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## **God for All Time: From Theism to Ultimism**

### 1. Introduction

Western philosophy, in its conversations about religion, has been much exercised by the idea of a personal God: an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good creator of any world there may be. Of course other religious ideas, as well as other versions of this idea, have surfaced from time to time. But the God of traditional theism – the God-Who-is-a-Personal-Agent – has dominated. In this respect the recent rebirth of philosophy of religion within analytical philosophy is nothing new. It's just an old conversation starting up again. If we are talking about the omnipotent agent God in new ways, and with new analytical tools, it's still *the omnipotent agent God* we're talking about. Hume, Leibniz, Descartes, Augustine, Aristotle, Plato, Anaxagoras – none of these figures would have much difficulty discerning what's going on should he suddenly be transported into the twenty-first century and reanimated in the midst of one of our seminars. (He'd immediately join us in arguing about whether God was responsible!)

Now there are complex historical reasons for this continuity of interest in a personal God. The millennia-long influences of western religious traditions, and especially of Christianity, would obviously have to be cited, as would the way in which the idea of an omnipotent agent has lent itself to explanation in metaphysics. Both factors are much in evidence in western philosophy, as we've experienced it so far, and appear as well in the work of leading instigators of the contemporary "revival" in philosophy of religion such as Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga. Some of the historical reasons involved may go much further back. According to the youthful field of study known as cognitive science of religion, we are primed by evolution for

agent-centered religion. Humans, so we are told, are built in such a way that religious agent concepts exert a special appeal (See Barrett 2004, Boyer 2001, Tremplin 2006). This recent work waits to be further confirmed, but it certainly enjoys a strong initial plausibility.

So is the upshot that the agent God, the personal God, has been overemphasized philosophically, at least in the west? Certainly there are some philosophers – and maybe we can tell by extrapolation from the above why they are not in the majority – who are calling for increased attention to alternative conceptions of the Divine. Because of an ambiguity in the word ‘God’ that I shall be emphasizing, which allows it to range more narrowly or more broadly, sometimes the phrase used is ‘alternative conceptions of God.’ Often what these people have in mind, or so it appears, is that we should be paying more attention to detailed pantheistic, panentheistic, perhaps process theistic views that have been knocked to one side in the rush to embrace or attack traditional theism. We need to be talking to Spinoza, Hegel, and Whitehead as well as to Descartes, Leibniz, and Hume.

Others, influenced by the great diversity of the world’s religious life, sensitive to the many *conflicting* details in religious concepts, have argued that we should focus on developing a concept of the Divine which puts it quite beyond any of our detailed representations, including that of traditional theism, and indeed altogether beyond human thought. Maybe we in the west need to be speaking to Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, and al-Arabi too, not to mention all the non-western philosophers and religious thinkers who have taught the idea of an ineffable or transcategorical Divine. One proposal in particular has captured the attention of contemporary analytical philosophers, and that is John Hick’s well known work on the ‘Real.’ (The religious application of the term ‘transcategorical’ originates, I believe, with him.)

The directions of thought I have just distinguished are, in my view, important and worth pursuing. Let many flowers bloom, so say I. But I have my own proposal, and a novel science-informed rationale for endorsing it. As I see it, the first option mentioned above which advocates exploring pantheism, panentheism, and similar ideas in detail, while excellent as far as it goes, in an important sense doesn't go *far enough*. While it is ready to speak of alternative conceptions of God, thus referring more broadly to a Divine reality and not to the theistic personal God or any other detailed center of religious life to which the word 'God' has been applied, it leaves the broader framework idea and the reasons for emphasizing it obscure. The general as opposed to specific idea of God – and thus, in that sense, an *alternative* idea of God – is ironically not itself clarified. As for the second, Hickian approach: while admirably motivated, in an important sense it goes *too far*. From detailed conceptions we move outward to a level of vagueness so deep that literally nothing can be said about the Divine. Though it might have been otherwise had the flight from detail been terminated earlier, and the reasons for increased generality correctly identified, no framework is afforded for continuing religious investigation.

I myself, of course, have the happy Goldilocks position that goes just far enough! Well, that is for argument to decide. After sketching a general conception in connection with which we might more self-consciously use the word 'God,' I shall give *my* arguments, paying special attention to the ways in which, in the new context for discussion I hope to open up, traditional theism will, perforce, recede to the secondary status it should always have had.

## 2. Ultimism

With concepts come propositions or claims – claims to the effect that those concepts are exemplified. And so, as we have already noted, with the idea of a personal God comes the claim

of traditional theism (or theism for short). In part because everything I'm doing here amounts to a debate with theism, I shall generally be speaking of my depiction of the alternative, more general way of thinking about God in terms of the proposition claiming *it* is realized. This proposition I have called *ultimism* (Schellenberg 2005). Another reason for highlighting the proposition ultimism is that although the thought of a more general or basic religious claim has long been, as it were, in the air, that claim has oddly never been given a name. Well, now it has a name.

Or, at least, a name has been given to one way of developing the ultimate proposition, the way I shall defend as offering a framework appropriate for religious investigation far into the future. On this view, the basic claim religion in the twenty-first century should be seen as calling us to consider is that there is a reality *ultimate in three ways*: metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically. Immediately we leave behind the vague gesturing of much talk about ultimacy in religious studies. But what exactly does *my* talk imply?

To see, it may be useful first to step back a bit and say something about another notion: that of a *transcendent* reality. The reality at the heart of many religious lives past and present is conceived as transcending – as being something more than or deeper than or greater than – mundane reality, where by 'mundane reality' or 'the mundane realm' I mean (to quote part of an earlier discussion of mine that remains relevant) "those aspects of human life and its environment to which just any mature human always has quick and natural cognitive and experiential access, what might (in two senses) be called the *common* elements of human life, which all who eat, drink, sleep, play, think, relate, and so on, will explicitly know and regularly encounter" (Schellenberg 2005, p. 11). Now the transcendent reality of religion is certainly something 'more' than mundane in factual terms, but if that's all there is to be said about it, it might very well turn out to be something discoverable by science and completely at home in a secular

picture of the world. As so many examples suggest, what the religious have in mind is also something ‘more’ in *value* and in what we might term *importance*, by which I mean its value for us – for human life. The first, purely factual sort of transcendence we may call metaphysical transcendence, the second is axiological transcendence, and the third soteriological transcendence (I use the term ‘soteriological’ advisedly, recognizing that it is often employed in contexts narrower than mine). It is by embracing these three together rather than the first alone, so I suggest, that religiousness is instantiated.

Let’s explain a bit further these three kinds of transcendence. To say that something is *metaphysically transcendent* is to say that its existence is a fact distinct from any mundane fact and in some way a more fundamental fact about reality than any mundane fact (more fundamental in a broadly causal and explanatorily relevant sense). To say that something is *axiologically transcendent* is to say that its intrinsic value – its splendour, its excellence – exceeds that of anything found in mundane reality alone. And to say that something is *soteriologically transcendent* is to say that being rightly related to it will make for more well-being, fulfilment, wholeness, and the like for creatures than can be attained at the mundane level alone (this leaves open the possibility that spiritual well-being might in some way be attainable *through* mundane things). The different realities believed by practitioners to be at the heart of Jewish, Christian, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Taoist practice certainly appear to be regarded as ‘more’ in all three of these ways (and the same goes for other forms of religion as different from one another as North American aboriginal and ancient Greek); they are regarded as transcendent not just metaphysically, but also axiologically and soteriologically. I call this complex property *triple transcendence*.<sup>i</sup>

Of course, as already suggested, the various religious traditions of the world typically

don't let the matter rest here – they have much more to say about how the 'more' of transcendence is to be construed. Details are added to the basic content of triple transcendence. And so we hear of the nonpersonal world-soul Brahman, or of the Buddha-nature, or of a personal God or gods (perhaps many gods or a God that is Three-in-One). The religious traditions differ in the sort of detail and also in how much detail they offer us. But they also differ along another dimension, which I shall be emphasizing, and this is a dimension I call *strength*. A strong concept of the Divine says or implies that the Divine is not just transcendent; it is ultimate, and ultimate in all three of the ways we have distinguished: metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically. A strong concept, in other words, takes us from triple transcendence to *triple ultimacy*, in effect endorsing the content of ultimism.<sup>ii</sup>

Before explaining a little further how the three kinds of ultimacy are to be conceived, let me record my impression that the word 'God' is typically used in connection with views elaborating them. I venture to surmise that it is an apparent connection to ultimacy that elicits use of the word 'God' and that the perhaps inchoate tendency of, for example, traditional theists and monistic Hindus to regard the reality central to their religious practices as ultimate is a necessary condition of their inclination to call it God. Perhaps lesser realities, even if triply transcendent, would not be seen as deserving the label. But, if so, then it is natural indeed to say of the bare concept of triple ultimacy, *without* elaboration, that what it refers to is appropriately called God. We can, in other words, use the word 'God' both more narrowly and more broadly. (As noted earlier, the possibility of doing so is indicated even by the expression 'alternative conceptions of God.')

In any case, with my emphasis in this paper on bare or simple or generic or unelaborated ultimism instead of on theism or any other detailed religious claim, I can be seen as recommending that we tear our eyes away from the word's more specific contexts of usage and

think about how it might more consciously and explicitly – and more *often* – be applied quite generally in this way.

Let's look more closely now at what ultimism should be seen as holding to be the case (and when using the word in this way I shall always mean unelaborated ultimism). What is metaphysical ultimacy? axiological ultimacy? soteriological ultimacy? Here I am torn between a desire to work, in each case, toward a clear notion through analysis and a sense of the need to leave room for various analyses; perhaps only if we recognize the latter need can ultimism be for us a proper *framework* proposition, stimulating much creative religious exploration that we may have occasion to value even millennia hence. Striving for a proper balance, let me offer a few remarks.

Metaphysical ultimacy, in line with what was said earlier about metaphysical transcendence, I see as involving the property of fundamentally determining what exists and why it exists as it does, a property that for those with interests in what and why will therefore be relevant *explanatorily*: something is metaphysically ultimate in the sense embraced by ultimism just in case its existence is the ultimate or most fundamental fact about the nature of things, in terms of which any other fact about what things exist and how they exist would have to be explained in a correct and comprehensive account of things. Plato, in speaking of the form of the Good, and metaphysically naturalistic scientists in speaking of the elusive Theory of Everything, seem both to have in mind something bearing metaphysical ultimacy in this sense. Religious people whose conception of the Divine is metaphysically ultimistic have it in mind too.

What else do they have in mind, at the metaphysical level? Well, I suspect this varies, and we should allow it to vary – remaining open to exploring many possibilities. As soon as we say more we are already elaborating the basic idea of metaphysical ultimacy at the heart of ultimism.

It might, for example, seem appealing to follow up on some interesting suggestions about the idea of an ultimate reality made by Robert Nozick (1989, p. 200). Nozick distinguishes several senses of this notion; the labels are mine but the descriptions are his: compositional (“the ground-floor stuff out of which everything is composed”), explanatory (“the fundamental explanatory level which explains all current happenings”), generative (“the factor out of which everything else originated”), and teleological (“the goal toward which everything develops”). The second of these seems a weaker version of what I’ve already set out in the previous paragraph, and entailed by it. The others – including the fourth (which also suggests a move *beyond* the metaphysical) – could all be explored as indicating some of the *ways* in which metaphysical ultimacy in my minimal sense might be realized. Perhaps they are even compatible; there are conceivable religious elaborations of metaphysical ultimacy that argue as much. (Perhaps an ‘emanationist’ model that pictured the embodiment of the Divine by the rest of reality deepened and enriched over time would allow for generative ultimacy to also be compositional and teleological.)

But ultimism, as I understand it, entails none of these things. Given such elaborations, the possibility of conflict among *alternative* conceptions of the metaphysical dimension of God or the Divine, and between such conceptions and metaphysical naturalism, already emerges. A naturalism which holds that the universe is infinite in past time, for example, will say there is no generative ultimate. And theism will say there is no compositional ultimate, since you and I and the Person Who Is God aren’t composed of the same ‘stuff.’ Ultimism, as I am presenting it, avoids such potential conflicts; it entails a metaphysical component at once broad enough for many within religion and without to endorse it and precise enough to provide a framework for further inquiry.

What about axiological ultimacy? Here again we have an intensification – a totalizing or



ultimizing – of what was said earlier about the relevant aspect of transcendence. If axiological transcendence is excellence and splendor surpassing anything in mundane reality, then axiological ultimacy is completely *unsurpassable* splendor and excellence. Here the famous Anselmian idea – which ironically is linked only to the broader sense of ‘God’ not exclusive to theism – might profitably be contemplated: the idea of something-than-which-a-greater cannot-be-thought. This is axiological ultimacy, as I have built it into ultimism. Something is axiologically ultimate just in case it is ultimate in value – the greatest possible reality.

Some might be tempted to assume that I have in mind, when speaking of axiological ultimacy, some claim to the effect that the existence of the Ultimate is the foundation for ethics or value theory or some such thing. Perhaps the friends of Euthyphro should rejoice! But no, this is not the case. Of course, there are conceivable elaborations of axiological ultimacy that run in this direction, but nothing of the sort is entailed by it. The Divine could be unsurpassably great even if the ‘foundations’ for ethics and value theory, if such there be, allowed for a fully secular appreciation – for example, by consisting of necessary truths concerning value.

Notice here that we are talking not only about something that exceeds in intrinsic value anything else in the *actual* world. By saying it is *unsurpassable* I mean to imply that it *cannot* be surpassed, in any possible world. This seems required in order to take account of ultimizing or totalizing attitudes as we find them in religion, such as attitudes of worship, which recognize no limit of any kind to the greatness of the Divine. Out of the corner of my mind, as it were, I am also glancing at the future and thinking of the sort of framework proposition we might profitably pass along to the generations that will follow us (more on this in the next section).

Notice, also, that by moving on from metaphysical to axiological ultimacy in the construction of ultimism, we move past anything that might *nonreligiously* be endorsed. Some

naturalists may demur, thinking that Nature or the most explanatorily basic fact about nature might be unsurpassably great. But in making this observation, I suggest, they are in effect observing a way of stepping *from* naturalism (at least from any naturalism defined in relation to twenty-first century empirical science) into a form of pantheism – which is one way in which the religious idea of ultimism might be elaborated.

Adding soteriological ultimacy to our picture of the Divine ensconces us all the more firmly in religious territory. For the ultimist, it's not just some greater good than can be found at the mundane level per se that is attainable in relation to the Ultimate, but the very greatest good that can be embodied in creaturely living – our *deepest* good (thus we are still talking about value, but not – at least not more than indirectly – about the intrinsic greatness of the Divine). Earlier I characterized this as a good *for us*. This expression invites discussion of the extension of 'us' – what is included in its range? Over time we have seen some movement, in the religious traditions of the world, toward a universal concern, and today one often hears religious people speaking of the good of the whole world as something they are actively seeking. Should we build such a universal attainability of wholeness or fulfilment or salvation into our understanding of soteriological ultimacy?

Here we need to distinguish two levels of 'attainable good.' First, soteriological ultimacy might be thought to involve a good attainable *by the religious practitioner*. Religion in the personal sense of religiousness that most concerns me involves a *practice*. And part of what makes a conception of the Ultimate religious, so it seems, is a certain view as to how this reality is related to such a practice. The short answer: soteriologically. On this view, anyone who takes up religious practice is thereby put in a position to attain his or her deepest good.

Having noted this, we can also move to a second level, discussing how widely beneficial

states of affairs will – at least eventually – be distributed in the world, if ultimism is true. Certainly it is natural to imagine the value of the Ultimate communicated *through* religious practitioners, and perhaps also in many other ways, to all the world. It is tempting to say that nothing less than a consummation of things in which all the world tastes the goodness of the Divine could be worthy of ultimism. But I am content to leave open various possible interpretations, by altogether avoiding in my definition a reference to *us*: a reality is soteriologically ultimate just in case in relation to it an ultimate good can be attained.

So we have before us my depiction of what might be called the alternative, more general concept of God – though of course the word ‘alternative’ is used here in a sense that allows many more detailed pictures of the Divine to be compatible with my own, even if they are incompatible with (and thus logically alternatives to) each other. According to ultimism’s spare vision there is a reality triply ultimate: metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically. Ultimism, as can be seen, is actually logically equivalent to a large *disjunction* of propositions – all those more detailed religious claims that entail ultimism. Theism would be thought to entail ultimism, and the same goes for various other detailed religious ideas, including pantheism as usually described. But ultimism entails none of these propositions. By claiming that ultimism is true (which claim is perhaps still more than our short evolutionary history will easily sustain), any religious believer who embraces this proposition is in one sense, perhaps the deepest, certainly the broadest, claiming that *God* exists. But she is at the same time recognizing, admitting, perhaps even exulting in the many alternative conceptions of God – *this* God – that our species may hardly yet have begun to explore.

### 3. Temporalism

And with that tantalizing thought I move from a summary of our results so far to a suggestion of new ones to be gleaned in the present section of the paper and in the one to follow. The central new idea is that there is a reason related to the scientific discovery of *deep time* that will support ‘going general’ in our thinking about God. Both in philosophy and in religion there is a striking tendency to forget our very early stage of evolutionary development as a species (and I have in mind both biological and cultural evolution). I have recently been seeking to remind us of this, and the position I am defending in doing so, which emphasizes our place in time and the importance of bending our thought accordingly, I call *temporalism*.

Temporalism tells us that the transition from human timescales involving months, years, or centuries to scientific timescales is still quite incomplete. Now it may be thought that we are actually becoming quite familiar with deep time: aren’t evolutionary studies, for example, all the rage? But what we’ve been getting used to is really just one side of the story, which concerns the deep *past*. The rest of the story concerns the deep future and where we are located between those two – between deep past and deep future. We need to notice our *place* in time, wedged between perhaps 50,000 years on one side, the short inter-glacial period in which behaviourally modern humans have arisen, and another *billion* or so on the other – life’s potential future on our planet. And we need to reflect carefully on this Great Disparity, seriously considering the changes in religiously-relevant thought and feeling that Earth may see in so much time, whether in our species or others that may follow.

These neglected scientific facts and cultural possibilities are relevant to how we should think about God. The alternative construals of a transcendent Divine reality that we’ve dug up so far, when considered in scientific perspective, will be seen to be such as may mark only a bare

beginning of religious investigation. Because of the very early stage of intelligent development that *Homo sapiens* – certainly as we know it today – is in, we have to admit that there may be many ways of adding detail to ultimism that we haven't yet conceived, perhaps including ones we are presently quite unable to conceive. Maybe it will take a great deal longer for intelligence and spiritual sensitivity to mature to the point where religious discoveries *could* be made. This state of affairs is epistemically possible, by which I mean that we have no way justifiedly to rule it out (for more on the relevant epistemological issues see Schellenberg 2013).

From the perspective temporalism opens up to us, it must seem rash and premature to pin our religious hopes on any very detailed religious proposition. For our descendants may uncover religious ideas or undergo religious experiences far more impressive than any that life on Earth has seen so far. How then should *we* think about God? In a word: generally. Our best chance at working, in this intellectually ambitious territory, with ideas possessing what I will call *temporal stability* – ideas that even more deeply enlightened descendants of ours existing in the far future, if such there should ever be, would find valuable – is to go general. While the door to truth in religion remains open, the best thing we can do, intellectually and spiritually, is to stretch our minds as far as we can along spiritual dimensions apparently already available to us. And this, I suggest, means focusing on the triple ultimacy central to ultimism – the biggest and arguably the most interesting idea that religion has yet delivered. (I, of course, am not responsible for producing this idea. It has been with us for thousands of years. All I am doing is drawing attention to it, pushing aside the weeds of thought that have obscured it from our eyes.)

Recall the disjunction to which ultimism is logically equivalent. We have no idea how big that disjunction is and whether it may not include religious disjuncts that far surpass in power and illumination any large-scale explanatory idea yet conceived by human beings. But what we

can do is *emphasize the disjunction* and work at getting a better sense of the disjuncts it may contain. Our idea of God needs to be a *framework* idea, whose extant fillings we must indeed continue to explore, as one of the approaches mentioned at the beginning of this paper would have it, but which we should regard as capable of being filled out in many new ways as well – ways that a few thousand years of stumbling around in the dark, out of the millions more that may be friendly to intelligent life on our planet, have perhaps not been sufficient to reveal.

This is the surprising perspective on God that, in my view, science supports. It is a perspective that, as I've begun to suggest, will not support the continuing dominance of theism in the philosophy of religion. But there are other troubling temporalist implications for theism to be explored, as I want now to show.

#### 4. The Evolutionary Ontological Argument

The title of this section is, I confess, a bit of a tease. I have no evolutionary proof of Anselm's idea. But I do have something like an evolutionary argument for *favouring* that ultimistic idea over the idea of theism, with which it is so often conflated. In fact, one half of the argument has already been given, for we have seen that concerns about temporal stability – the stability of our most ambitious ideas over what may be enormously long periods of cultural and genetic evolution – warrant our focusing on something very like the general idea Anselm's ontological argument sought to establish as true, and considering many ways of filling it out other than theism. But there is another concern too, which I call a concern about *spiritual authenticity*.<sup>iii</sup>

The central idea here is that in the light of ultimism, clearer than any cast by its elaborations, theism may appear less impressive than we would like an idea of the Ultimate to be. Add to this the temporalist insight that we could easily mistake an imposter for the genuine

article at so early a stage of evolutionary development, and we may find ourselves wondering whether theism *really does* entail ultimism. Its advocates would surely suppose it to do so. The evolutionary ontological argument is completed by the considerations that undermine this supposition.

The idea of a personal God is, for any sensitive human being who sees it in the light it *can* compel, with the weeds of thought that obscure the vision of many contemporary *atheists* brushed aside, a deeply affecting one. The greatest possible person would be a great thing indeed. Beginning from our own experiences of power, knowledge, and goodness and extrapolating to ultimate versions thereof, recognizing that we could never fully embrace in thought the result of doing so, noting also that there may be facets of Godly greatness compatible with those just mentioned of which we can form no conception, we may think the theistic idea of God to *be* ultimate – ultimate among religious ideas. Imagining what it would be like to grow ever deeper into knowledge by acquaintance of such a being’s nature, striving to appreciate what must be the limitless subtleties and nuances of a personal relationship with the personal God, we may be unable to imagine anything that could be better – more saving – for vulnerable finite lives like our own.

And yet.... And yet it is significant that everything I have just described falls within the parameters of the concept of a *person*, with the attributes of personhood determined by what we and the rest of our species have experienced thus far in our own very short career as persons. Could an ultimate reality be thus narrowly confined? “The concept of God,” Peter van Inwagen writes in his recent Gifford lectures, is not just “the concept of a greatest possible person.” It is “the concept of a *person* who is the greatest possible being.” (2006, p. 158). But *could* a person, with personhood understood by reference to us, be the greatest possible being? Perhaps

personhood as known by us is the thin edge of a wedge that thickens indefinitely, with the reality of the thicker parts in some way embracing strands of what we know but also transcending them to such an extent as to be quite unrecognizable by us. Perhaps, alternatively, something like Spinoza's idea is correct and mind and matter – the modes of being with which we are acquainted – are but two of an infinite number of dimensions or modes of Divinity (for more on such possibilities see Schellenberg 2007). Who can say? We are of course ready to be content with the idea of a Divine Person. With the hymn writer I may imagine that “He walks with me and He talks with me, and He tells me I am His own,” feeling that this is quite enough. But is it enough for triple ultimacy?

Especially given a temporalist perspective, there is reason to be in doubt – skeptical – as to whether it is. It could be that theism represents no more than an early attempt to fill out the Divine idea, one that in a future potentially twenty thousand times as long as our past, reflective and spiritually sensitive intelligence on our planet will surpass many times over. Now extrapolating from our experience as persons, when developing religious ideas, is of course quite natural for us – if the cognitive science of religion is right, then it is natural indeed! But it may also lead us to become obsessed with religious ideas that fall far short of what we might yet encounter in the way of religious illumination, over periods of time we can hardly conceive, through much openminded and openhearted investigation. All in all, even our best and fullest experience of personhood is a slender reed on which to hang a conception of the Ultimate.

Notice that the issue here isn't whether we should be in doubt as to whether theism is *true*. I have argued elsewhere that at least so much *is* justified by evolutionary considerations (Schellenberg 2009, 2013); but that is not my concern at the moment. The issue is whether theism offers a contender for the status of ultimacy in the first place. Unless it does so, it can



hardly hope to retain a central place in our investigations in philosophy of religion as we take the idea of religious ultimacy from the past into the future. Now, of course, one could tack on at the end of the traditional theistic proposition with its omni-attributes the following addition: “and this being is metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically ultimate.” That would quite trivially make of theism an ultimacy claim. But nothing is accomplished through such sleight of hand. For now we do find ourselves wondering whether theism is true because we wonder whether the content coming *before* the tacked-on bit entails it. Indeed, the two sorts of doubt I have distinguished now coincide.

Notice how different things must be if instead of theism we make ultimism central. Ultimism’s spiritual authenticity can hardly be challenged, since it provides the standard by which to *assess* claims as authentic, spiritually, or not. So long as this more general idea of God was left obscure, theism could stand unchallenged. But with ultimism clarified, we are able to compare the two propositions. We are able, furthermore, to see that theism should entail ultimism, if the hopes for it cherished by many philosophers of religion are well grounded. And we can see that it’s not at all clear that it does entail ultimism. Moreover, with an investigative orientation tempered by temporalism, we can see that there are good reasons, at so early a stage of evolutionary development, to beware of premature commitment to what could be misleading details and indeed to *look* for something much more general like ultimism to guide the much more thoroughgoing efforts in religious investigation that are needed.

Things should be different indeed in philosophy of religion when all of this is absorbed.

##### 5. Ultimism and ‘the Real’

I have argued that the general idea of God represented by ultimism should become central in

philosophy of religion, and that the alternative ways of filling out that idea – and in particular the one offered by theism – should be regarded as having, at best, a secondary status. On temporalist grounds we can see that the general concept should be the preferred alternative, when the question is whether to go general or specific in our thinking about God. And, having settled that, and having *clarified* the general idea, we now have a decent framework for discussing *many* alternative conceptions of God – that is to say many different ways of attempting to fill out that general picture, including any renewed attempts made by theists – as we move into the future.

How does all this relate to the *second* way of seeking to get past an overemphasis on the personal God mentioned at the beginning of this paper – the Hickian approach? If we can now see that the first approach does not go far enough, because it leaves the general idea of God and the reasons for emphasizing it unclear, can we by the same token see how the second approach, as I earlier suggested, goes too far?

I think we can, and in this final section of the paper, I want to show how. John Hick's efforts to revive a transcategorical, ineffabilist picture of the Divine in the midst of twentieth-century analytical philosophy of religion are strikingly bold and bracing. Much can be learned from Hick's work, and his sensitivity to the facts of religious diversity – which, together with a Kantian strain of thought, form the basis for his approach – is exemplary. But the Hickian concept of the 'Real,' a Divine reality that "in itself is not and cannot be humanly experienced" (Hick 1989, p. 249) and whose positive, nonformal properties we could not possibly grasp, leaves something to be desired. Though one can, as Hick points out, find examples of ineffabilist talk about the Divine in many different religious traditions, one wonders why it isn't to be regarded as being what Hick himself took incarnational language about Jesus to be in another context: "hyperbole of the heart" (Hick 1977, p. 183). That nothing can be said of the Divine,

that it merits silence alone, and so on – these are the sorts of things religious people say when stunned by the apparent *greatness* of God in certain kinds of religious experience. And this is a *positive* quality. Sure, it may be that no detailed picture religion has yet produced can do it justice, but then why not retreat to talking of such greatness alone, as does ultimism? For reasons such as this, one wonders whether Hick, in picking up the ineffability idea and running with it, hasn't gone too far. Why isn't ultimism far enough?

Notice that ultimism, unlike the concept of the 'Real', is not insensitive to real-world aspirations to gain some understanding of the Divine. Instead, it provides a framework within which we may seek to fulfil them. And most of the *positive* things that the various religious traditions of the world have wanted to say about the Divine can be investigated within its parameters: the facts of religious diversity are fully – certainly *more* fully – accommodated. Hick appears to go further than his own sensitivity to religious diversity might have been expected to take him.

Now perhaps such investigative ambitions would be shown to be completely unrealistic if Hick's application of the Kantian distinction between phenomenal and noumenal reality stood up to scrutiny. We have seen how experiences of Divine greatness and the facts of religious diversity are admirably accommodated by ultimism. But if this third reason of Hick's had any weight, we might judge that even ultimism could not literally be true.

Unfortunately the Kantian move has been powerfully criticized – for example, in Plantinga (2000). And now let me add my own criticism, grounded in temporalism. The Kantian theory, bearing such properties as precision, detail, and profundity, not to mention ambition and controversiality, is made subject to a temporalist sort of skepticism (elsewhere I have called it evolutionary skepticism: see Schellenberg 2013). Though the theory might be true, and certainly

is worth examining further, it cannot command our belief at so early a stage of philosophical investigation, with so many profound alternatives possibly waiting to be explored.

Independently of these specific considerations, we might already have wondered how there is any way to tell, given our place in time, that positive religious insights are simply closed off to us, behind a Kantian Wall, instead of waiting for us – or for species that may follow us – in the future. With a proper appreciation of deep time and in the context of thinking about cultural and biological evolution we can see that skepticism about our mental capabilities has to be a double-edged sword: we should be in doubt about many of our most ambitious results of the present, but in doubt as well about the claim that we will never do much better. To put this more positively: temporalist epistemological pessimism is united with a certain *optimism* – these two come in the same package. Not having taken account of temporalist insights, Hick offers us pessimism alone. And thus he goes too far.

The temporalist answer to Hick – and also to the traditional theist Plantinga, as we saw in the previous section, and to anyone else focused exclusively on a detailed conception of God – is one that we are only starting to appreciate. What it shows is that there is a reason for ‘going general’ in matters religious stemming from our evolutionary immaturity. We need to think about religion in a manner that allows us to be part of a trans-generational process of inquiry – a long process weaving its way through deep time that we who recognize our evolutionarily immaturity must imagine to be unfolding in order to give life and hope to our present inquiries. In this context it must, to say the least, appear short-sighted to make a detailed proposition like theism, so tied to our past and present experience, central to philosophy of religion. We don’t need a God from our time or for our time alone. We need a God for *all* time. Better than any alternative, this is what ultimism provides.

## Notes

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i. The use of the word ‘transcendence’ that is relevant here is easily conflated with another found in religion, which focuses on a qualitative feature or features of certain *elevated human experiences*. Now technically the latter could satisfy my description of triple transcendence, but usually the ‘reality’ central to religion is regarded as being more than an experience. Of course, even when this is so, the former may be closely related to the latter. Perhaps especially in a soteriological context one might be moved to speak of experiences of transcendence as *attending* a right relationship to the transcendent Divine.

ii. Of course, it may do so – and a similar observation applies to the other ideas I have mentioned, such as the idea of transcendence – without any religious person ever employing the word ‘ultimism’ or ‘ultimate.’ The religious concepts with which we operate and the words we use to speak of them, if we ever do, are distinct matters.

iii. I first gestured at these two concerns in Schellenberg 2009, chap. 1.

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