

A FAITH FOR THE FUTURE: WHY NON-DOXASTIC TRADITIONAL RELIGION IS THE PREFERABLE FORM OF EVOLUTIONARY RELIGION

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Abstract. In the philosophy of J. L. Schellenberg, “evolutionary religion” is a religious stance oriented towards the deep future. According to Schellenberg, the best form of evolutionary religion is non-doxastic faith in ultimism. I reject Schellenberg’s arguments for preferring ultimism and suggest that committing non-doxastically to traditional religion makes more sense from an evolutionary perspective. I argue that the alignment argument for traditional religion remains sound even when the deep future is considered. Furthermore, I assess Schellenberg’s claim that humanity is religiously immature.

I. INTRODUCTION

Consider religion from an evolutionary perspective. With an eye, not towards the past but towards the future. With about a billion years left for intelligent life to develop on Earth, it is certainly a live possibility that religious life as we know it only represents an exceedingly early stage of development. We can only imagine how religion might evolve in the deep future, and surely there are also possible developments lying far beyond what we can imagine. Which religious stance should we take today, to best accommodate what the future might hold?

The introduction of this surprisingly novel and utterly profound question into the philosophy of religion is one of the great achievements of John L. Schellenberg. It is most clearly raised in *Evolutionary Religion*¹ and *Religion After Science*². In *Evolutionary Religion* Schellenberg also provides an answer to the question: the best religious stance for our early days is non-doxastic faith in ultimism. Non-doxastic faith is faith without belief, an agnostic form of faith based upon desire and epistemic possibility. Ultimism is the view that there exists a transcendent reality, which is ultimate in three ways: metaphysically, soteriologically and axiologically.³

While I agree with Schellenberg that non-doxasticism is the most preferable cognitive stance, his rejection of traditional religion in favour of ultimism is uncalled for. From an evolutionary perspective, it makes more sense to build upon what we have and continue developing existing traditions, rather than trying to recreate religion from scratch.

In much of Schellenberg’s work, the issue of non-doxastic sceptical religion has been intertwined with the issue of evolutionary religion. Recently, however, Schellenberg has made a clear distinction between the two:

1 J. L. Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2013).

2 J. L. Schellenberg, *Religion After Science: The Cultural Consequences of Religious Immaturity* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019).

3 In *Religion After Science* Schellenberg uses the term triple transcendency rather than triple ultimacy. This, however, does not mean that Schellenberg no longer defends ultimism as the best form of evolutionary religion. In *Religion After Science* Schellenberg only argues for the importance of pursuing the quest for evolutionary religion (here called the “religion project,” emphasising religion as inquiry). He is not presenting his preferred account of how such religion should be instantiated, as he does in *Evolutionary Religion* and earlier works (Schellenberg, private conversation).

Sceptical religion is defined by reference to its non-doxastic features, whereas evolutionary religion is defined by reference to its being a form of religiousness adapted to a temporally early, and perhaps immature, stage of human religious life.⁴

It is now suggested that the two themes might be fruitfully treated as separate subjects, a suggestion I certainly agree with.⁵ The distinction also makes obvious that the evolutionary side of Schellenberg's work has received surprisingly little attention in the literature.⁶ To amend this, I will here address the issue of evolutionary religion exclusively.

In a previous publication, I offered the alignment argument for preferring traditional religion over ultimism as the proper object of non-doxastic faith.⁷ In his reply, Schellenberg rightfully points out that my argument does not address the evolutionary side of his thinking. He thereby implies that the alignment argument would not be effective in promoting traditional religion as evolutionary religion.⁸ I will argue to the contrary. Expanding on my earlier view, I will show that the alignment argument gives us reason to prefer traditional religion also when the matter is considered from an evolutionary perspective. In arguing for traditional religion as evolutionary religion, I take up a direct challenge laid down by Schellenberg:

Perhaps there is some way we have not yet thought of for a traditional form of religion, especially when taken non-doxastically, to satisfy the conditions required for evolutionary religion — to fit or be appropriate or be adapted to the temporally early stage of human religious life.⁹

Before continuing, some preliminary remarks. First, as noted by McKim, Schellenberg's concern is sometimes with the broad evolutionary picture and the development of intelligent life in the deep future, and sometimes he is more narrowly concerned with the development of our species.¹⁰ In his writings, it is not always clear which kind of development is intended. If not explicitly stating otherwise, I will focus on the broad picture, often taking for granted that Schellenberg's ideas concerning the future of humankind are also applicable when considering the deep future. This sometimes requires a very generous reading of terms like "humanity."¹¹

Secondly, Schellenberg's work concerning evolutionary religion has a clear focus on positive religious developments which might take place, and I follow him in this. I do not mean to deny that there are other evolutionary possibilities. Evolution is no teleological process. Perhaps religion is just a peculiar feature of *Homo sapiens*, something future intelligent species will lack. Or maybe there will be no future intelligent species, maybe our kind of intelligence is an evolutionary dead end. Nevertheless, non-doxasticism is all about committing to some desirable epistemic possibility, in this case the possibility of a deep future where religion flourishes. Since I agree with Schellenberg regarding the non-doxastic framework of evolutionary religion, possible outcomes of the evolutionary process where religion does not develop can be properly ignored for now.

4 J. L. Schellenberg, "On evolutionary religion (in interaction with Rottschaefer, Elliott, Dumsday, and Palmqvist)", *Religious Studies* 55, no 4 (2019), 578–579.

5 *Ibid.*, 578.

6 For two notable exceptions, see William A. Rottschaefer, 'Schellenberg's Evolutionary Religion: How Evolutionary and How Religious?', *Religious Studies* 52, no. 4 (2016) and Robert McKim, 'On Making Religious Progress', in *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Paul Draper (Routledge, 2019).

7 Carl-Johan Palmqvist, 'The Proper Object of Non-Doxastic Religion: Why Traditional Religion Should Be Preferred over Schellenberg's Simple Ultimism', *Religious Studies* 55, no. 4 (2019).

8 Schellenberg, 'On Evolutionary Religion (in Interaction with Rottschaefer, Elliott, Dumsday, and Palmqvist)', 579; 588–589

9 *Ibid.*, 589.

10 McKim, 'On Making Religious Progress', 35.

11 In this context, we should also consider the possibility hoped for by transhumanists, that humanity might one day be able to direct and enhance its own evolution. If this happens, the distinction between human evolution and the evolution of intelligent life might become blurred or even cease to be meaningful. In such case, positive development might take place significantly faster than presumed in this discussion. While this is surely a fascinating possibility, I will set it aside for now since it does not affect my main points — they remain even if the hoped-for development occurs a thousand years into the future rather than in ten million years.

Thirdly, the notion of alignment with reality will play a key role in what follows. I understand alignment as having a cognitive content which corresponds to reality, in combination with being guided in action by this content. Both components are needed for full alignment: if you act in alignment with reality but fail to have the proper cognitive content, you are poorly aligned — Don Quixote fighting windmills he believes to be giants is an example of this. If you have the right content without acting properly, you are also poorly aligned — imagine someone who believes that he sees a wall but acts as if it is not there and tries to walk right through it. This notion of alignment clearly requires the detailed kind of cognitive content we find in traditional religion. It also allows for alignment to come in degrees since one can have a more or less accurate view of the world.¹²

The upcoming section (2) introduces Schellenberg's basic position and contrasts it with my own. It is followed by (3) a presentation of the main reasons for favouring traditional religion. In section (4) the case is made that the alignment argument remains sound on evolutionary religion, and in (5) Schellenberg's main arguments for preferring ultimism are assessed and rejected. The last major section (6) treats Schellenberg's claim that our present-day religion is immature.

II. NON-DOXASTIC FAITH IN WHAT: MAKING CLEAR THE ALTERNATIVES

According to Schellenberg, the best form of evolutionary religion is non-doxastic faith in ultimism. The central claim of non-doxasticism is that a religious life does not need to be based on religious belief, but only on some epistemically weaker cognitive attitude, like hope or propositional faith. While the details vary between accounts, the basic idea is that an agnostic can make a commitment based on religious proposition p , if she evaluates p positively and regards the truth of p an epistemic possibility.¹³ This view should not be conflated with religious fictionalism, where the truth of p is irrelevant.

Much can be said about how to best spell out the details of non-doxasticism.¹⁴ However, since the considerations behind evolutionary religion support non-doxasticism in general rather than any specific account, and since I agree with Schellenberg that non-doxasticism is most suitable for evolutionary religion, the question of which account to prefer can be safely set aside for now.

Ultimism is religion stripped of all its details and reduced to its most basic proposition: the claim that there exists a transcendent reality which is ultimate in three ways: metaphysically, axiologically and soteriologically.¹⁵ In *Evolutionary Religion* the idea is presented as follows:

...an idea of something deepest in reality (metaphysically ultimate) that is also unsurpassably great (axiologically ultimate) and the source of our deepest good (soteriologically ultimate). I call the claim that there is such a triple-ultimate reality ultimism.¹⁶

Ultimism is a most abstract view of ultimate reality, and it is entailed by every more detailed account. If any detailed account of ultimate reality, like Christianity or Buddhism, turns out to be true, ultimism will be true as well.

In Schellenberg's view the absence of details is appropriate at our early evolutionary stage, but it is not supposed to be permanent. Ultimism is to be considered something of a framework, a template to

12 For a more thorough discussion on the notion of alignment, see Palmqvist, "The Proper Object of Non-Doxastic Religion".

13 For other important accounts, see William Alston, 'Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith', in *Faith, Freedom, and Rationality*, ed. Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Rowman & Littlefield Lanham, MD, 1996); Lara Buchak, 'Can It Be Rational to Have Faith?', in *Probability in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Jake Chandler and Victoria Harrison (Oxford Univ. Press, 2012); Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'Propositional Faith: What It Is and What It Is Not', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (2013); Daniel McKaughan, 'Action-Centered Faith, Doubt, and Rationality', *Journal of Philosophical Research* 41, no. Issue Supplement (2016).

14 For Schellenberg's account of propositional non-doxastic faith in terms of imagination and voluntary assent, see Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion*, 102–103.

15 J. L. Schellenberg, *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2005).

16 Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion*, 99.

be filled with details by future religious investigation. A non-doxastic religiosity based on ultimism will include such investigation as a key component.¹⁷

Contrary to Schellenberg, I do not think an evolutionary perspective on religion requires us to adopt ultimism. As long as we are aware that current religion might represent an early stage of religious evolution and keep our minds open for further developments, I think the move from belief-based religion to non-doxasticism is sufficient to meet the demands of evolutionary religion. An additional move from traditional religion to ultimism is not necessary. Compare the argument from pessimistic induction in the philosophy of science. It states that since scientific theories are standardly superseded by better ones, we should expect this to happen with current theories as well, and refrain from considering them literally true. However, no proponent of this argument would claim that this should lead us to reject all theories in favour of some abstract view like “there is a physical universe.” Instead, they argue for a shift from realism to anti-realism, a shift not so different from the move from belief-based to non-doxastic traditional religion.

Schellenberg does not envisage the ultimist as completely turning her back on tradition. Participation or exchange with tradition could well be part of her religious life:

Rejecting traditionalism does not entail turning a deaf ear to the traditions... Since what is potentially of religious value in the traditions does not depend on the truth of sectarian religious claims, one can reject the idea of adherence to such claims without losing out on that value.¹⁸

It also seems clear that Schellenberg thinks that one can be an ultimist without a heavy engagement with traditional religion. In many passages, religiosity without details seems to be his favoured approach.¹⁹ Therefore, we should distinguish between the ecumenical ultimist, who engages with traditional religion, and the radical ultimist, who does not.

What difference remains between the ecumenical ultimist and the traditionalist, who follows my advice and commits non-doxastically to traditional religion? There is not necessarily any difference in what these subjects perceive as epistemic possibilities — in the standard case, they will both regard all major religious views as epistemic possibilities. The difference lies in what possibility they commit to. The traditionalist commits to a fully detailed view, the ecumenical ultimist only to the most abstract. Since the traditionalist will indirectly commit to ultimism as well, it being entailed by her specific view, the main difference is that the ecumenical ultimist does not commit to any religious details.

According to Schellenberg, there are two ways one can be an ecumenical ultimist. The one-to-one ultimist relates to one specific tradition, while the one-to-many ultimist explores several different traditions simultaneously.²⁰

The one-to-one approach is the one closest to that of the traditionalist. This kind of ecumenical ultimist lives out her religious life inside an existing religious tradition, without cognitively committing to its details. For example, she might live as a Muslim, while committing non-doxastically neither to Islam nor even to the existence of God but only to ultimism.

The traditionalist’s belief-less engagement lies close to what many reflective modern religious people are already doing.²¹ Compared to the traditionalist it seems that the one-to-one ultimist, who commits only to ultimism while living a traditional religious life, must spend a lot of mental energy just to keep reminding herself where her commitment lies. To make matters worse, Schellenberg suggests that the one-to-one ultimist reinterprets religious language:

17 J. L. Schellenberg, *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2009), 36–44.

18 *Ibid.*, 55.

19 Schellenberg, *The Will to Imagine*, 15–23; Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion*, 87–100; Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 103–104.

20 *Ibid.*, 60–61.

21 Alston, “Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith”.

[the one-to-one ultimist] is able to reinterpret the sectarian religious language of her community, thinking of it symbolically or metaphorically instead of literally.²²

Why would the ultimist do this? The move is reasonable from the perspective of belief-based religion: interpret what you cannot believe as a metaphor for something you can believe. However, from a non-doxastic perspective, there is no need for reinterpretation as long as the literal truth of religious language represents an epistemic possibility. The one-to-one ultimist therefore seems overly cautious, going far beyond the requirements of non-doxasticism, to a position that seems exceedingly hard to maintain psychologically. Since I cannot see that she will gain anything by going so far compared to a non-doxastic traditionalist, the latter stance seems highly preferable.

On the contrasting one-to-many approach, the ultimist has a smorgasbord-attitude towards traditional religion. The obvious strength of this kind of ecumenical ultimism is the kind of wide-ranging religious exploration and creativity it comes with. Its weakness is that it does not encourage prolonged immersion in a detailed religious worldview or a committed exploration of a single religious idea. Unlike the one-to-one approach, I cannot see any reason to dismiss the one-to-many approach at this early stage of the discussion. That means that we move forward with three possible positions: non-doxastic traditionalism, radical ultimism and ecumenical ultimism according to the one-to-many approach (I will henceforth use the term “ecumenical ultimism” to refer to the one-to-many approach exclusively, and for brevity I will most often refer to “radical ultimism” as “ultimism” only).

III. WHY WE SHOULD PREFER TRADITIONAL RELIGION AS EVOLUTIONARY RELIGION

In this section, I will present two main reasons for preferring traditional religion from an evolutionary perspective. The first has to do with promoting change, and the second concerns the possibility of truth in contemporary religion. I will also discuss a possible objection to my approach.

I want to stress that I expect traditional religion to continue developing. Taking the deep future into account, I think we should expect religion to evolve in ways we cannot even begin to imagine. Consider how much religion in the West has evolved the last three millennia. Most importantly, the development from pagan polytheism to monotheism, but also the development of monotheism from ancient Zoroastrianism and early Hebrew faith to present day Christianity, Judaism and Islam. If religion keeps developing at the same speed for the next three millennia, we should expect a shift as great as that from ancient paganism to modern Christianity. Then consider the deep future, with possibly millions of years of both biological and cultural evolution. The possibilities for religious development seem almost endless. It is important for an account of evolutionary religion to be open to such profound change, and regard present day religion primarily as a point of departure for further religious development.

We should consider the practical question of how we can provide favourable conditions for evolutionary change to take place. One straight-forward way to promote such change is to provide future generations with advanced, religious concepts. Consider the metaphor attributed to Newton “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulder of giants.” It is hard to see how future generations could be helped by rejecting all but the most basic propositions concerning the ultimate. It is like getting rid of the giant and just hand over the firm ground the giant was standing on. Presumably, if not a giant yourself, you will not even see as far as the giant did. It is important to realize that the giant does not need to be right for his work to be an excellent starting position.

This reason for preferring traditional religion clearly favours ecumenical ultimism over radical. The ecumenical ultimist is free to use parts of all religious traditions in developing her religiosity, allowing for more creativity than any other approach. However, one must also remember that when the traditionalist works creatively, it is to develop a religious view she is committed to. The ecumenical ultimist will not commit religiously to her creative work in the same way since it is hard to avoid details when being crea-

22 Schellenberg, *The Will to Imagine*, 57.

tive. Presumably, her work will be of a more exploratory nature. I think the difference between religious art and the use of religious motives in secular art might be an illuminating analogy. It seems reasonable to suggest that the traditionalist's creative work will have the potential to bring about more substantial religious change.

I have argued that we should not only be open to change in religion, but also actively promote it. However, it is important to not jump to conclusions when considering the deep future. Even though religious life has just begun on an evolutionary timescale, it remains an epistemic possibility that significant religious development has already taken place in the past. In an evolutionary process, a feature might emerge at some early point without changing considerably thereafter. Consider basic physical features, like having teeth as opposed to not having teeth.

It must therefore be considered a live epistemic possibility that some present-day religion has got it basically right, especially since there might be viable explanations of why the true religion emerged early. For example, from a theistic point of view it makes considerable sense to suppose that God would reveal himself early in history, right after the dawn of civilisation and the emergence of means to preserve the revelation for future generations. Of course, I am not claiming that this is the case, I am just saying that the discovery of the deep future should not lead us to neglect this possibility.

Even though we should expect religion to keep developing, the possibility that some contemporary religion is basically right is what should guide our non-doxastic commitment in the present. A non-doxastic commitment is never based on epistemic considerations only — what you desire and find important matters greatly. Since alignment with a soteriologically ultimate would enable us to receive the ultimate human good, it is something we should always strive for when it seems a live possibility that we might have a chance to achieve it. In other words, we should prefer traditional religion as long as we find it epistemically possible that it might lead us to salvation.

It might seem incoherent to expect religion to keep developing, while at the same time stressing the possibility that some current religion might be true. However, it is not incoherent: on non-doxasticism it makes perfect sense to relate to several important epistemic possibilities at once, even if they cannot all turn out to be true. Focusing on the possibility that religion might evolve without denying the contrasting possibility that some present religion might offer a true view of the ultimate, I argue for traditional religion *both* as a means to promote change and as a possible road to alignment with the divine.

As long as the truth of some contemporary religious view remains an epistemic possibility, we should be reluctant to make the move from traditional religion to ultimism. Not only would we risk moving away from a view which is actually true, it has also been argued that ultimism itself is too abstract to allow for contact with ultimate reality. That is the central claim of the alignment argument I discuss in the next section. First, however, I want to address a possible objection to my view.

It might be argued that my suggestion that we stick with traditional religion is not radical enough, since the conditions for change would be even more favourable if we were to cultivate new religions in addition to those we already have. Instead of limiting ourselves to traditional religion, would it not be better if some of us pursued ultimism, while others invented completely new religious views? Should we not strive to maximize diversity in order to promote change? Pursuing this line of thought even further, it might be suggested that we should also try to maximize diversity also when it comes to our epistemic attitudes. Instead of suggesting a universal move to non-doxasticism, would it not be better if some religion remains belief-based, so that we have a mix of believing and non-doxastic adherents? Would this not provide the ultimate conditions for religious evolution?²³

The reason I suggest we restrict ourselves to traditional religion is that we have other aims to consider in addition to religious development. Most importantly alignment with the divine, but we also have our epistemic duties. While it makes sense from the evolutionary perspective to cultivate every religious path imaginable, the alignment aim suggests that we restrict ourselves to paths where we think contact with the divine is a real possibility. It is hard to see how a religion invented solely for the sake of religious

23 I want to thank an anonymous referee for making this interesting suggestion.

evolution could be relevant in this regard, since the chances of such an invented religion being true are negligible. While we might invent religions akin to the church of the flying spaghetti monster to promote change, it seems a poor choice to join such a religion if you genuinely hope for salvation. As for the suggestion that it might be better for future developments if some remain believers, I can only say that once you seriously start to believe that present day religion will be superseded, it makes no sense to remain a believer from an epistemic point of view. That a present-day religion might be true enough is only an epistemic possibility, not something we should believe.

IV. EVOLUTIONARY RELIGION AND THE ALIGNMENT ARGUMENT

Andrew Dole has pointed out that ultimism lacks soteriological information, and that without such detailed information we have no hope of achieving the ultimate good, even if ultimism is true.²⁴ In an earlier publication, I developed this point into what we might call “the alignment argument” for preferring traditional religion over ultimism as the object of non-doxastic religion. According to the argument, if a view is overly abstract it does not enable us to interact with the part of reality it concerns “and what good is a vague but true religious view, if it is too abstract to let us experience religious reality?”²⁵ While I did not address the evolutionary side of Schellenberg’s thinking in my first presentation of the alignment argument, I now aim to show that the argument remains relevant also on this perspective.

The idea behind the alignment argument is simple: if there is an ultimate reality, we need a religious view with cognitive content to be able to interact with it:

Cognitive content is what guides action. Having a view that is too abstract will not enable one to act upon it properly, since it will fail to imply a concrete course of action. Presumably, the only course of action a highly abstract view will suggest is that one should try to get more information (which is exactly what Schellenberg envisages when he claims that religious investigation will be a big part of the ultimist’s religiosity).²⁶

Since we do not know how detailed a concept of the ultimate is required to achieve alignment, we should play safe and go for a fully detailed view. Also, our choice should be guided by reports of religious experience, since such reports concern the kind of contact with ultimate reality we hope for. In all, we should prefer traditional religion.²⁷

While the argument is mainly directed at the radical ultimist, it seems to affect the ecumenical ultimist as well. Arguably, the ecumenical ultimist will be better off than the radical. Her smorgasbord-approach makes it reasonable to assume that if the teaching of some present religion turns out to be true, she will have had some contact with it. However, there are strong reasons to suspect that she has not done enough. If, for example, Christianity is the true religion, it seems doubtful that her occasional church-going and exploratory prayer will have put her in a relationship with God. The non-doxastic Christian, on the other hand, might live her whole life trying to be close to God (even though she only views God’s existence as an epistemic possibility). Supposedly, if God exists, she will be in a relationship with God.

It should be noted that the assumptions behind the alignment argument are explicitly shared by Schellenberg:

Individuals and communities need to discover and internalize ways of behaving that, at the deepest level, will allow a real connection to the transcendent... You could try all you like to get to a heavenly relationship with God, but if your attempt is based on bad information — if, say, the Buddhists are right and there is no God — it’s not going to take you where you want to go: you’ll be unsuccessful.²⁸

24 Andrew Dole, ‘Is Sceptical Religion Adequate as a Religion?’, *Religious Studies* 49, no. 2 (2013), 236–240.

25 Palmqvist, ‘The Proper Object of Non-Doxastic Religion’, 561.

26 *Ibid.*, 562.

27 *Ibid.*, 563–564.

28 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 31. Also see J. L. Schellenberg, ‘The Future of Religion: How Might Religion Make Progress?’, in *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Paul Draper (Routledge, 2019), 13.

Given these remarks, we would expect Schellenberg to have an explicit account of how the ultimist might achieve alignment. After all, it is exactly the kind of information required to distinguish between Christianity and Buddhism ultimism lacks. Unfortunately, on this issue Schellenberg's account is sketchy at best and would need much elaboration to be satisfying. His basic idea is that ultimism *does* imply at least one form of concrete action besides religious investigation: risk-taking behaviour on behalf of the good. Such behaviour is also supposed to be a way of aligning the ultimist with the triple ultimate.²⁹

I am not convinced by this suggestion. The idea that risk-taking behaviour on behalf of the good is a way of aligning with ultimate reality seems overly theistic, perhaps even Christian. In Christianity, doing good deeds is usually viewed as doing God's work, it means working with God, and is supposed to bring one closer to God etc. On other pictures of ultimate reality, this does not hold. In many Buddhist traditions, good deeds only effect your karmic reincarnation, they do not bring you closer to contact with the ultimate reality of Buddhahood.³⁰ It depends on the details of the ultimate if risk-taking behaviour on behalf of the good can bring alignment. One cannot deduce that some specific moral behaviour brings one into contact with the ultimate if one has no conception regarding the nature of the ultimate. Therefore, I take it that Schellenberg has not shown how ultimism can allow for alignment with ultimate reality.

Now to the main question: does the alignment argument remain sound when we consider it from an evolutionary perspective? I will argue that this question should be answered in the affirmative. Even though the evolutionary perspective should make us sceptic about the truth-claims of present-day religions, and even though we should at least hope for a religiously positive evolution which will give us a better understanding of transcendent things (if there are any) in the deep future, traditional religion remains our best shot at achieving contact with ultimate reality in the present.

When thinking about religion in evolutionary terms, one important question concerns what kind of development is needed if we are to become religiously superior in the future? Although sometimes mentioning cultural development, Schellenberg mostly emphasizes the evolution of our cognitive faculties:

Humans might be a long way from any capacity to realize insights on the most profound and complex matters. But who knows what the future may bring?³¹

No-one has yet developed to the point where religious truths, if such there be, can be made available to human awareness³²

One way to conceive of such cognitive development is in terms of an evolving religious sense. While philosophers like Alvin Plantinga have claimed that we actually possess a religious sense, we need not take the idea literally. Instead, we can regard it as a heuristic device, a metaphor for whatever religion is based on cognitively that might evolve into something more reliable.³³

Considering the young age of religion on an evolutionary timescale, we must conclude that the religious sense is new and that it has only just begun to develop. In its present state, the sense is primitive and highly unreliable. If we compare it with eyesight, we should presumably conclude that it is like having bad eyesight in combination with severe cases of hallucination (considering the vast differences between various religious and areligious outlooks).

When considering the alignment argument, the major issue is how we should treat what we "perceive" with this sense. A commitment to traditional religion means trying to do one's best with the unreliable "sense data" one is provided with. While evolution might bring about improved perception in the future, the best thing we can do for now is trying to piece together what we cannot see clearly by using our imagination and educated guesswork and try to interact with divine reality (if such there be) based

29 Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion*, 110–111. Also see Kirk Loughheed, 'Schellenberg's Ultimism as the Proper Object of Non-Doxastic Religion', *Sophia* 59, no. 2 (2020), 270–280. Loughheed rightly points out that I overlooked this response in my first presentation of the argument.

30 At best, it represents one step on the eightfold path to Enlightenment.

31 Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion*, 23.

32 Schellenberg, 'On Evolutionary Religion (in Interaction with Rottschaefer, Elliott, Dumsday, and Palmqvist)', 580.

33 Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2000).

on the resulting picture. From this perspective, a non-doxastic approach to traditional religion is much like trying to participate in a conversation, even though your hearing is failing you to the degree that you do not actually believe that you get it right.

Schellenberg's contrasting suggestion is that we should reject everything but the most abstract, common denominator of the unreliable "data" the religious sense provides us with. However, as the alignment argument shows, if we reject all cognitive content, we will be unable to interact with the part of reality the sense is directed at. Returning to the analogy, choosing ultimism amounts to giving up on the conversation for now, keeping content with concluding that the conversation is probably about "something" and hoping that future evolution will bring about better hearing.

An objector might wonder what is wrong with taking position on the fence, waiting for the religious sense to evolve so we might base our commitment on a more reliable cognitive access to the divine? The problem is that we will all be dead (presumably even extinct as a species) long before we can reasonably expect that to happen. If there is a soteriological ultimate, it is not enough that some more evolved future species receives the ultimate good in relation to it. Since achieving the ultimate human good in relation to the soteriologically ultimate is the most valuable thing imaginable, it should always be pursued as long as its existence represents an epistemic possibility. We want the ultimate human good now, for ourselves (anyone not wanting it has presumably not grasped the idea of soteriological ultimacy), and if our best shot at getting it is to rely on some of the information our unreliable religious sense provides us with, so be it.

In response to my original argument, Schellenberg has presented two objections relevant also on the present approach.³⁴ The first is that the argument does not account for the ineffable experiences of oneness commonly reported by mystics:

Palmqvist neglects mystical experiences we already know about that, in their powerful but opaque profundity, are easier to link to simple ultimism than to any elaborated version.³⁵

There seems to be some ambiguity in Schellenberg's work on how to understand the idea that the ultimate lacks concrete details. As stated, Schellenberg explicitly thinks of ultimism as a kind of template that is to be filled with details by future investigation.³⁶ The ultimate is not really thought to be without details, but we refrain from filling in those details until we learn more (or perhaps the investigation will show that the ultimate actually has no details, the point being that we do not know). This is the reading I have presupposed. For the objection to have force, we must take the contrasting view that the lack of details is a 'fact' about the ultimate, and regard ultimism as the view that there exists a triply ultimate reality *which is also without details*. Only on this latter interpretation does the objection make any sense. If the ultimate is thought to have details like in traditional religion, but of which we are currently ignorant, it does not seem that mystical experience of a "powerful but opaque profundity" without details would favour ultimism over traditional, detailed views. Since Schellenberg explicitly wishes to defend the first interpretation, this objection seems mistaken.³⁷

The second objection offered by Schellenberg concerns the intelligibility of the ultimate:

³⁴ Schellenberg also presents a third objection, that the agnostic has no reason to select any one traditional religion over ultimism. However, this objection seems to beg the question against my view, since it presupposes that ultimism can bring alignment with divine reality. See Schellenberg, 'On Evolutionary Religion (in Interaction with Rottschaefer, Elliott, Dumsday, and Palmqvist)', 588–589.

³⁵ Schellenberg, 'On Evolutionary Religion (in Interaction with Rottschaefer, Elliott, Dumsday, and Palmqvist)', 588. Also see Loughheed, 'Schellenberg's Ultimism as the Proper Object of Non-Doxastic Religion' for a more developed version of this criticism against the original alignment argument.

³⁶ This is perhaps most clearly put in the first two chapters of Schellenberg, *The Will to Imagine*.

³⁷ Or perhaps the objection is rather that we are too early in the history of religion to commit to a detailed view, since not even our best trained "experts" have yet mastered the ability to "perceive" the relevant details? However, such a reading of mystical experience would only underpin my claim that we must use "imagination and educated guesswork" to go beyond this "opaque profundity," since it does not affect my argument that we cannot stay on the fence.

Palmqvist appears to assume that the true details about a divine reality, if not represented somewhere among traditional religions, would at any rate be within our power to understand, at the present stage of human development.³⁸

The suggestion that the alignment argument requires an assumption of intelligibility is wrong. There is no need to deny the epistemic possibility that the true details about divine reality might be unfathomable, as there is no need to deny the possibility that naturalism is correct and that there is no ultimate. The presence of undesired, negative possibilities should not affect one's choice. If one desires contact with the divine, picking a traditional religious view and sticking with it remains the most rational thing to do. Granted, one is much more likely to end up with a false religious view than the true one (if such there be), but unfortunately for us, our predicament leaves us no better option.

Consider an analogy. There is a lottery, where winning means getting the ultimate award, a prize you can only get by participating in this lottery. You are presented with a huge bundle of tickets and asked to pick one. But before picking, you are also informed that the prize might not exist, and that it is possible that there exist other tickets, unavailable to you but perhaps available in the far future. Does this added information affect your choice? Do you have to assume that there are no unavailable tickets? Obviously not! Regardless of these unfortunate circumstances, picking a ticket is still your only shot at securing the prize.

V. SCHELLENBERG'S CASE FOR RELIGION WITHOUT DETAILS

The idea that the best religion at our early stage of development is one without details is a recurring theme in Schellenberg's work. While it is always based on the insight that the deep future should make us intellectually humble, the way this idea is framed and argued for differs between different writings.

In *The Will to Imagine* "the openness aim" is used to argue for ultimism over traditional religion.³⁹ The idea is simple and intuitive — at our early stage we should prefer a religious view which makes us open for what the future might bring:

An aim that should all things considered be pursued... is the aim of maintaining as much openness to actual and possible religious development as may feasibly be combined with a clear and substantial religiousness.⁴⁰

Schellenberg's preferred view is maximally open since it contains both the open attitude of non-doxastic faith, and the open view of ultimism. However, one must ask whether openness regarding religious view really adds anything substantial if we already have the open attitude of non-doxastic faith? Is one better adapted to the future by having non-doxastic faith in ultimism, than one is by having the same attitude towards traditional religion? Have we not already reached an adequate level of openness when adopting non-doxasticism, making adopting ultimism for the same reason redundant?

Consider an analogy. A Victorian explorer is lost in the jungle. He lacks any beliefs regarding his present location. However, he has no less than a dozen local guides, all who claim to know where they are. The problem is that they all offer different and incompatible accounts. The explorer realizes that at most one guide can be reliable, and perhaps none is.⁴¹ Since he has nothing else to go on, the explorer picks a guide at random and starts following him, accepting the possibility that the guide knows their location. Would this explorer be better off if he only accepted the epistemically overcautious proposition "I am in a jungle," which is the only proposition consistent with the testimony of all guides? Would he be more

38 Schellenberg, 'On Evolutionary Religion (in Interaction with Rottschaefer, Elliott, Dumsday, and Palmqvist)', 588, italics in original.

39 Schellenberg, *The Will to Imagine*, 17–23.

40 Ibid., 17.

41 This is not a perfect analogy to the religious case. The explorer knows that the jungle is real while the subject of non-doxastic faith is agnostic concerning the existence of an ultimate reality. However, the analogy is sufficient for present purposes, since my point is simply to demonstrate that in situations of uncertainty, nothing is gained by adopting an abstract view if one has already taken the step to non-doxasticism.

“open” to signs that might lead him out of the jungle? I do not see how that would follow. Once belief is abandoned, one naturally “opens up” for new evidence. It is hard to see that one could improve this openness by committing to a most abstract view, or that going along with a possibility one does not believe in would make one less open. While the openness aim surely points towards non-doxasticism, it is far less obvious that it can justify a move from traditional religion to ultimism.

It might be objected that the ecumenical ultimist has an advantage here, since she could combine bits and pieces from all the guides’ accounts and make her own map building on what the guides seem to agree about. However, since we have no idea of how the jungle look, we do not know if agreement indicates truth, or if it indicates some bias or shared fallacy. Therefore, we should not conclude that the ecumenical ultimist is in a superior position compared to the traditionalist.

In *Evolutionary Religion*, Schellenberg argues for what he calls “evolutionary scepticism.” It is based on the reasonable idea that we should not believe today what we suspect will turn out to be false in the future. He offers the following sufficient (though not necessary) criteria for belief-rejection on evolutionary grounds:

Notice, first of all, that a belief one is inclined to form may be *precise* as opposed to vague: its content clearly specifiable. A belief candidate may furthermore be *detailed* as opposed to simple, full of particulars and thus complex or multifaceted, having many parts. Third, it may be *profound*. Profundity in a belief, let’s say, involves its offering a deep understanding of how things are in the world, and one fairly comprehensive in scope... A belief may also be *attractive* — such as human beings generally would wish to be true, it may be *ambitious*, by which I mean that it may concern matters that strongly resist human attempts to understand... Finally, a belief may be *controversial*, with different diligent inquirers finding different and conflicting views on it persuasive.⁴²

Most traditional religious views are singled out by these criteria (as are detailed and profound non-religious views) while ultimism is not. However, the purpose of these criteria can be understood in at least two ways. On a weak reading, the criteria only require a move from belief to non-doxasticism, while on a stronger interpretation they require a complete rejection of the views they apply to.⁴³

The problem with the strong reading is that it turns evolutionary scepticism into a self-defeating position. Schellenberg has argued that the basic claims of evolutionary scepticism are general and unattractive.⁴⁴ However, it is not evolutionary scepticism itself, but the theories leading to the view which are susceptible in this regard. Evolutionary scepticism becomes self-defeating on a strong interpretation because the criteria for belief-rejection would have us reject the scientific theories the evolutionary picture is based upon. The Darwinian evolutionary theory and physical theories about the deep future of Earth are precise, detailed, profound, and ambitious. They are also attractive, at least for people seeking understanding of the natural world. The criterion regarding controversy is the only one not speaking against these scientific theories. However, we have good reasons to reject this criterion. Schellenberg’s driving intuition is that the discovery of a deep future should make us epistemically humble. Believing something just because it is uncontroversial today does not seem like an appropriate way of responding to that insight.

Since the strong interpretation is self-defeating, we must settle for the weaker interpretation where the criteria only demand a move from belief to non-doxasticism. That means that the criteria cannot be used to argue for non-doxastic ultimism over non-doxastic traditional religion.

Schellenberg’s latest case for religion without details is found in *Religion After Science*, where committing non-doxastically to religion without details is called being “doubly” or “extra” agnostic.⁴⁵ He offers

42 Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion*, 49–50, italics in original.

43 It should be noted that Schellenberg himself seems to presuppose the weaker interpretation, at least in his more recent work. See Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion*, 52.

44 J. L. Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Cornell Univ. Press, 2007), 48–49.

45 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 104–105. However, I find the terms “doubly” or “extra” agnostic ill-suited to describe religion without details. What Schellenberg in fact suggests is rejection rather than suspension of judgement, and it is hard to see what second level agnosticism would amount to.

three reasons for rejecting religious details on non-doxasticism. The first is that non-doxastic religion should be hospitable to apostates who have rejected traditional religion:

Notice that among the Nones are many so-called apostates, who were once conventionally religious... but who have left the fold. And often this is because they simply don't find the detailed beliefs of their tradition credible anymore... So if agnostic religion were not able to be doubly agnostic in the way I'm proposing, it wouldn't have any room for these Nones.⁴⁶

I have argued repeatedly that the move from belief to non-doxasticism is enough to meet the intellectual demands of evolutionary religion. It does not matter whether one is an apostate or not — rejecting belief in a detailed view in no way warrants rejecting the same view taken non-doxastically. Of course, it could be the case that the apostate no longer considers the detailed religious view she has left an epistemic possibility. In such case, that particular religious view is rationally unavailable also from a non-doxastic perspective. However, there will always be other detailed religious options available — a Christian apostate could turn to non-doxastic Buddhism.⁴⁷ Or is Schellenberg only suggesting that former believers can have emotional difficulties with detailed religion? While this surely gives the emotionally scarred apostate therapeutic reasons to prefer ultimism, it does not give such reasons to anybody else. Also, I cannot see that therapeutic reasons would carry much force when weighted against the alignment argument. Choosing a religion which makes you feel good over one which might enable contact with divine reality seems a poor choice.

The second reason to reject religious details reads as follows:

Many of the arguments I used to build our immaturity framework and support the new agnosticism in earlier chapters do double duty, justifying also this extra agnosticism. For example, the bad record of past religion... the special challenges religion faces because of its big ambitions and our humble talents... not to mention the new facts about deep time⁴⁸

I will address the immaturity framework and the claim that religion has a bad record in the next section. For now, I only want to contest Schellenberg's sweeping claims about arguments doing "double duty." It is not the case that arguments for agnosticism and non-doxasticism in general also support a move from detailed religion to ultimism. I hope to have shown why we should resist such conclusions when it comes to the openness aim and evolutionary scepticism. Likewise, we should resist them concerning the examples in this argument: if one rejects religious belief in favour for a non-doxastic approach, it is not at all obvious that rationality requires one to do anything further when confronted with deep time or the limits of human cognition.

The third reason concerns religious investigation, and it is perhaps the most persuasive:

Given our present religious immaturity, we ought to spread our investigations far and wide, exposing every detailed picture of transcendent things we can for careful inspection, just so we don't miss what details are right through premature specification⁴⁹

Note that this is an argument for being an ecumenical, one-to-many ultimist rather than a radical. It should not be denied that the ecumenical ultimist has an advantage when it comes to religious exploration and investigation. However, religious investigation can only be a secondary goal. The primary goal for all religion which deals with soteriological ultimacy must be to enable the achievement of the ultimate human good. As suggested by the alignment argument, this should make us prefer traditional religion.

46 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 104.

47 Of course, it is also possible to actively disbelieve *all* detailed religious claims and still regard ultimism as epistemically possible. For such a person, I grant that Schellenberg's ultimism will be the best non-doxastic option available. Unlike apostasy, however, I think it is a very rare position.

48 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 104.

49 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 104–105.

VI. ARE WE RELIGIOUSLY IMMATURE?

Schellenberg has often repeated the “immaturity thesis,” according to which it is at least an epistemic possibility that we are an immature species. Even though I find it problematic to speak about a species as immature in anything but a metaphorical sense, I will not address the general immaturity thesis. Instead, I will focus on the more specific thesis that humanity is *religiously* immature, which Schellenberg elaborates at length in *Religion After Science*.

In Schellenberg’s view, present-day religion represents an immature stage of “the religion project of *Homo sapiens*.” He bases this assumption on three things: the huge ambitions of the religion project, the prospect of future development in a billion years to come, and the assessment that the project so far has “a poor record.”⁵⁰ While it is a basic assumption of evolutionary religion that there is a deep future where important development can take place, the idea that religion is a great and ambitious human project which has so far not been going very well is more controversial and requires further attention.

In Schellenberg’s view, the goal of the religion project of humanity is to determine whether there is a transcendent reality or not, or alternatively to establish that any possible knowledge concerning the transcendent is forever inaccessible to us. When we reach our cognitive limits, the project will be completed:

For whenever the limits of our capacities, however modest, are reached, and no further development is humanly possible, one of two things has got to be true: (i) humans have determined that there is a triply transcendent reality or determined that there is no such reality, or (ii) this has not occurred... Thus, one way or the other, the inquiry is completed and its goal achieved whenever our capacities for religious inquiry in the broad sense are exhausted.⁵¹

I find much to object to here. First, talking about reaching the limits of our cognitive capacities makes little sense from an evolutionary perspective. We can only speculate in what ways humanity might evolve, much less make any guesses concerning the cognitive limits of the species which are to come after us. Schellenberg seems to suppose that there is an absolute limit to biologically based cognition, but what would that be? Secondly, if, for the sake of discussion, we suppose that there is such a limit, how could you tell if your own species has encountered it? Short of reaching the logical limits of cognition, that is omniscience, I cannot see how any creatures could possibly tell that they cannot develop further.

The main thing I find objectionable, however, is how Schellenberg is framing religion as a research project. Even if we grant that religion could be thought of as a project (and this is granting a lot), it is not mainly an epistemic project, but an existential and soteriological one. Schellenberg appears to confuse one of the main goals of the philosophy of religion (i.e. knowledge about ultimate reality) with the goal of religion itself. People do not engage in religion with the main purpose of finding out whether its propositional content is true, they do so in an attempt to live their lives in alignment with ultimate reality.

Schellenberg tries to pre-empt this objection by making a distinction between the goal of the religion project, and the concrete goals of existing “robust” religion. He does not deny that existing religions typically have alignment-goals, such as living in a personal relationship with God.⁵² He only holds that the overarching religion project is epistemic in character.⁵³

I do not find this line of reasoning very convincing. How can the goal of religion change if, instead of considering individual religions, we move to the meta-level and view religion as a great human project? In science, which must surely be labelled a “great human project” if this term is at all applicable, we find no similar discrepancy. Very simplified, the goal of science is to improve our understanding of the natural world. This goal holds for both individual researchers and scientific institutions, as it holds on the meta-level for scientific disciplines and for science as a whole. If religion is indeed a great human

50 Ibid., 52.

51 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 61.

52 As I think Schellenberg acknowledges, it is hard to see how religion containing the idea of soteriological ultimacy could have any other goal than achieving the ultimate human good in relation to it.

53 Schellenberg, *Religion After Science*, 15–16.

project, the goal of religion when conceived at the meta-level should only differ from the concrete goals of religious people and existing religions by its level of abstraction.

We should also consider that in religion in general, epistemic endeavours have instrumental rather than intrinsic value.⁵⁴ The point of religious belief-systems is to enable alignment with ultimate reality and make possible the achievement of the ultimate human good. Alignment and the achievement of the ultimate good is what has intrinsic religious value, not the knowledge we need to reach these things. It seems highly implausible to suggest that this would change on a meta-level, when considering religion as a project.

Therefore, the goal of the religion project cannot be to attain certainty regarding the ultimate, but to achieve alignment. If one wants to regard religion as “a great project of humanity,” its magnificent end goal would presumably be a state where everyone exists in perfect alignment with ultimate reality. However, since many present religions tend to emphasize the individual’s role in the alignment process, I am not sure the collective interpretation suggested by the idea of a great human project is applicable.

What remains of the religious immaturity thesis after the idea of a great epistemic project has been abandoned is the insight that present-day religion has much potential for further development in the deep future. That religion is immature in this weak sense is hardly controversial from the perspective of evolutionary religion. I cannot even see how one could adopt the perspective without embracing it.

The result of this section has significant impact on our main question, whether we should prefer ultimism or traditional religion as evolutionary religion. Had transcendent knowledge been the goal of religion, we would have had a persuasive case for ultimism, since arguably religious inquiry is more important to the ultimist than to the traditionalist. However, since religion is primarily about contact with the divine and the ultimate human good, we have strong reasons for preferring traditional religion over ultimism.

VII. SUMMARY

Evolutionary religion calls for non-doxasticism, on that I agree with Schellenberg. But what is its proper object? Schellenberg’s main arguments for preferring ultimism over traditional religion have all been shown to be untenable. Once we have moved from belief-based religion to non-doxasticism, there is simply no need to make the secondary move from traditional religion to ultimism.

Traditional religion has an evolutionary advantage over radical ultimism, since it provides future generations with advanced religious concepts and forms of life to build on, enabling religion to keep evolving. It is hard to see how religion could evolve from a position rejecting all details. Granted, the ecumenical ultimist seems to be on par with the traditionalist here. Even if she is not able to penetrate a single religious way of life as deeply as the traditionalist, she compensates by taking part in multiple religions.

However, traditional religion has a further major advantage over both radical and ecumenical ultimism. It is an epistemic possibility that one of our present-day religions has got it right enough to allow for alignment with the divine, and that possibility is hard to reconcile with the basic thrust of ultimism. By keeping the detailed soteriological information of traditional religion, the non-doxastic traditionalist remains in a position which might allow for contact with ultimate reality (if there is one, and she has the good luck of betting on the right details). Since such alignment is supposed to lead to the ultimate human good, a possibility to achieve it must always be prioritized. Therefore, we should prefer traditional religion over ultimism also when considering things from an evolutionary perspective.

54 The exception is of course Gnosticism, where the religious knowledge itself is what brings salvation.

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