e.g., ordering effects, framing effects, cultural differences in intuitions), it is likely that my participants did not identify all the IFs that might possibly impact their work.

(2) Socially desirable responding: this is the tendency of participants to present a favorable image of themselves. It may distort the results of both qualitative and quantitative studies, on a variety of subjects such as charitable donation, dietary habits, and exercising (van de Mortel 2008). Likewise, even though this survey was anonymous, philosophers may have responded to it in such a way that it enhanced their image. Given that philosophers like to think of themselves as reasoners who are mainly guided by rational argument and inference, this might lead respondents to minimize the role of IFs in their work.

From (1) and (2) we can predict that the IFs discussed in the present survey are likely an underestimation of the actual extent to which philosophers of religion are influenced by IFs in their work. Recently, more quantitative approaches (e.g., Tobia 2016, De Cruz and De Smedt 2016) have attempted to reveal unconscious bias in the evaluation of philosophical arguments for the existence of God. While such studies are better at avoiding social desirability responding and can also potentially uncover biases that

participants are not consciously aware of, they are typically narrower in the kinds of IFs that are being explored (in the studies mentioned, theistic belief). Due to (2) that philosophers would overestimate the role of IFs in their work. Therefore, the survey is useful for identifying a range of IFs that philosophers of religion experience in their work, even though it might not accurately portray the extent to which philosophers of religion are influenced by IFs (which is more likely to be underreported than over reported), it is

Given that my emphasis will be on identifying this range of IFs, and given that the survey is qualitative, the results will not in detail explore inferential statistics or possible significant correlations (with a few motivated exceptions, as can be seen in the next section). The reason for this is that the true range of IFs is likely even wider, and the extent to which they operate probably more pervasive. These limitations of the survey, as well as its exploratory character, need to be kept in mind when evaluating the results.

Participants were invited through a philosophy mailing list (Philos-L) and widely read philosophy blogs (Prosblogion—now continued—and Feminist Philosophers). The invitation clearly stated that the survey was exclusively aimed at professional philosophers of religion (the multiple-choice survey question on how many years had elapsed post-PhD was used to exclude people who are not professional philosophers. Graduate students were included, but people who were neither graduate students nor PhD holders were excluded). Participants received an open questionnaire of nine questions, which they could fill in without upper or lower word limit; they could choose to leave questions unanswered. Typed responses were collected directly using Qualtrics survey software.

Two coders coded the answers to questions 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8 using coding schemes I developed for this study (section 4 provides details on the instructions coders received). Coders were postgraduate students at the University of Oxford, one was completing a BPhil philosophy, the other was a graduate student in theology. They received a training session on pilot responses that were provided to the open questions to make sure they understood the coding scheme. To preserve anonymity of the respondents, coders

received a version of the survey that was stripped of all the responses to multiple-choice questions (i.e., they had no information about the respondents' gender, age, or country of residence). Given that the coding schemes were quite complex, Cohen's kappa, a measure of inter-rater agreement, was moderate  $\kappa = .78$  for question 3,  $.82$  for question 5,  $.739$  for question 7, and  $.791$  for question 8. Disagreements were resolved through in-person discussion. Due to the exploratory and qualitative nature of this study, the focus will be on the reporting of qualitative data rather than statistical analysis.

As philosophy of religion is a relatively small field, insiders might be able to guess the identity of some respondents. To reduce this risk of identification, I report at most one response per participant (participants were informed about this). I did not edit responses, except for obvious typographic errors.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Respondents**

150 philosophers of religion participated in the survey. 134 participants completed all questions (that is, all questions from 1 to 8, as question 9 was clearly marked optional), 5 respondents completed all but one or two of the questions, and 11 answered only a few questions. My analysis includes the surveys that were completed or nearly completed (with nearly completed I mean that one or two of the open questions were not answered; this does not include the optional question 9),  $N = 139$ . 83% of the respondents were male; the remaining 17% were female (no respondent indicated another gender). This sample is thus more skewed toward men than the gender distribution in philosophy, which has about 20-25% women in the UK and the US<sup>4</sup>. In

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<sup>4</sup> Data from US doctoral granting departments in 2015 suggest about 23.14% of tenure track or tenured faculty members are female;

philosophy of religion, the gender distribution is likely lower than the discipline average, with informal counts of membership of the Society for Christian Philosophers and attendance to philosophy of religion conferences suggesting about 10% are women (see Van Dyke, 2015, for discussion of the causes and potential remedies). The mean age in the sample was 43 years (SD = 13.6). Most participants were from the USA (47%), the UK (27%), and Canada (5%).

Respondents were working in a wide variety of institutions, for example, faith-based small liberal arts colleges in the United States, large research-oriented universities in Germany, research-intensive institutions (Russell Group) in the United Kingdom, and two-year teaching-focused community colleges in the United States. For question 1 (Is the school faith-based?), 30% of respondents reported working in faith-based institutions. Some of these colleges were mainly faith schools in name, e.g., “[my school is] officially faith-based but it’s hard to tell in practice—most students outside our faculty don’t seem to know or care”, “The university is religiously oriented, but does not discriminate in hiring or admissions on the basis of religion.”

#### **4.2 The religious beliefs of philosophers of religion**

Responses to question 5 “How would you describe your personal religious beliefs, or lack thereof?” were coded into the following categories: (1) *Christian theist*, for respondents who explicitly identify as Christian or member of a Christian denomination, (2) *Other theist*, for anyone who explicitly mentions a non-Christian monotheistic religion, such as Judaism or Islam, (3) *Other religious believer*, e.g., polytheist, (4) *Unspecified religious believer*, someone who says they are religious but do not specify the religion, (5) *Atheist*, someone who says they are an atheist, or reject any form of supernaturalism, (6) *Agnostic*, (7) *It’s complicated/other*, anyone who does not fit in the above categories. Figure 1 shows a summary of the results with the number of participants in each category in N (categories 3 and 7 are merged to make the results

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[http://web.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/doctoral\\_2004.html](http://web.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/doctoral_2004.html). In the UK, the percentage of female permanent post holders stands at about 24% (Beebee and Saul 2011)

more readable).

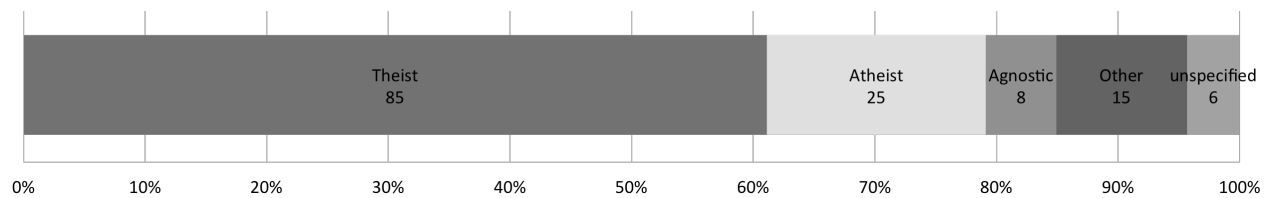


Figure 1: Religious beliefs of participants in the sample (in N).

In line with earlier surveys that examined the religious beliefs of philosophers of religion (Bourget and Chalmers 2014), a majority of respondents ( $N = 85$ , 61.1%) were theists. The vast majority of these were Christian theists ( $N = 80$ , 57.6%). Comparing the present findings with earlier surveys (see table 1 for a summary), there is an association between being a philosopher of religion and being a theist. But, as we will see further on in this paper, this correlation does not show what the direction of causation might be. There might be multiple causal pathways to explain the result. For example, it could be that a religious believer has more personal investment in philosophical arguments about the supernatural, just like someone who likes or engages in sports is more likely to find the philosophy of sport relevant (see De Cruz and De Smedt 2016).

Looking more into the respondents who called themselves Christian theist, respondents tend to self-identify as traditional or orthodox, e.g., “fairly conservative”, “devout, Orthodox, practicing open Christian.” Some explicitly endorsed the Nicene Creed: “I am committed to the central claims of the Christian tradition, captured in the Nicene Creed”, “I affirm the Apostle’s creed and the Nicene Creed. Beyond that, while I have opinions, I regard things as pretty unsettled and tentative.” Moreover, a majority of Christians in the sample identified with specific denominations or movements, for instance: “Committed Christian (Eastern Orthodox, specifically),” “tortured but enthusiastic Roman Catholic”, “I’m a relatively theologically conservative Evangelical Christian”, “orthodox Anglican ... a traditionally minded Christian”, “I do not currently attend an Anglican or Episcopal church, but I still identify with the worldwide Anglican

Communion”. Non-Christian theists were decidedly in the minority: only one Muslim and four Jewish participants completed the survey. These results are in line with the perception that the majority of philosophers of religion are Christian theists (e.g., Smith 2001), and that most of them are fairly traditional.

Survey	Percentage of theists in Philosophy of religion	Percentage of theists not in philosophy of religion	Total sample size	Number of philosophers of religion in the sample	Effect Size (Cramer’s V)
Bourget and Chalmers 2014	72.3%	11.6%	931	47	.38
De Cruz and De Smedt 2016	73.1%	23.9%	802	271	.474
De Cruz 2017	60.5%	15%	518	119	.455
Present survey	61.1%	NA (this survey is only focused on philosophers of religion)	139	139	NA

Table 1: Summary of the association between theism and philosophy of religion as area of specialization as found in previous surveys and the present survey. All  $p$ -values are  $<.001$ . The present survey has no  $p$ -value or effect size calculated because there is no contrasting group of non-philosophers of religion for comparison.

Next to Christian theists, the most frequent self-identification was atheist (N = 25, 18%). For example,

I am an atheist (although I was raised Protestant Christian). I am not a rabid or evangelical atheist (I try to avoid having the “convert’s zeal”); I merely disbelieve in God’s existence. — male associate professor at an international branch campus of a large, research-oriented US university.

5.8% (N = 8) respondents were agnostic, for example:

I am agnostic, I am afraid. I put this that way, because I think that agnosticism is perhaps a most fair stance to take (we do not know whether God exists or not, and we are unable to prove that he does or does not, so this is the most intellectually fair option), but, altogether, it somehow seems to me insufficient (like a kind of ideological minimalism, which can easily transfer into intellectual laziness). — female graduate student, Polish small liberal arts college.

10.8% (N = 15) participants had beliefs that fall outside of traditional theism, atheism, or agnosticism (coded in the categories 3 and 7). These participants frequently voiced conflicting beliefs and doubts, for instance:

Struggled to carve out a conceptual space for myself as a spiritual person, without having any typically “religious” beliefs. I believe in a God, and in my relationship to God as the source of value and meaning in my life. However, I doubt the veracity of almost all tenets of the Christian tradition I was raised in, and which dominates my department. — male graduate student, faith-based institution, US.

Some of these non-orthodox beliefs included panentheism, pantheism, and polytheism, for instance:

Indeterminate polytheism (there is an indeterminate number of gods in the



actual world, whose properties/attributes and functions we don't know.)  
— male assistant professor, Turkey.

I suppose I am a philosophical panentheist. I don't belong to any organized religious tradition, but I did have a religious experience when I was in my teens that convinced me of the truth of some kind of minimal super- or extra-naturalist picture of the world. I think that what underlies the entirety of the universe is divine, and that it is not exhausted by what is in the natural world, and that it is purposive. — male graduate student, US.

The remainder either described themselves generically as “religious believer” or simply “religious” without any further specification (N = 3), or declined to provide any religious affiliation (N = 3).

### **4.3 Motivations for Specializing in Philosophy of Religion**

Why did respondents choose to specialize in philosophy of religion (question 3, “Can you tell something about the factors that contributed to your specializing in philosophy of religion”)? To code responses, coders used the following categories: (1) *Religious upbringing*, (e.g., Christian parents) that kindled the respondents interest in the topic, (2) *Religious identity or experience* (e.g., a personal connection or affiliation to a religious denomination), (3) *Proselytism, witness, apologetics*: the wish to propagate particular religious or areligious views, (4) *Philosophical interest*, finding religious questions interesting from a primarily philosophical perspective, for instance, wanting to know whether theism is true, whether the existence of God can be proved, connection to other areas of philosophy such as metaphysics or ethics, (5) respondents found *Religion a culturally, historically, or sociologically interesting phenomenon*, (6) *Education*, including educational background (e.g., theology undergraduate), an inspiring professor or lecture series, (7) *Other*. Coders could select multiple categories when appropriate.

The most frequent response was religious identity or experience (36%, N = 50), followed

by philosophical interest (33.1%, N = 46), education (20.1%, N = 28), and interest in religion as a culturally, historically, or sociologically interesting phenomenon (14.4%, N = 20). Upbringing and childhood experiences were mentioned by 15 participants (10.8%). In spite of the widespread perception of philosophy of religion as apologetics (even by some respondents in this survey, see below), 7.2% (N = 10) mentioned witness, proselytism, or apologetics as a motivation to specialize in philosophy of religion. 7.9% of participants (N = 11) mentioned reasons for specializing in philosophy of religion that coders could not fit in the other groups. Results are summarized in figure 2.

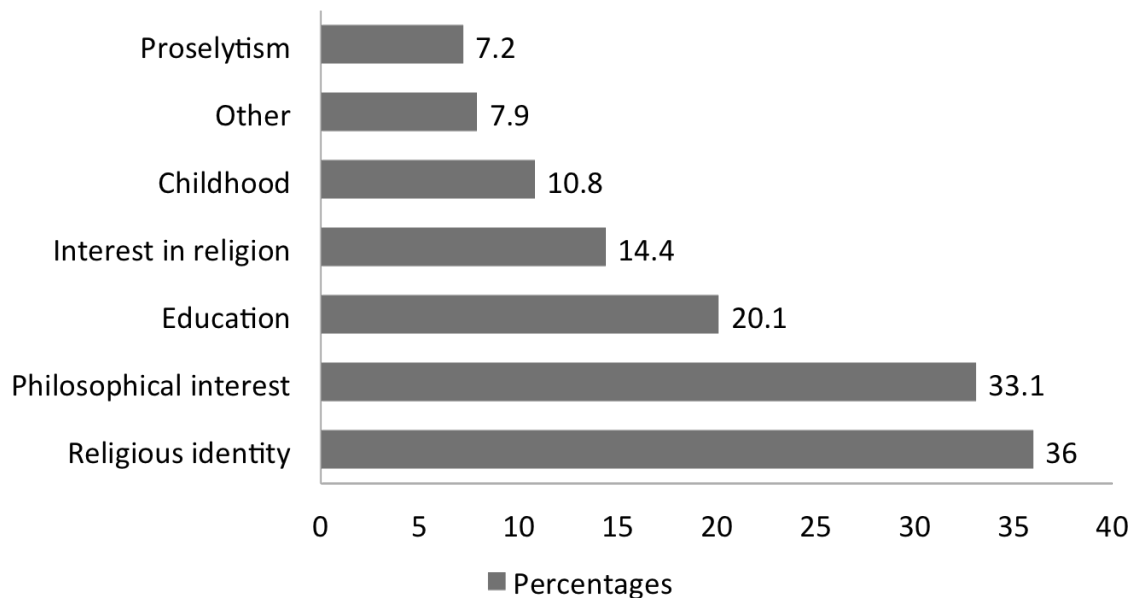


Figure 2: Motivations for specializing in philosophy of religion, in percentage (total over 100% as several participants offered more than one reason).

Looking in more detail at the responses to this open question, the emerging theme from respondents who answered upbringing, identity or both (i.e., 1 and/or 2) is that to them, philosophy of religion is a form of faith seeking understanding. When combining upbringing and religious identity as explicit motivators for engaging in philosophy of religion, 43.9% of respondents mentioned either or both of these factors:

I am a catholic, and philosophy of religion helps me in deepening my faith

by way of—paradoxically—putting the faith itself into question and even criticizing it. — male assistant professor, public university, Italy.

I'm a cerebral religious person and thinking carefully about my faith is a plus not a negative. I particularly enjoy working on the philosophical aspects of moral and religious diversity. Perhaps I am getting a better understanding of other faiths and denominations when I do this. — female full professor, research-oriented university, UK.

I was raised Catholic and have a strong respect for that tradition. This respect has led me to be interested in other traditions as well. At the same time, as I have studied philosophy, I have been intrigued by arguments for atheism. My parents were deeply religious and intellectually engaged with their faith; this has surely had an influence on me. — male associate professor, secular small liberal arts college, US.

Some atheist philosophers of religion were also motivated by upbringing and questions of their religious identity:

When I was a child I was a very committed believer and participant in Christianity. I gradually lost my faith, and the finishing element was a section on philosophy of religion when I took an introductory philosophy course in my first year at university. The shock was huge and (believe it or not), I was somewhat suicidal: I felt I no longer had any meaning in my life. I think, ever since then, I have been trying to understand what happened to me, and wondering whether I really needed to abandon my faith. I also find philosophy of religion intellectually fascinating. — female full professor, research-intensive university, country not disclosed.

Many respondents reported an interest in the philosophical ideas that are explored in philosophy of religion (33.1%), for instance, "I wanted to find out whether any general religious claims about reality like "God exists" are true or false." Some respondents

thought philosophy of religion was also a good field to specialize in for pragmatic reasons:

I've always been interested in the philosophy of religion but have specialised in it for a number of reasons. The contemporary debates tend to be on broader (metaphysical) problems than those in metaphysics, which tend to get very technical, and it sometimes seems as though the debate has strayed too far from the original question. The quality of work in the philosophy of religion tends to be lower than that in metaphysics, so there are more obvious things to say in the debates. Also, as an atheist, I feel I can engage with the arguments and positions from an objective position. — female graduate student, research-intensive university, UK.

Few of the respondents were explicitly motivated by proselytism, witness, or apologetics (7.2%):

My religious commitment helps to motivate some of the work I do (part of which involves defending and explicating Christian doctrine). — male assistant professor, research-oriented university, Canada.

I was and am a Christian. I believed that philosophy could provide tools for giving much-needed arguments for the existence of God and for Christian doctrines, which I would publish. — male emeritus professor, research university, UK.

The respondents who gave this motivation (N = 10) were all Christian theists, which means that 12.5% of Christian theists in this sample aver that they are driven by proselytism (the actual percentage might well be higher, but it is interesting that there is a minority of respondents who recognize this as an explicit motivator).

Several respondents noted the cultural, historical, or sociological dimensions of religion as a motivating factor for engaging in their research (14.4%). More atheists (16% of

atheists) than theists (9.6% of theists) were drawn to philosophy of religion for this reason:

Even though I do not believe in any religion or God(s), I do know that religion is an essential part of our culture. I am interested in the phenomenology of religious belief simply because it has been so important in shaping our society, and in particular art/literature/etc., and even people who are not religious do live in a society that is importantly religious in many ways. — female graduate student, research-intensive department, UK.

20.1% of respondents mentioned undergraduate education, inspirational professors, scholars whose work they read during their education, and other education-related reasons for specializing in philosophy of religion, for instance this respondent mentions both educational reasons and philosophical interests:

I grew up in the Christian school system, so I knew my way around religion, despite growing more and more secular as the years went by. I was (and still am) very interested in medieval philosophy, which is what led me to questions in philosophy of religion. Since then, I have spent a year in a very old, German theological faculty, which awakened interest in figures like Schleiermacher and Otto, and my interests have now turned to religious experience and philosophical accounts of faith and secularism. — female postdoctoral research fellow, public university, Germany.

#### **4.4 Change in Religious Belief and Philosophical Practice**

Coders coded the responses to question 7, “Did your religious beliefs change over time, especially in the time since you were a philosopher? Could you describe this change (if applicable)?” using the following categories: (1) *Little or no change*, (2) *More grounding or sophistication of beliefs*, e.g., believing something on the basis of arguments that the respondent held unreflectively before, (3) *Tempering of beliefs*: participants have

become less dogmatic or less entrenched in their beliefs, without giving up those beliefs, (4) *Change from one religious view to another*, (5) *From religious belief to nonbelief or agnosticism*, (6) *From agnosticism or atheism to religious belief*, (7) *Other*: any pattern that does not fit 1–6.

Although the coding scheme was fairly complex to be able to categorize a wide variety of observed changes, the most common coding was *Other* with 23.7% of respondents (N = 33). 18% (N = 25) responded with little or no change. 16.5% (N = 23) felt their religious views had become more grounded and/or sophisticated as a result of their engagement with philosophy of religion. About the same number, 15.8% (N = 22) reported a tempering of religious beliefs (including atheism) to less extreme positions. Only 3.6% (N = 5) changed from one religious view/affiliation to another as a direct result of working in philosophy of religion. 12.2% (N = 17) went from religious belief to nonbelief, often as undergraduates, when encountering philosophical objections to theism. By contrast, 9.4% (N = 13) went from agnosticism or atheism to religious belief. Of the current atheists in the sample (N = 25), 7 are former religious believers, of the current agnostics (N = 8), 5 are former religious believers. This amounts to 33% of both atheists and agnostics being former religious believers. By contrast, of the current theists (N = 85) in the sample, only 11 (12.9%) were former atheists and agnostics. This difference is statistically significant, Fisher's exact test, two-tailed (N = 118),  $p < 0.01$ . Of the theists who converted to atheism, several stated that they had held unreflective religious beliefs before they studied philosophy. They subsequently began to question and abandon them:

I was a theist when I began university. It was during reading Hume's Dialogues in my second year that I began the road to atheism. I believed that Hume successfully undermined every rational reason I had for my personal belief in God ... I have to admit that I initially felt very confused, lost, ashamed and angry when I realized that I no longer could count myself as a believer. But, at the same time, I had an overriding curiosity to

understand how it was that I became such an ardent believer to begin with.  
— male research associate, public university, UK.

For one respondent, his growing disenchantment with arguments for theism was the final push for him to become an atheist:

I was a moderate Christian entering college ... I recall specifically the straw that broke the camel's back—that made me finally admit that I was an atheist. I was reading the arguments in a book called [redacted]. The theist in the debate was [redacted], and his arguments were so bad and he so obviously willfully ignored the arguments of his opponent that I finally said "I can't be on this side anymore"... This is not what convinced me that atheism is true—I was already convinced of that—but this is what made it okay in my eyes to finally admit that I was an atheist. If I truly cared about reason, rationality and truth, I could not self-identify as a theist anymore.  
— male associate professor, liberal arts college, US.

An atheist who converted to theism after exposure to philosophical arguments wrote:

In the beginning of my studies in philosophy of religion, I was an atheist (at least in the sense of lacking belief in God). I investigated many many arguments for and against the existence of God. I discovered that my initial impression of "the" arguments was overly simplistic ... In the end (or the next beginning), the arguments for God seemed to win out, and so I began to lean toward belief in God. As I've progressed further in philosophy, I seemed to find many reasons to think God exists, and the reasons against God seemed less persuasive. Of course, I'm aware of the problem of polarization, and so I try to keep testing various arguments and listening to those who see things differently ... rechecking the arguments. — male assistant professor, research-oriented university, US.

Many respondents (20.8%) provided a complex history of their beliefs over time:

I went from agnosticism to atheism and back again for a time, experienced a brief conversion to a broad theism about ten years in, and more recently settled on a non-naturalistic atheism. — male full professor, small liberal arts college, no country provided.

Some participants expressed more grounding and/or sophistication of their religious beliefs as their work in philosophy of religion progressed, e.g., “I grew in understanding of the things I believed”, “I have become more historically grounded and sophisticated in my beliefs, as well as having better epistemological support for my beliefs.”

Some philosophers noted a tempering in more extreme atheist or religious views as a result of their exposure to philosophy; often this was the mere fact of being exposed to other views:

I was raised in a very conservative, Protestant evangelical home, and I attended a high school and a college that fit well into this tradition. In graduate school I realized for the first time what it would be like (in the Nagelian sense) to have a purely secular mindset ... This precipitated a crisis of faith that lasted about three years. Ultimately I returned to Christian faith but in a significantly changed way ... Attitudinally I would say I emerged with a freer mindset—a greater willingness to question received doctrine, and less worry about having the “right” theology—than I went in with. — male associate professor, comprehensive state university, US.

#### **4.5 The Relationship between Religious Beliefs and Philosophical Practice**

How do participants see the relationship between their religious beliefs and commitments and their philosophical work (question 8: “How would you describe the relationship between your personal religious beliefs, or lack thereof, and your work in philosophy of religion”)? The answers were coded as (1) *Intimate relationship*, (2) *Looser relationship*, (3) *No relationship*, (4) *Religion takes precedence over philosophy*, (5) *Philosophy takes precedence over religion*, and (6) *Other*. The largest group (33.1%, N =



46) saw the relationship as intimate:

The two inform each other very closely. I hold philosophical views in large part because I find them to be Biblical and I interpret the Bible through the lens of philosophy of religion. For me, the two do not and should not come apart. — female adjunct professor, middle-sized university, US.

10.1% (N = 14) described a looser relationship:

I do not think that I am interested in religion because I am an atheist. Rather, it is fascinating to me that anyone should be anything but an atheist. In addition, I think it vital that we understand the impact of religion upon society, both in its positive and its negative aspects. — male professor, private secular university, Poland.

For 20 respondents (14.4%), religious beliefs are the most important, and their philosophical work is ancillary to it:

My philosophy falls under the umbrella of my religion, particularly my reading of the Bible. If philosophy led to some conclusion contrary to the plain reading of the Scripture, I would 'redo my sums,' so to speak. — male assistant professor, Christian liberal arts college, US.

A smaller group of participants, 6.5% (N = 9) has a "philosophy first" view, where philosophy has the final word:

My philosophical convictions crowd out any vestiges of religious ones. — female full professor, secular university, US.

11.5% (N = 16) claimed there was little or no relationship between their personal beliefs and their philosophical work:

There's a presupposition here I reject. My beliefs have little to do with my

religious practices, and my work in philosophy of religion isn't about what I believe. It is about defending various conservative theological stances, but it is a deep and important question whether I believe the things I defend. I am committed to them, though. — male distinguished professor, research-intensive faith-based university, US.

The remaining 34 respondents (24.4%) had a relationship that was not easily categorized. I will quote two examples to give a flavor of the complicated relationships participants mentioned:

I think this relationship is complex. It is certainly there. Anyone who claims their research interests are not related to their personal narratives is either lying or living the sort of soul-stultifying existence that does not become the life of the mind. What the relationship is exactly is hard for me to discern. At times, I am exploring or even just playing with parts of the conceptual landscape that happen to have something to do with God or a religious worldview. At other times, I feel I am combating noxious poisons that threaten truths of essential importance. At other times, I think I am trying to explain myself to myself or am even complaining to God in an academic venue. — male assistant professor, small liberal arts college, US.

I would say that my personal religious beliefs partly *\*motivate\** my work and even *\*influence\** it, but they do not dictate it. A recurring motif in my philosophical thinking and writing is rejection of (or at least a *\*wariness about\**) naturalistic reductionism and methodological skepticism. These are not core religious doctrines, of course, but they make sense in the light of my religious commitments, and they help in turn to make sense of those religious commitments as well. And they have brought application in philosophy generally – male full professor, small liberal arts college, US.

#### 4.6 How Philosophers of Religion View their Area of Specialization

Many respondents spontaneously offered criticisms of their discipline for question 9 (“Are there any additional anecdotes or personal observations that you think are relevant for this study?”). While most of these were atheists or agnostics, some theists were also critical of philosophy of religion. Criticisms were mainly directed at the apologetic nature of philosophy of religion, its perceived lack of real-world relevance, and its lack of attention for traditions outside of Christianity. Here is a selection:

Philosophy of religion is too much focused on issues of what is true and what is false, from a doctrinal standpoint, and my latest thinking is that such issues aren’t primary. — male distinguished philosopher of religion, US.

The ‘rigour’ and analytical ‘skills’ in this branch of philosophy has kept its (Christian) philosophers isolated and distant from the social, ethical and political changes taking place in other branches of analytic philosophy. Insularity has allowed the field to protect and to encourage narrow-mindedness and overconfidence in the thinking of the best known (and best funded) philosophers of religion in the world. — female full professor, secular university, UK.

I would not be the first to say that philosophy of religion, especially “analytic theology,” is simply not philosophy. It’s Christian apologetics, and it often is poorer philosophically because of that. A Christian bias pervades everything, and, once one becomes a non-Christian, the irrational faith-based assumptions and intuitions start to stand out. Philosophy of religion is increasingly out of touch with the actual practice of religion in Europe and the Americas. It needs to be revitalized by making contact with the rich religious pluralism now evolving in Europe and the Americas. We need to see articles by analytic philosophers on Mormonism, Santeria, Umbanda,

Wicca, goddess religion, religious naturalism, new pantheistic movements, and on and on. — male full professor, state university, US.

Philosophy of religion is a field well-suited to contribute helpful resources for clarifying confusion as well as disagreement at areas of cross-cultural contact, but the field may be hindered in this effort so long as it employs models of religiosity that have been derived from philosophical debates within Western Christianity. — male visiting assistant professor, small liberal arts college, China.

#### **4.7 Summary of the Findings: Addressing the Empirical Question**

With this survey, I investigated the empirical question of the extent to which IFs, such as upbringing and education, shape views in the philosophy of religion. I show that philosophers of religion are indeed influenced by such factors, and that these have an impact on their philosophical work. The answer to the empirical question is therefore yes, philosophers of religion are influenced by IFs in forming their philosophical attitudes. For instance, 43.9% of respondents explicitly gave their religious upbringing and/or identity as a motivation for engaging in philosophy of religion. Also, only 11.5% of participants said there was no relationship between their personal religious beliefs and their work in philosophy of religion. As I argued in section 3, due to socially desirable responding, and lack of awareness of some biases and influences respondents likely did not list all the IFs exhaustively, so the role of IFs might be even stronger than this study suggests.

In the sample, significantly more atheists who engage in philosophy of religion were former theists than the reverse. This asymmetry can be explained by the fact that philosophy of religion attracts people who find religion important, and such people are more likely to have a religious background or upbringing. The theme of faith seeking understanding that emerged in this survey supports this hypothesis. Those who come into contact with philosophy of religion as long-time atheists are less likely to be

interested in the subject matter. The high percentage of Christian theists in this sample (57.6%), several of whom explicitly endorse orthodox beliefs, such as expressed in the Nicene Creed, demonstrates that this group is highly represented in philosophy of religion, especially as compared to philosophy in general. The low representation of theists outside of Christianity (3.6%), agnostics (5.8%), and the relatively small number of respondents who fall outside of the classical theism, atheism, or agnostic divide (10.8%), is reflected in the published work in philosophy of religion, which is mostly concerned with Christian theism, generic theism, or atheism.

The view that philosophy of religion is primarily a form of apologetics—voiced by some participants in the survey—is not confirmed in this study, since only 7.2% of respondents (12.5% of Christians in the sample) provide proselytism, witness, or apologetics as a reason to engage in philosophy of religion. Some of the reasons philosophers of religion chose to specialize in this discipline are probably similar to the reasons other philosophers have for their specializations: 33.1% expressed an interest in the philosophical ideas that philosophy of religion explores, and 20.1% mentioned education as a source of their enthusiasm for the subject.

## **5. Does the Role of Irrelevant Factors Challenge Views in Philosophy of Religion?**

This paper started out with two questions: the empirical question (whether philosophy of religion is influenced by IFs) and the epistemological question (whether the influence of IFs on philosophical views should worry us). In the previous section, I addressed the empirical question. In this section, I will concentrate on the epistemological question. As we have seen, most moderate permissivists (e.g., Vavova 2018) do not think that all IFs are benign, and acknowledge that in some cases we do need to revise our beliefs, or lower our confidence that  $p$  when we become aware that it was formed as a result of an IF. By contrast, proponents of uniqueness (e.g., White 2014) think that IFs are akin to ingesting a pill that causes one to form a belief at random. Unfortunately, there is no

generally-agreed principled account of which IFs are innocuous and which are pernicious. Schoenfield (2014) recommends to look at the extent to which the beliefs formed through IFs are in tension with one's other beliefs. According to her, beliefs formed early in life (for instance, through upbringing) are less likely to be in tension with one's other beliefs, and thus we are permitted to maintain such beliefs. One unfortunate consequence of this view is that one can hold patently false and irrational beliefs, as long as they form a coherent belief system and were acquired early in life, e.g., someone who was raised with scientologist or young earth creationist views could maintain them rationally, as long as she refuses to incorporate scientific views in tension with her prior beliefs. This makes the rationality of beliefs overtly dependent on the chronological order in which they are acquired. Kelly (2014) holds a more stringent position, arguing that rational responses are situated within a certain range. For instance, it would be irrational to deny anthropogenic causes of climate change given the evidence, but there is still a range of rational responses about the severity of effects of climate change, such as the projected rise in sea levels. One problem with the range view<sup>5</sup> is that it does not make any claims about which IFs should worry us, but rather concentrates on the responses that are reasonable in the light of IFs. For instance, one could be subject to a clearly bad IF, such as White's (2014) hypothetical pill-popping cases, which would still be fine if the resulting belief fell within an acceptable range. Vavova (2018, 145) proposes that we only have to revise our belief that  $p$  when we have independent reasons to assume that IFs make our belief that  $p$  unreliable. She formulates the *Good Independent Reason Principle* (GIRP). If recognizing such IFs gives you "good independent reason to think that you are mistaken with respect to  $p$ , you must revise your confidence in  $p$  accordingly—insofar as you can." Given that this heuristic still allows quite a lot of latitude, and since IFs are pervasive in the formation of the philosophical views of philosophers of religion, this heuristic seems useful for evaluating IFs in this field.

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<sup>5</sup> For another criticism, see Horowitz (2014).

We have so far seen that the answer to the empirical question is an unequivocal yes. Should this influence of IFs on the work of philosophers of religion be a cause for concern? From the armchair, some authors have argued that philosophy of religion is subject to IFs that are harmful for the discipline. Here follow their main objections:

*Self-selection:* IFs, such as Christian upbringing or personal religious identity, have motivated a majority of philosophers of religion to specialize in it. There is thus an unhealthy self-selection going on in philosophy of religion (Draper & Nichols, 2013).

*Prejudice:* IFs, such as atheist and Christian beliefs, make it hard for philosophers of religion to assess evidence and arguments in their discipline in a dispassionate manner because they have a personal stake in it (Levine 2000).

*Constraint:* the cultural background of the majority of philosophers of religion (western Christian theism or naturalism) has led them to regard Christian theism and naturalism as the default options, thus ruling out a variety of other potentially philosophically viable beliefs (Schellenberg 2015, Schilbrack 2014).

Considering *self-selection* first, as we have seen, the majority of respondents admit they are influenced by IFs, such as religious identity (e.g., being a Christian), education and upbringing, to a greater extent than by intrinsically philosophical interests—although to a minority, the latter was also a contributing factor. This leads to self-selection among philosophers of religion. Non-Christians or people with a non-Christian background lack this motivation. While this results in a relative lack of diversity in the profession, does it provide individual philosophers of religion with reasons to revise their confidence in the philosophical views they hold, using GIRP? Suppose a Christian philosopher of religion, upon reading this study realizes he is also one of these Christians who became interested in the subject because of his religious upbringing. This fact, by itself, does not give him independent reasons to think his philosophical views are unreliable, unless it turns out that Christians would be less good at engaging in philosophical work. One unfortunate side-effect of self-selection is that one may end up in an echo-chamber. If

philosophers of religion are mainly surrounded by people who think like them, they are lulled into a false sense of consensus, i.e., that the positions they endorse are accepted in the wider philosophical community, which is not the case<sup>6</sup>. Still, by itself self-selection does not seem to be a compelling reason to revise one's philosophical views.

*Prejudice* is a more serious charge, hinting at an unhealthy conflict of interest where philosophers of religion, whether atheist, theist, or otherwise inclined, are merely arguing for and confirming what they already believe. Confirmation bias, which lies at the basis of *prejudice*, is a prevalent phenomenon (Nickerson, 1998). When a subject *S* is already convinced that *p*, *S* will typically evaluate evidence and arguments in favor of *p* as stronger than arguments against *p*. She is disposed to devote resources to find counterarguments and evidence against data that do not fit her belief that *p*. *S*'s philosophical views would be widely different, depending on whether she was raised in a theist or atheist household, and so would have been the arguments with which she defends her philosophical views. Her way of gathering and evaluating evidence is thus dependent on an initial state in a way that seems pernicious (see Kelly, 2008, for similar concerns).

This survey suggests that *prejudice* might not be as serious a problem in the philosophy of religion as is commonly assumed. We can think of *prejudice* as a claim about how IFs color one's evaluation of philosophical evidence: it could be so pervasive that one never changes one's mind as a result of philosophical inquiry, or it could be so weak that one changes one's religious views profoundly when one comes into contact with philosophy of religion. The evidence presented here suggests that little or no change is relatively rare, but that conversions (from atheism or agnosticism to theism, from theism to agnosticism or atheism, or from one religion, denomination, or movement to another) are not very common either, together about a quarter of respondents. The majority of participants experienced some degree of tempering, deepening, further grounding, or a more complex change in their views as a result of engagement with philosophy of

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<sup>6</sup> Thank you to David Christensen for alerting me to this possibility.



religion. Given that lack of change was rare (18% saw little or no change in their outlooks), prejudice is less of a problem in philosophy of religion than is commonly thought.

*Constraint* looks at the range of positions philosophers of religion typically defend, and states that they have been unduly constrained in their consideration of alternative positions (e.g., polytheism, Taoism) as a result of their cultural background. There is relatively little work in non-Christian theist philosophy which may be due to the fact that very few philosophers of religion are, for instance, Buddhist or neo-Pagan. With a mainly western Christian or post-Christian background, philosophers of religion tend to see a generic form of theism, Christian theism (exploring concepts like the Trinity or the Incarnation), and scientific naturalism as the default options. Thick non-Christian beliefs, such as Mormon eternal progression or Jain *jiva* (the essence of a living being that gets reincarnated through different life forms), are ignored. Yet they seem as worthy of philosophical exploration as thick Christian views, which have received ample attention in the philosophical literature (see e.g., the cottage industry on the Latin and social Trinity that has sprung up in recent years).

Does the realization that philosophers of religion have left many options unexplored provide them with a reason for skepticism about their current philosophical beliefs? Although *constraint* looks superficially similar to *self-selection*, it has considerably more skeptical force. For *self-selection*, a philosopher of religion is asked to consider whether her motivations might give her any reasons for doubting the beliefs she holds. For *constraint*, she has to consider that a vast conceptual space of religious views is left philosophically unexplored because of haphazard factors in the upbringing and religious backgrounds of philosophers of religion. The realization that IFs constrain the range of viable options does provide a reason to reconsider one's confidence in one's philosophical views, given that one did not consider a much wider range of possible views from the outset. To take an analogy, suppose you have a book with challenging puzzles. For one puzzle, you are given three possible answers. You are told that there is

only one solution, and asked to provide good arguments for why the one you choose is correct. You carefully consider the options, and eventually provide arguments in favor of one of them. But then you notice that some pages were torn out of the book. Upon browsing an undamaged copy, it turns out that instead of only three answers, there are 30 possible answers. It seems rational to reduce your confidence in the position you have argued for, even though you were even-handed in your (limited) choice. Without considering the other solutions, your confidence seems misguided. Likewise, if a philosopher of religion comes to a carefully argued scientific naturalism, thin monotheism, or Christian theism, her confidence should be shaken in the face of the role of IFs in leading her and other philosophers of religion to consider only these as serious options. *Constraint* has a negative epistemic impact on work in philosophy of religion.

## **6. Conclusion**

Do irrelevant influences play a role in philosophy, and if so, should this worry us? I have examined these questions through a qualitative study among academic philosophers of religion. Philosophy of religion is a field where we can expect a large impact of IFs, given how intertwined religious views (including atheism and agnosticism) are with everyday life. I examined the empirical question, viz. to what extent philosophers of religion are influenced by factors such as personal motivation and upbringing in their choice of their area of specialization, and in their philosophical work. This qualitative survey indicates that philosophers of religion are at least to some extent aware of IFs and that personal religious life and philosophical positions are intertwined.

For the epistemological question of whether these factors negatively influence philosophy of religion, I have taken a moderately permissivist viewpoint—at least in some cases, we can rationally respond to a given body of evidence while being subject to IFs and thereby come to different conclusions. However, if we have reasons to think

IFs make our beliefs unreliable, we should re-evaluate these beliefs. I have outlined three worries for philosophers of religion: the role of self-selection, prejudice, and constraint in the cultural backgrounds of its practitioners. Although self-selection and prejudice are frequently flagged as problems for philosophy of religion, they do not require revision of opinions. I have shown that constraint plays a negative epistemic role in philosophy of religion, and that realizing how it limits the scope of philosophical investigation does require a re-evaluation of views in philosophy of religion.

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