

The Evolutionary Answer to the Problem of Faith and Reason

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The problem of faith and reason, as I shall understand it here, is the problem of showing how the *religious* impulse of humanity can be fully reconciled with the *rational* one. Some, for example those held in thrall by postmodernism or scientism, may think they are solving the problem of faith and reason when they denounce one or other of these quintessentially human proclivities. But, on my understanding of the problem, they are simply refusing to admit it. Fortunately, approaches with more curiosity and tenacity can also be found in philosophy of religion. The deductive theistic proofs of Anselm or Leibniz exemplify one; Swinburne's cautious inductive and cumulative case for the existence of God another; Plantinga's critique of evidentialism and defense of theistic belief's proper basicity in circumstances of religious experience a third; John Hick's neo-Kantian religious pluralism, more irenic than theism though still experientially grounded, a fourth. But no existing answer to the problem of how to reconcile reason and religion seems to me wholly satisfactory; certainly none has won wide acceptance. Here I wish to outline a response that has not thus far been attempted, except implicitly in my recent books.¹ It will, I hope, prove worthwhile to set it out more explicitly and crisply and under a single guiding concept, so that it can be captured, as it were, at a glance, and thus more easily compared with other answers.

The answer I have in mind may be called the *evolutionary* answer (and 'evolutionary' is

¹Schellenberg, 2005, 2007, and forthcoming.

to be taken in the broadest possible sense: we will need to remember that there are various possible mechanisms of evolutionary change in religion, including but not restricted to those of biological evolution, whether natural or contrived). Perhaps the swiftest way to sense this answer's animating center is to introduce some facts about the future – more specifically, about what we might call the Great Disparity between the religious past and our possible future. So that is how I begin.

The Great Disparity

According to science, which all parties to this discussion claim to respect, planet Earth has supported life for about 3.8 billion years now. But only in the last sliver from this block of time, about 5 million years ago, did the human lineage diverge from the ape lineage. You'd have to travel almost all the way through that 5 million year period, stopping just 50,000 years short of the present, to finally meet beings both anatomically and behaviourally like us, capable of practising some form of religion.² What's more, you'd have to make it almost all the way through that 50,000 year span of time to arrive at religious movements with ripples reaching our shores: they are most noticeable during what various writers have called the 'Axial Age,' a pivotal period lasting from about 2900 to 2200 years ago, in which some of the best thinkers and thoughts of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism were hatched. And, of course, Christianity, Islam, and

²For an authoritative survey of the most recent scientific thinking about these early periods, see Wade, 2006. The behavioural changes I've alluded to are visible in the archaeological record of about 50,000 years ago, and recent genetic evidence suggests that they may have been spurred by the advent of fully articulate language – probably required for anything more than incipient religiosity.

certain other religious traditions of influence today come even later.

Now contrast all this, the human religious story of about the last 50,000 years, conspicuously heavy at our end, with the fact that, according to science, although the Sun will eventually scorch our planet, Earth may remain habitable for as long as another *billion years more*.³ Long story short: we might only be getting started.

Oh, I know: opportunities for further religious exploration could quickly be snuffed out by our own irresponsible actions or other events. Not unreasonably, many of us are concerned about the epistemic possibility – which could be realized in the near future – of such things as nuclear holocaust; an unlucky chain of disastrous events following upon human failure to manage global warming; the release of deadly genetically engineered viruses; a rain of huge asteroids, and so on. But whether taken singly or disjunctively, these things represent *only* a possibility – the factors involved are too complex and often unpredictable to allow for more than that. In any event, it would be much harder to get rid of all traces of intelligent life, or of the many creatures from which it could again evolve, than one is inclined to think. Life on Earth is nothing if not tenacious. If disasters occur but intelligent life and its precursors are not completely erased, a billion years provides a lot of time for recovery and improvement (200 times more than was required to get from the apes to us). Biologists will want us to think more generally here about the ingenuity to be witnessed in the history of natural selection. As Darwin wrote, “ordinary succession by generation has never once been broken and no cataclysm has desolated the whole world.”⁴ Note also that doomsday scenarios, with the separation of human

³As recently confirmed in Schroder and Smith, 2008.

⁴Darwin, 1985 (1859): 459

populations they may involve, are by some viewed as *facilitating* future biological evolution rather than as shutting it down.⁵ Thus it remains the case that we *might* only be getting started, more generally and also in matters religious – this is epistemically possible (by which I mean that it is neither known nor justifiedly believed to be false).

We must therefore open up to the idea of a very long future indeed, which will make the time that beings on Earth have already spent thinking and feeling religiously seem like no more than a nanosecond. Precisely because we are still immature and limited in so many ways, it is very easy for us to overlook this idea, or not really to absorb it when it is presented to us. So how can we better imagine the Great Disparity?

Here's one approach. Think of all the words in this book. Then think of all the letters making up those words. Now think of each of those letters as representing a century. Slowly turn (or imagine yourself turning) each page of the book, drawing your finger down the page, deliberately thinking of what you see on each page as a *collection of letters* and thinking of each letter on all those pages as a century. Only a handful of lines on the first page is needed to net you the five hundred centuries that religion has had so far. But even when you get to the end of the whole book, you still have a representation of only about one-tenth of the total number of centuries that may remain for intelligent life on this planet. You'd need to flip through at least another nine books of equal length to take note of the number of *letters* representing the number of *centuries* that may remain to us.

Now take things one step further. As you mentally pass over all of the letters from that tall stack of books, strewn across thousands of pages, imagining each one as a century, imagine

⁵I thank Paul Draper for reminding me of this point.

also that to each letter are attached a list of changes in intelligent life as great as have, on average, attended the past five hundred centuries, in which, as we like to think, humankind has slowly been coming into its own (that's a constraint fairly generous to the cynic, since until relatively recently, development has often been *very* slow). And mentally add and subtract imaginary accomplishments as you move your gaze over all the *millions* of centuries to come, applying everything you know about science and human ingenuity, chance and design, sifting, allowing for the fits and starts of evolution. What might we have by the end?

We might, of course, have nothing at all – that is a possibility I earlier accepted. But many other, rather more interesting results are also epistemically possible. With doomsday scenarios put in their place, as representing one possibility among others, a surge of new questions must now be experienced. What enormous changes might be effected in so much time, by processes much slower than we can readily notice (or swifter than we expect, if genetic manipulation or artificial intellectual enhancements enter the mix), as forms of life continue to adapt to their environments? Might we lose much of our propensity to violence?⁶ Might it be only if we are *able* to survive far into the future that we will develop fitness for understanding the more sensitive and subtle and profound things? Might human thought be some small part in a long story not yet written – a few paragraphs back on p. 2 or 1? And how much of those paragraphs does our present thinking represent – a few letters? What words, ultimately, will be spoken?

⁶As Wade, 2006 documents, evidence from such disciplines as archaeology, primatology, social anthropology, and – enriching all of these – genetics suggests that much of the period in which religion as we know it has developed has been *drenched* in violence.

When the sheer enormity of the disparity between our past and the possible future starts to sink in, we get a different sense of our environment, temporally, that should affect developing hominids like us in ways analogous to a startling new sense of geographical environment. Humans confronted with the possibilities of the future in this way are something like gophers poking their heads out on the prairie, after thinking their burrow the whole world. We need to get intellectually reoriented, taking this massive new fact into account.

Richard Dawkins has commented on a similar need for reorientation and reimagination specifically with respect to Darwinian processes:

Our brains are built to deal with events on radically different *timescales* from those that characterize evolutionary change. We are equipped to appreciate processes that take seconds, minutes, years or, at most, decades to complete. Darwinism is a theory of processes so slow that they take between thousands and millions of decades to complete.... It requires effort of the imagination to escape from the prison of familiar timescale.⁷

Dawkins is writing about the past here. As his popular book *The God Delusion* shows, he hasn't spent much time applying these thoughts to the future. One wonders why avowed evolutionary thinkers like Dawkins don't prod us more about the future, and, in particular, why they don't think much more about the religious *developments* that we might hope to see in another million centuries, given all that has occurred in just the last five hundred – or twenty – or one. Perhaps it would be helpful if we summoned *here* that “effort of the imagination to escape from the prison of familiar timescale” which Dawkins recommends.

⁷Dawkins, 2006: xix

A Diachronic Conception of Religion

So the first step toward an evolutionary answer to the problem of faith and reason involves acquiring a much richer imaginative grasp of just how much religious evolution may still lie ahead of us. And anyone who has taken this first step will easily be induced to take another, which is really a corollary of the first. This second step is toward what I will call a *diachronic conception of religion*, according to which religion or ‘faith’ is a propensity having many possible incarnations, a feature of human life (and perhaps other forms of life to come) that can in important ways grow and change and evolve throughout the life of species and of the planet.

Most discussion of the problem of faith and reason these days is carried out under the shadow of what I will call a *synchronic* conception, by which I mean a view that identifies religion with attitudes and/or practices of religious humans living at the present time, in the early twenty-first century (together, perhaps, with whatever from our past is presupposed thereby). This is certainly true of Swinburne, Plantinga, and Hick. Now, the synchronic conception is appropriate for some purposes. If, for example, we’re talking about religion’s influence on contemporary politics, we will necessarily have in mind a phenomenon that can be identified synchronically, by reference to what exists right now. But when considering religion within the context of the problem of faith and reason, especially after making the first step toward a broader awareness discussed in the previous section, things are otherwise. For even if all *existing* religion were seriously flawed and all *existing* religious claims false, one would intuitively want to say, in the light of that broader evolutionary awareness, that these facts provide no good reason to give up on religion – thus revealing the presence and operation of the diachronic conception. Because the intellectual results of the exercise of the religious impulse may over much future time become

greatly improved, we ought not in this context tie religion to its existing instantiations. We need, indeed, to get used to thinking about the possibility that religion may flourish even if its presently existing instantiations are eventually well covered over by the sands of history.

But precisely this possibility is often overlooked or ignored in philosophy of religion's faith and reason debate, and unnecessary difficulties and errors result. Both defenders of religion – people like Swinburne, Plantinga, and Hick – and its critics – those, like J. L. Mackie or Kai Nielsen or Daniel Dennett or Richard Dawkins, who say the problem of faith and reason cannot be solved – behave as though what exists right now in the way of religious phenomena is all the world will ever see. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, maybe Buddhism and Hinduism – this is religion, and if reason cannot be reconciled with something from this mix, then we should all give up on religion.

Ironically, we see this error even in *evolutionary* critics of religion like Dennett and Dawkins, who infer from what they see as the inadequacy of *present day* religious thinking that religion is a total failure and that it's clear sailing ahead for naturalism. Such critics have not reflected deeply enough on the implications of evolutionary thinking. Their inference is unjustified by their own evolutionary lights, and their evolutionary naturalism hoist by its own petard. Of course, if one makes the assumption that the prevailing religious 'isms' represent the only forms (or only significant forms) of religious thinking the world will ever know, then one can indeed infer, given their failure, that religion is brain-dead. Such an assumption is what the synchronic conception of religion in effect gives you. But that assumption must surely be taken away by a properly evolutionary perspective! An evolutionary perspective should sensitize us not just to developments in-the-past-leading-to-the-present but also to the possibility of a hugely

extended *future*, with vast eons left for human beings to think, perhaps much more fruitfully, about ultimate things.

The contrast between what may yet appear and the piddling few years of (deeply compromised) religion planet Earth has seen so far could hardly be more stark. It's easy for us to forget how ill-prepared our species may be for ultimate insight, what with the flashy technologies that have led us to so dominate and alter the planet. Behind all the camouflage there is still an emotional primitiveness and a considerable propensity to violence. We are not so very different in these respects from those in whom the religious impulse first began to stir, whose violent tendencies may still be inscribed in our genes. It is here, in this rather less than congenial environment, just a moment ago in evolutionary terms, that religious ideas, ideas about things ultimate in reality and value we today respectfully call 'traditional' and 'venerable,' began to emerge. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised – or regretful – at their passing. And perhaps, by the same token, we should be happy to think of religion as something that can change and grow and possibly generate many interesting new insights if and when we manage to flush some of the immaturity out of our system, and go through the evolutionary changes that, oh, say, another few million years would bring.

Interim Assessment

Let's take fuller stock now of what our first two results – the Great Disparity and a diachronic conception of religion – already permit us to conclude in respect of the faith and reason debate. As we were just noticing at the end of the previous section, those who think the problem of faith and reason need not even be addressed because of the impotence of religion are giving up on religion far too soon. And here we can also readily discern how one might respond to any

postmodern rejection of the problem, grounded in the disparagement or demotion of *reason*. The semblances of complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, diversity, and so on with which so many postmodernists – for example, Derrida⁸ – are enamoured, insofar as they are not the removable effects of intellectual confusion, may reflect nothing more than our intellectual immaturity. Indeed, just as I have insisted on a diachronic conception of religion, so we might insist on construing the enterprise of *rational inquiry* diachronically, and for the same reason. And in this context the term ‘postmodernism’ must come to appear as something of a misnomer. Certain sorts of intellectual complexity and subtlety do indeed show how difficult and challenging are some of the goals of truth and understanding that modernist thinking sets for itself, and it may be necessary to appreciate some ‘postmodern’ ideas to become properly sensitized to this fact. (Perhaps ‘postmodernism’ will end up helping to prepare us for a successful assault on modernism’s goals.) It may even be that, because of the sorts of things to which ‘postmodernism’ can sensitize us, we ought to think of certain intellectual tasks – for example, ones involving the most difficult and complex questions of cosmology or of the nature of consciousness or, yes, of religion – as tasks to be carried out over many generations, or as tasks for the species as a whole. But there is nothing here to suggest that these tasks are in some way misconceived – ones human beings should not set for themselves at all. Indeed, the deeper our appreciation for the Great Disparity, the more shortsighted and arrogant such a supposition must appear to be.

What about those – Leibniz, Swinburne, Plantinga, Hick, et al. – who take the problem of faith and reason seriously and who think that it can be solved in one or another of the ways identified at the beginning of this paper? What’s wrong with *their* solutions? Here one is inclined

⁸See Derrida, 1988

to mention the controversy that continually swirls around theistic arguments (even theists are in disagreement over the force of arguments like those of Leibniz or Swinburne); the matter of religious diversity, more specifically, of conflicting experiential claims not all of which can be true, which call theists like Plantinga to move outside their comfort zone in an effort to arbitrate the experiential dispute accurately and fairly; as well as the problem for religious experience arising from the possibility of natural explanations thereof, which reveal how the experiences on which Plantinga and also, in his own way, Hick rely could occur even if there is no Divine reality in them, and so can rationally lead to doubt as to whether they *did not*. For Hick, specifically, there are all the problems inherited from Kant: in particular, the obvious tension between wanting to say *something* about the nature of the Ultimate (a desire religion seems to express) and being able to say *nothing at all* (an inability Kant seems to insist upon).

Now, these problems, obviously, are not interesting because unfamiliar. They have all been raised before. Nor are theists like Swinburne or Plantinga or pluralists like Hick without replies to them. But what I want to point out is that such issues are all explained and put into an enticing new perspective by the evolutionary approach to faith and reason, which therefore seems poised to transcend the other approaches.

Take the controversies over theistic reasoning. These will be regarded by the evolutionary approach as symptomatic of human intellectual immaturity, especially where they seem to hang on matters that only much future investigation in philosophy and science will resolve. Such matters may include the following. (1) The propriety or otherwise of seeking an explanation for the universe. Even where God is regarded as a contingent being, it is held that because of the *kind* of contingent being God is (omnipotent, etc.) it makes no sense to speak of explaining God.

Well, perhaps something analogous will turn out to be true of the contingent universe when we know more about it. (2) The nature and role of simplicity in cosmological explanation. More philosophy of science may be needed to deal adequately with questions like this: Is a picture with God at the top preferable on grounds of simplicity because God is a simpler being than the universe, or objectionable on grounds of simplicity because we now have two kinds of being, both physical and non-physical? (3) The nature and existence of multiple universes. The ‘multiverse’ reply to design arguments is often disparaged these days as ad hoc, but who knows how it may fit into theories of the future? (4) The availability or otherwise of non-scientific but also *non-personal* explanations of the existence or order of the universe. It may feel natural to go along with Swinburne’s well-known distinction between ‘scientific’ and ‘personal’ explanation. But isn’t it curious how we overlook the fact that ‘personal’ here should really be ‘non-scientific’, and that the latter might name a large *disjunctive* category including many disjuncts *other than the personal one* that will become accessible to us only in the future, when our conceptual sophistication has been much increased?

Turn now to the problem of religious diversity. Religion in the world today is hugely diverse, but many theists (and also atheists and agnostics!) still live in something of a ‘bubble’ when it comes to acquaintance with religion. Furthermore – and here we have another testament to human immaturity – theistic religious traditions are often models of self-preoccupation, fixated on details of self-articulation and self-preservation. Within such an ethos, reinforced by emotion-heightening participation in particularized religious practice and ritual, there is not much motivation to really get to know people and ideas of other traditions. But *precisely this* is required to become justified in believing what one’s theistic religious experience suggests. (I say

that this is a necessary condition, not that it is sufficient.) For who knows what new insights may arise from careful attention to unfamiliar claims and experiences? Who knows whether our intuitions as to what is plausible and what is not will not be adjusted by serious exposure to ways of thinking and experiencing radically different from our own? And, to take things an important step further, who knows what to say *now* about *new* ways of experiencing religiously that may emerge as the future unfolds and the species matures? It's a pretty good bet that what the world has so far seen of possible religious experiences is not a representative sample. In this context to *believe* that one's present religious experiences tell the truth about the universe instead of resisting belief and taking such experiences as nudging one further along an exciting though presently inconclusive line of research, seems to have rather little to do with the philosopher's burning desire for real truth and understanding. Or so the evolutionary approach, buttressed by the Great Disparity and a diachronic conception of religion, may with some plausibility insist.

What about the matter of natural explanations for religious experience? On an evolutionary approach it will seem obvious that this cannot decisively be resolved at present, since the exploration of such explanations is still in its infancy and should be expected to reach much more sophisticated heights in times to come, with interesting results that *may* lead ever more strongly to a sense that the ultimate source of such experience is not Divine. (Suppose, for example, that scientists of the future are able to produce all kinds of religious experience at will, when otherwise they occur but sporadically, and often not in situations where, for religious reasons, they might have been expected.) It is interesting when writers – for example, William Alston⁹ – point out how *weak* is present research on related matters and how *nothing at present*

⁹See Alston, 1991: p. 233

allows for a comprehensive natural account of religious experience. This may suffice to defeat the claim that such a comprehensive account *is* available to us right now – a claim some of Alston’s less circumspect critics have been known to make. But it does nothing to refute the claim that it is epistemically possible that such an account will emerge in the future; indeed, it plays right into its hands.

Finally, we have the Hickian sense that we are doomed to know nothing at all about the nature of any Divine reality there may be. This sense, though at the other extreme from theistic confidence, will like it be regarded by the evolutionary approach as stemming from a failure to properly appreciate how great is the disparity between what we have already attained and what we may yet achieve. Any conviction about the truth of an unqualified Kantian picture is indeed shown to be quite unjustified when the future is properly taken into account. For even if our minds are *now* limited in the ways Hick emphasizes, why suppose that this must always be the case, if through a future with a hugely intricate interweaving of evolutionary factors beyond our fathoming, humans are constantly adapting to new circumstances? (Here we are easily misled by the fact that the human brain has – despite a few relevant genetic changes – been pretty much in the same stage of evolutionary development throughout the relatively short time we have so far spent seriously thinking about such things.)

In this section I have tried to provide some sense of how, given only the results of the previous two sections, a new evolutionary approach to the problem of faith and reason possessing the resources to deal with the *other* approaches (as well as with reluctance to address this problem) already begins to take shape. Of course one must expect replies from those other views. The Plantinga-style approach, for example, will (in my opinion short-sightedly, not to mention

question-beggingly) insist on the theist's right to infer from what is experientially delivered to *her* what is entailed by that, viz. that everyone *else* has got it wrong, and furthermore to hold that any approach to faith and reason, like the evolutionary approach, that is incompatible with her having got it right must be mistaken. Now, it is true that the evolutionary approach is incompatible with the other views that might be taken here. But that is surely what one might hope for from an alternative approach! If with this alternative we are able to deal with other views not simply by inferring their falsehood from what has allegedly been revealed to us but by persuasively explaining, within a scientific framework, just how they fall short, and if, in addition, we are able to show how the evolutionary approach is in various respects more sensitive than its alternatives to a number of important desiderata, including respect for the investigative imperatives which any philosopher must feel, then, so far forth, we have a powerful new contender in the philosophical debate over faith and reason.

The Crucial Distinction

“So far forth, indeed!” the critic may now be heard to say. “But an essential element is still missing. You have yet to show how the rather bleak story you’re telling leads to any possibility of rational religion *in the present*. I’m ready to accept that the future includes new religious possibilities which we ought not ignore. And I can also see the point of a diachronic conception of religion, and how such a conception may undercut some contemporary assessments of religion. But what do these realizations provide one *now* other than a basis for a kind of evolutionary religious *skepticism*, and for wishing one had been born 100,000 or 1,000,000 years later to see how things pan out? How can *we ourselves, today* get to the unequivocally positive perspective on religion you have advertised above?”

The critic is right about there being a kind of evolutionary religious skepticism latent here. But the critic is importantly wrong about that being the end of the story. As we will see, rational religion not only might evolve over eons of time, but can do so in our own lifetime, if we apply certain relevant insights carefully and correctly.

But let me first address the skepticism. If we may be only at the beginning of some important inquiry, one that could well require the efforts of many who come after us, perhaps over thousands or even millions of years, then it would be inappropriate for us to *believe* that some proposition available to us in the present represents the proper result of that inquiry. If I believe this of some proposition, I also hold it to be true, and I cannot be justified in such a state unless I am also justified in believing that the total relevant evidence supports the proposition. (If the total relevant evidence did not support it, the proposition could not be true.) And how is that rationally possible here? Believing some verdict on a profound and complex matter because I think all the important results are in, especially when the matter in question is resistant to any consensus solution today, is about as reasonable as the winner in the 100 meters at the 2008 Olympics believing that no one will ever best that performance. And in matters religious we obviously have profundity, complexity, and controversy *in excelcis*.¹⁰

The skepticism we have discovered in this connection is a distinctive sort of skepticism – that’s why I call it *evolutionary* skepticism. Notice that while it is opposed to the blithe confidence about complex matters we may have felt in the absence of respect for the future, and so can be experienced as initially jarring or disillusioning, the vulnerability of the propositions it

¹⁰Skepticism of the sort in question here is defended much more fully in Schellenberg, 2007.

places in question is quite compatible with the intellectual safety of others. There is much that needs to be said here, but let me just point out that these latter would have to include (1) claims we need to accept, if only as practical postulates, in order to pursue inquiry at all, for example, that truth and understanding are attainable by beings like us with our cognitive machinery; (2) certain obvious and immediate and unavoidably believed outputs of that machinery, such as (a) necessary truths clearly open to the rational gaze and (b) simple claims resulting from sensory observation and interpretation, for example, that I am presently typing these words; and (3) claims for which much careful investigation that extrapolates from such simple results as those just mentioned has already provided many converging lines of powerful rational support, for example, elementary ideas from astronomy (heliocentrism) and biology (some role for natural selection). Evolutionary skepticism, clearly, is not universal in scope.

Nor is it in any way corrosive or defeatist or paralyzing. It is indeed *opposed* to any broader skepticism that suggests humans are unable to come up with reliable answers to big questions. The latter sort of skepticism is just as unwarranted as confident knowledge claims in the present: both suffer from an unrealistically static view of human life and inadequate attention to the future.

Evolutionary skepticism, in sum, does not have us lounging on any fence. Rather, in *aid* of inquiry, it urges us forward to explore the ever-moving frontiers of the future. That is its unique quality. It is a skepticism unusually full of creative potential, uniting us with every true skeptic and returning us to skepticism in the best and fullest, most positive sense of the word. (Think here of the Greek word *skeptikos*, which, though it has often been applied to fence loungers, is translatable simply as ‘persistent inquirer.’)

So the thing to notice about the skepticism to which we are driven is that it is not some bland and static fallibilism, but rather a skepticism dynamically turned toward the future. And it is within this context that we can make clear what is in some ways the most important point of all about the evolutionary answer to the problem of faith and reason – a crucial distinction to answer the critic’s distinction between future possibilities and rational religion right now. This crucial distinction is a distinction between what rational religion might be expected to look like at *later* times in an evolutionary process and what it might be expected to look like at *earlier* times. The point is that, given an evolutionary sensibility, we will recognize how rational religion may look *very different* at an earlier time, such as ours, than at later ones (100,000 or 1,000,000 years in the future). When trying to solve the problem of faith and reason, therefore, we need to think about what form of religion, if any, is fitted to *our* place in time.

I cannot overemphasize this point. And now to apply it: even if any kind of detailed religious *belief* and religious practise grounded therein is arguably premature at present, appropriate, if ever, only after much more time has elapsed, perhaps some *other* form of religion will still be appropriate today. And perhaps among the evolutionary shifts that will belong to human religion given its diachronic nature is precisely the one we can today instigate by noticing this distinction and acting on it. By trying to bolster detailed belief about ultimate things, as if we had already arrived at our goal, the religious apologists of our planet have only caused us to get ahead of ourselves in a big way and seriously confused the issue of faith and reason. Religion has, because of them, had a bad start on planet Earth. But the story of religion needn’t end with a bad start. In an evolutionary frame of mind we can think of many aspects of religion past and present as possibly representing examples of immature overreaching that will flower into

something more mature and appropriate to our own early time with a bit of careful digging and watering.

So the future provides breathing space not just for reason (as we saw before when addressing postmodernism) but also for religion. And in this context, what results from their interaction may be expected to surprise us. There is an invitation to the imagination here – really, a new research program. Put otherwise, we have an hypothesis – that a new form of religion appropriate to our time and (thus) compatible with evolutionary religious skepticism can be developed – with various possible experimental results. In the remainder of this paper, I want to outline some of my own, quite positive experimental results, worked out in the books mentioned earlier. (But I stress that critical interaction with them as well as additional tests of the above-mentioned hypothesis are greatly to be welcomed!) If these hold up, then we have a *completed* evolutionary answer to the problem of faith and reason, which, especially in view of the limitations we have already found encrusting alternative views, must arguably prove superior to any of the latter.

Rational Religion in the Twenty-First Century

My results involve (1) a focus on what I call ultimism rather than theism or any other detailed religious ‘ism’; (2) the deployment of imaginative nonbelieving faith rather than belief; and (3) massaging the old arguments for theistic belief (both evidentialist and nonevidentialist), inadequate as such, into powerful rational support for ultimistic faith. In other words, we have a new *object* of faith, a new *attitude* of faith, and new *arguments* for faith. Let me add just a little light to each of these points.

(1) ‘Ultimism’ is my label for the general notion of a metaphysically and axiologically

ultimate reality, in relation to which an ultimate good can be attained.¹¹ The idea of a personal God concerned for our salvation represents *one* way of trying to give more specific content to this notion – it is, we may assume, one of the disjuncts going to make up the big disjunction to which ultimism is logically equivalent. But there are other attempts to fill out this notion in existing nontheistic religions (consider monistic Hinduism or Buddhism or Taoism), and it may well be filled out in many brand new ways, perhaps much more adequate ways, in the future. And whatever may be true about theism, there is no way to rule out the truth of ultimism at the present stage of our development. (Elsewhere I have defended the view that there are some new arguments for atheism which we can appraise as strong arguments even given the modest means at our present disposal.¹² But notice that the evolutionary answer to the problem of faith and reason does not depend on the success of such arguments for atheism: it is compatible with the conjunction of doubt about ultimism and doubt about theism.)

Ultimism is a more appropriate focus for us, at our early stage of religious development in what is after all only the twenty-first century, than theism or any other detailed ‘ism.’ It is set at a good distance from us, conceptually speaking: not so distant as to be incapable of touching

¹¹Paul Draper has suggested to me that this might still be too specific, given our current stage of development. But as I argue in Schellenberg, 2005 (see esp. p. 34), because of the ‘ultimately ultimate’ interests of much existing religion in conjunction with the fundamental concerns of philosophy, a more full-blooded ultimism is the place to start, and other ideas should be investigated in philosophy under the rubric of religion if/when the former notion is shown to be irremediably problematic.

¹²See, for example, Schellenberg, 2007, Part III.

us, but not so close and defined in its features as to foreclose all investigation and make us forget our place in time. It is in the balance between these two things that ultimism's religious promise can be discerned. By 'touching us' I mean primarily three things: that we can get excited by what ultimism represents; that we can even identify some of our 'religious' experiences as possibly giving us some early form of contact with what it represents (instead of falling into premature identification of their object with one of the standard conceptions of existing religion); and also that ultimism has enough content to provide a basis for defining certain patterns of behaviour as appropriate and others as not – and so can function as a distinctively religious guide of behaviour (more on this in a moment). By leaving open investigation, I have in mind that ultimism is as general a claim as one could adopt without leaving religion altogether, general enough indeed to permit, as an evolutionary sensibility demands, uncommitted investigation of every other religious claim – every disjunct from that big disjunction! We have here the best of both worlds: a framework for ongoing religious investigation of the whole panoply of more detailed religious claims, both actual and undiscovered, to none of which one is committed, and also an object of religious intellectual and emotional and practical commitment, *ultimism itself* – the disjunction instead of any of the disjuncts.

When trying to see from a great distance, we should be pleased at having possibly located something with the broad outlines of our desired object of vision, and content to leave the details for later. But some imagination is required here, for it is easy to dismiss an object of religiosity so general as *too* general. Traditional, sectarian religious claims are no doubt much more familiar to us than the simpler claim they presuppose. (Indeed, that simpler claim is almost never extracted *as a claim* at all. This can be seen simply from the fact that I have had to provide for it a name!)

Moreover, their evident and abundant content may seduce us into thinking it impossible to get a grip on anything *less* content-full. But such is not the case. Notice that by thinking of a reality as both metaphysically and axiologically *ultimate* and also *salvific*, we posit a number of relevant properties. We certainly have nothing as lacking in content as John Hick's 'Real,' which, influenced by Kant, he describes as in itself completely unknowable and indescribable.¹³ Hick has been much criticized for this feature of his 'religious hypothesis,' which is otherwise admirable in many ways, but it is important to recognize that – although Hick sometimes uses such labels as 'the Ultimate' in place of 'the Real' – my notion of ultimism does not share this feature. In saying that a reality is metaphysically ultimate, we say that its existence is explanatorily the most basic fact, that it is deepest, most fundamental in the nature of things; in saying that it is axiologically ultimate we say that it possesses the deepest possible value. And it is the *combination* of these two elements taken together with the content specified by 'salvific' – the idea that the value of the Ultimate *can in some way be communicated to us*; that by relating ourselves appropriately to the Ultimate, our own deepest good can be realized – that produces something distinctively religious, according to the definition of 'religion' I have defended.¹⁴

In *seeing* that we have something distinctively religious here, something that can clearly be distinguished from what a materialist might say, who nevertheless thinks that there exists something metaphysically ultimate, and from what a certain sort of cosmic pessimist might say, who thinks there is something axiologically ultimate but holds that it must forever be out of reach, since completely out of our league – in seeing all this, I suggest, we see the significant

¹³See Hick, 1989.

¹⁴See Schellenberg, 2005, Chapter 1.

content that remains in ultimism. And, furthermore, one can begin to define the patterns of behaviour that are appropriate given the truth of ultimism, and those that are not, and notice how the former make for a rich and substantial religious life. I cannot here go into detail on this, but elsewhere I have identified and grounded in the various sorts of abundance ultimism represents *three dimensions or directions* within an ultimistic religious life, distinguished as ‘downward’ (into the depths of an understanding of ultimate things), ‘inward’ (into the self, with the aim of reshaping its fundamental dispositions), and ‘outward’ (into the world and an engagement with its needs); and also *two distinct levels* in such a life: the actions and dispositions that would immediately reflect the content of one’s faith in the ways just suggested, and those one undertakes to perform or cultivate in order to make actions and dispositions at the first level easier, more natural, or stronger – including participation in a suitable religious community.¹⁵ In short, although ultimism is typically *qualified*, decked out in specific religious garb that can be misleading or distorting, it may instead be in its naked beauty that we behold it and integrate it into our religious practice. So long unrecognized and nameless, this claim now emerges as the one most appropriately engaged by religion as it seeks to emerge from immaturity.

(2) Let’s think now about the religious attitude with which we might, at this early stage of evolution, approach such a proposition as ultimism. Belief, our evolutionary religious skepticism tells us, is premature. Is there anything that can take its place? Yes, indeed. And this is where the surge of recent discussion of nondoxastic religious faith becomes relevant. Our evolutionary answer to the problem of faith and reason indeed provides for such discussion a significance –

¹⁵See Schellenberg, forthcoming, Part I.

and a ‘home’ – that it might otherwise be deemed to lack.¹⁶

My own view is that there is an important species of faith that is *imagination*-based instead of belief-based. This is easiest to see when thinking about propositional faith. (The complete ‘faith response’ required to instantiate a religious life focused on ultimism will combine propositional faith with what I call operational faith; but let’s begin with the former.) Propositional faith is faith *that* a proposition is true – it involves imagining a valued religious state of affairs to obtain and mentally giving one’s assent to it. To fill this out a little: faith that a proposition is true involves a purely voluntary assent to that proposition, undertaken in circumstances where one views the state of affairs to which it refers as good and desirable but in which one lacks evidence causally sufficient for belief of the proposition. In thus assenting to a proposition, one adopts and subsequently adheres to a certain policy: a policy of mentally going along with the content of that proposition in relevant contexts (as opposed to questioning or criticizing or ignoring it, or simply keeping it at arm’s length) – of imagining the world to oneself as one in which the proposition is true and endorsing this representation (in thought ‘taking its side,’ identifying oneself with it, deciding in favour of it, selecting it to guide one). Such an attitude is different from belief, which is a disposition to experience a mental condition in which thinking of the relevant state of affairs involves thinking of the world – a mental condition in which one is involuntarily and passively being *represented to* rather than actively *representing to oneself*. Also unlike belief, the attitude of faith does not typically issue in *verbal affirmation of*

¹⁶For examples of this discussion, see Swinburne, 1981, Pojman, 1986, Alston, 1996, and Audi, 2008. My own contribution, on which the following is based, appears in Schellenberg, 2005, chaps. 5 and 6.

the proposition *as* true. (Such affirmation contextually implies that we believe and is generally recognized as doing so; hence the person of faith may be expected to avoid it as misleading.)¹⁷

But all of this is only *propositional* faith. Propositional religious faith is important to the evolutionary stance on faith and reason and indeed fundamental. However, there is also *operational* religious faith, which is realized when someone *acts on* propositional religious faith in pursuit of a religious way, or else on propositional religious belief (in doing so, one exhibits not just religious faith-that, but also faith *in* a putative ultimate and salvific reality). Though, as just indicated, propositional belief *can* be the cognitive core of operational faith, the important point here is that when the cognitive core is beliefless propositional faith, we see a quite distinct, full-blooded response, which I am calling the faith response to ultimism – a response that ought to be considered alongside believing, disbelieving and purely skeptical responses.

Notice that someone who adopts a faith response to ultimism after endorsing evolutionary religious skepticism does not lose her skepticism. Faith grounded in imagination is perfectly compatible with doubt and religious investigation. It is content with possibility. Thus it is ideally suited to reconciling reason with religion in the evolutionary circumstances I have been emphasizing. Notice also that this is no ad hoc scrambling response to the shortage of good arguments for religious belief, and no reluctant ‘fall back’ position. In a very important sense, we are not yet *ready* for belief and so we should *look for* an attitude other than belief to characterize religion at our early stage of development. Imaginative faith, so I suggest, fits this description

¹⁷Some interesting recent work supporting my conception of propositional faith, work on the existence of a ‘distinct cognitive attitude’ (DCA) created by propositional imagination, is collected in Nichols, 2006.

admirably.

(3) Finally, let me outline briefly how one can grow those old and (in the minds of many) discredited theistic arguments into powerful rational support for a faith response to ultimism. It may be tempting to take a Dawkins line and regard them all simply as failed attempts to provide evidence for belief in a personal God or, where evidence is agreed to be lacking, as pitiful pragmatic attempts to justify theistic wishful thinking. But traditional arguments for theistic belief may be *recast* as arguments for nonbelieving faith and thereby achieve a new respectability and success. Pascal's famous Wager argument, which urges us to bet on God, is only one of the arguments that can thus be adapted to the support of ultimistic faith. In the new dispensation, Pascal's Wager can be joined by arguments adapting the work of Anselm, Leibniz, Paley, Kant, Kierkegaard, Mill, James, and Wittgenstein.¹⁸ In all these ways – and no doubt more will emerge once our gaze is firmly fixed on the light at the end of the tunnel in which faith and reason have been battling it out, a light coming from the door opened by the evolutionary approach – the new faith finds support from reason.

Let me give a brief example of reasoning from this mix – I call it the 'ought to be true' argument. In his final unfinished work, published posthumously, William James presented (as he had done before) something he called a "faith-ladder":

1. There is nothing absurd in a certain view of the world being true, nothing self-contradictory;

¹⁸See Schellenberg, forthcoming, Parts III, IV, and V, which has chapters on Pascal's Wager as well as Anselm's Idea, Leibniz's Ambition, Paley's Wonder, Kant's Postulate, Kierkegaard's Leap, Mill's Hope, James's Will, and Wittgenstein's Picture.

2. It *might* have been true under certain conditions;
3. It *may* be true, even now;
4. It is *fit* to be true;
5. It *ought* to be true;
6. It *must* be true;
7. It *shall* be true, at any rate true for *me*.¹⁹

What James's faith-ladder suggests is that there are propositions which *ought* to be true even if they might *not* be true: that it would (appropriately) be felt *sad* were these propositions to turn out false. Though James is characteristically inconsistent, and though he uses the word 'faith', he seems here to be thinking of someone working herself into a state of belief in response to such propositions. But we need not take the steps of his ladder this way; we can think of imaginative faith instead. We can fasten on faith as a 'responsive gesture' which enables us to see personal possibilities of fulfilment and moral ideals as they *deserve* to be seen, as they *ought* to be, if they have the unrivalled importance our moral experience and commitment drive us to ascribe to them.

What I am talking about is a powerful, teeth-gritting determination to imagine and assent to and live by what ought to be the case (and what that in turn makes desirable) even if in fact it may *not* be the case – whenever the truth of what ought to be so is not independently ruled out by reason. Imagine a situation where (in circumstances of doubt) it ought to be the case that one finds one's way through a snowstorm, or that one's child navigates safely through to the other side of a depression, or that the party in power will be ousted, or that democracy spreads

¹⁹James, 1979 [1911]: p. 113

throughout the world, or that war can be made to cease.... Indeed, it is hard to imagine a case of the relevant sort in which faith is *not* called for, as a responsive gesture to the value one sees as sadly threatened. In all such cases, it appears that the best response – the response making the best whole of one’s emotional and intellectual and other dispositions – will involve the attitudes of faith. So why would we deny that faith is appropriate when we see how very much it ought to be the case that *ultimism* is true?

For it would be sad were the wonder of our conscious experience to cease just when we are starting to realize its benefits; sad were powerfully evocative religious experiences not to point beyond themselves to anything real; sad were the species – the whole project of human consciousness – to flicker out instead of flourishing ever more fully over the longest of runs; sad were the strangeness and wonder of the universe not fulfilled in the infinite strangeness and wonder of ultimate things. Looking upon these propositions carefully, with our emotional and other dispositions functioning properly, we will conclude that their truth, if known to us, would indeed be an occasion for sadness, and that their falsity is eminently desirable. We will also conclude that the truth of ultimism is the best (and in some cases the only) guarantee that such propositions *are* false. And, seeing that *all* their denials call for the truth of ultimism, we are brought by a chorus of passionate reasons to our own religious faith-ladder, only slightly different from James’s: Considering ultimism: ‘It is *fit* to be true; it would be well if it *were* true; it *might* be true; it *may* be true; it *ought* to be true; thus it *will* be true *for me*; that is, I will treat it as if it *were* true so far as my advocacy and actions are concerned.’

Here the passions, so important to James, are obviously relevant. What do they say? That there *is* a Divine reality? No, hardly – but they can tell us that there *ought* to be! And,

furthermore, they can tell us to follow our desire into the responsive gesture of, not just religious hope, which still timidly holds back, but the full imaginative commitment of religious faith (“it *shall* be true... *for me*...”).

This is just one example of the sort of reasoning that can be evolved here. The central point of all such reasoning is this: that a religious orientation, though it requires imagining the facts to have a certain character and though it would be undermined were they shown to have a contrary one, is (at least for our time) best viewed as a response not to evidence showing that things are such-and-so but to *value*. Here we see not any one-sided wishful thinking but rather a multi-sided appreciation of the complexity of a well-rounded human life and human community. And in responding to value in this way, one who takes up imaginative faith is able, with unparalleled effectiveness, to express and celebrate and also further develop this unique complexity. We have, in other words, an evolutionary rationale for faith.

What I have in mind here is a range of human features such as imagination, intellect, and aesthetic sensibilities, as well as transcendent experience, prudential choice, moral insight, the need for long-term personal integration, the desire for virtue, and the impulse toward ritualistic behavior (all of which are touched in one or another way by the traditional arguments). Better than anything else, imaginative faith engages and enlarges and also unifies the whole family of such human characteristics and capacities. Such faith is therefore intellectually well justified for human beings. Imaginative faith focused on ultimism is justified by adaptations of the traditional arguments, even if their forebears were incapable of justifying theistic belief.

Conclusion

What we have found, then, is that a whole new approach to faith and reason can be derived from

certain important distinctions, which are the gift of an evolutionary lens: a distinction between past and future; between synchronic and diachronic conceptions of religion; between religion appropriate for the future and religion appropriate right now; between theism (as well as other detailed ‘isms’) and ultimism; between belief and imaginative faith; between arguments for theistic belief and arguments for ultimistic faith. This approach is intellectually exceedingly fruitful. It represents an alternative both to theism (as well as other detailed religious ‘isms’) and to naturalism, for both violate its skeptical aspect. Thus it transcends the recurring debate between those two. It does this while still preserving a rational way of being genuinely religious, which most have thought to depend on a particular disputed resolution of the former debate. And this way of being religious is indeed one that it can show, on scientific and philosophical grounds, to be the only one appropriate to our time.

One of the nicest features of the evolutionary approach is how it allows us, in our work on religion, to be philosophers again: wondering at the vastness of the world instead of chipping away at some corner of our little cave; exercising imaginative vision instead of hunkering down amid conventional ideas. In what we like to call the *philosophy* of religion, this last point on behalf of the evolutionary answer to the problem of faith and reason must surely be regarded as a major point in its favour!

When rickety old ideas are allowed to die, there is all manner of room for new ones to evolve. And new opportunities, too, for them to be supported by reason. I invite for the new ideas developed here the careful contemplation of philosophy. Ideas about ultimism, imaginative faith, and adapted theistic arguments may seem radical. The form of religion I have been talking about may initially strike one as religiously inadequate or inauthentic. But it is, I suggest, only under

the burden of the synchronic conception of religion, unaware of or insensitive to the future, that one will *persist* in such reactions. There is a great danger of forgetting how far behind the line we who have just completed the twentieth – instead of the two hundredth or two thousandth or two millionth – century may turn out to have been. But if, in light of all that an evolutionary perspective truly teaches us, we wean ourselves of that forgetfulness, and listen for the voices echoing from the Great Disparity, we will instead find an arresting and persuasive new way of reconciling reason and religion, appropriate to our time – the only time for which *our* problem of faith and reason need be solved.

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