

In defense of natural religion

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Abstract: The dominance of the Abrahamic tradition in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion has led some to call for greater exploration of alternatives to the traditional conception of God, such as Pantheism, Ultimism, and Axiarchism. While we think this call for alternatives is important, we go in a different direction. Rather than explore and defend alternative conceptions of God, we defend a range of fairly traditional but non-religious conceptions of God. This range of views, from deism to philosophical theism, enjoys a variety of benefits over its religious competitors and deserves greater attention.

Keywords: Deism, Theism, Faith, Religious Commitment, Revelation

[C]reation is the Bible of the true believer in God. Everything in this vast volume inspires him with sublime ideas of the Creator.

- Thomas Paine, *Of the Religion of Deism Compared With the Christian Religion*

Introduction

Andrei Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa (2016, 9) observe that some critics think ‘that much philosophy of religion today amounts to smartly dressed apologetics.’ Whatever the merits of this criticism, it is clear that the Abrahamic tradition, and Christianity in particular, dominates contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. More papers than one could hope to read focus on the incarnation, atonement, trinity, and other topics of interest to Christians primarily. While these debates are important, their dominance in the literature

is odd in a philosophical, although not sociological, sense. This is because there is a range of underappreciated, alternative views that deserves greater attention.

In response to the excessively Christian focus of the field, Buckareff and Nagasawa call for greater exploration of alternatives to the traditional Christian conception of God, such as Pantheism, Ultimism, and Axiarchism.¹ Our goal here is to go in a different direction, and defend a range of *traditional*, but *non-religious* views of God. Proponents of alternative conceptions of God argue that we should understand conceptions of the divine on a spectrum, with classical theism on one end and, say, Pantheism on the other. Their point being that there is a logical space between these poles populated by worthwhile conceptions of God. But there is another *dimension* to popular views on the divine insofar as belief in God is often accompanied by various other beliefs, say, that He became man, intervened in the world with good news, or promises eternal happiness for the faithful. So, for any conception of God, there are also often other commitments, generally of a religious nature. Imagine Christian teaching could be summed thus: J. Traditional Christianity, then, could be understood as Theism + J. The views we aim to defend subtract J and it analogates from this crude equation.²

This range of views, from Deism to Philosophical Theism, holds onto the fairly traditional conception of God as a personal, transcendent ontological source of the world, but jettisons claims about, say, God becoming human, sacrificing His only son for our sins, and being three persons of one substance. While the history of Deism and Philosophical Theism is replete with condemnation and failure (see Grasso 2008; Walters 1992, 34-43), we think that, philosophically, these views deserve far more attention; in fact, the lack of philosophical engagement with these views is genuinely astonishing.³

First, we lay out the details of the range of views we hope to defend and clarify the nature of the religious commitments we divorce these views from. Next, we detail some of the chief merits of these views, which are, generally, of an evidentialist flavor. Then we consider and respond to what we take to be the most serious objections to Deism and Philosophical Theism. In all, our goal is quite modest: we hope to put a range of views back on the table as serious and worth exploring further.⁴

Deism, Philosophical Theism, and the Nature of Religious Commitments

The range of views we hope to defend has Deism on one end and Philosophical Theism on the other end. Deism is the view that there is a personal, transcendent ontological source of the world, but one that doesn't much care for the world, or, more minimally, doesn't intervene in the world.⁵ Philosophical Theism holds that there is a personal, transcendent ontological source of the world, but that it does care for the world, and may intervene in it.⁶ We're interested in this *range* of views because we're drawn to the idea of an neutral creator, a mere source of the world, yet think a creator might be loving, interventionist, and so on. For instance, if the world exists only contingently, then God must have *elected* to create, and this points to a *generous agent* (O'Connor 2008, ch. 4; Rasmussen 2009).

Aquinas concludes each of his five ways with the proclamation: *and this all men call God*. We're with Aquinas. So, the God we have in mind is the prime mover, the uncaused cause, the necessary being, the maximum of perfection, the intelligent source of order in the universe. While we're not concerned here with picking divine attributes, we generally understand the God of Deism and Philosophical Theism to be maximally perfect, infinite, immaterial, simple, wholly independent, eternal, and so on.⁷ And, finally, while we conceive of God as the creator or ontological source of the world, we try to remain neutral on issues of metatheological fundamentality (see Kvanvig 2021).

So, the views we're interested in hold that there is a personal, transcendent ontological source of the world. Importantly, that's it. We think it is immanently plausible that someone who believes that the world has a transcendent source would, say, thank, praise, venerate, and worship that source. Certain actions and attitudes might even be rationally entailed by belief in God. For instance, endorsement of Philosophical Theism might practically require us to live according to certain moral principles if there are good reasons to think God is the source and/or measure of normativity (more on this in section 4 below). But it is a wholly other matter whether those who believe the world has a transcendent source *also* believe that ontological source became human, is of three persons, and so on.

A religious commitment is, in broad stroke, a teaching handed to practitioners from some appropriate authority of a religious group that is to be taken on faith.⁸ We can think of religious commitments as *cognitive* or *propositional*, or *conative*. The former are about what one is to believe or endorse. For instance, Christians generally believe that Jesus was the God-Man, that God is three persons, that eternal happiness awaits the faithful. Conative religious commitments, then, are those that do not have to do with, or aren't best construed along the lines of, what one is to believe. Generally, they are about how one is to live and the attitudes one is to take up. For instance, Christians aim to live in a Christlike fashion, following Jesus as a model of behavior. The religious commitments we want to divorce Deism and Philosophical Theism from are cognitive or propositional in nature.

Deism and Philosophical Theism, along with most any other philosophical view, are constituted by sets of propositions. Endorsing one set of propositions rather than another is what makes one a Deist, Philosophical Theist, or anything else. This point is hinted at by Richard Swinburne (2001, 4-5):

Yet the practices of the religion only have a point if there is a God—there is no point in worshipping a non-existent creator or asking him to do something on Earth or take us to Heaven if he does not exist; or trying to live our lives in accord with his will, if he has no will. If someone is to be rational in practising the Christian, Islamic or Jewish religion, he needs to believe (to some degree) the credal claims which underlie the practice. These claims include as their central claim, one presupposed by all the other claims, the claim that there is a God.

So, if, say, Philosophical Theism is constituted by proposition G, and Christianity is constituted by propositions G and J, the difference between the two is the inclusion of J. One can endorse G and take up various conative commitments and still just be a Philosophical Theist, but one cannot be a Christian should they reject J but manage to live a Christlike life (see Kvanvig 2018 and Rooney 2019).⁹ So, what's at issue, and so, what defines Deism and Philosophical Theism, is what one *believes*.¹⁰

In Defense of Deism and Philosophical Theism

The task of defending Deism and Philosophical Theism consists of two phases. The first is to provide positive reasons for believing in the existence of a transcendent ontological source of the world. We don't see this as part of our task here. We have our favorite arguments for the existence of God, and we suppose that others who believe in the existence of God have their favorites too. The second phase is making sure things stop with the affirmation of the existence of God. This is where our work begins.

In this section, we assume it is reasonable to believe in the existence of God on the basis of natural theological arguments and focus on providing reasons for not taking on religious commitments in addition to the belief in God. We'll focus on three main reasons, all of an evidentialist flavor: *Risk*, *Baggage*, and *Rationality*.¹¹ As will become clear, none of these reasons, individually or in conjunction, constitutes a knockdown argument for Deism or Philosophical Theism. Overall, we think, these reasons provide a good *general case* for taking Deism and Philosophical Theism seriously.¹²

Risk

The endorsement of certain propositions is risky. Both on their face and after scrutiny, some propositions seem likely to be false. Endorsing these propositions, rather than others (or remaining agnostic), comes with greater *epistemic risk*: we're more likely to hold false beliefs when endorsing these propositions.

On the table before you it seems as if there is a tomato. While there are numerous possible explanations of this seeming, consider these: (1) there is before you on the table a tomato, and (2) an evil scientist is probing your brain such that it seems to you as if there is a tomato on the table. (2) is riskier than (1); on its face and after scrutinizing reflection, it seems one is more likely to hold a false belief should they endorse (2) over (1).

We take it that many religious commitments are quite risky in this sense. That is, we think that many religious commitments seem likely to be false, and so, one should avoid endorsing them. One has a better position vis-a-vis epistemic risk should they just endorse Deism or Philosophical Theism instead of endorsing some sort of Religious Theism.

Our point needs to be unpacked, however. For, it seems as though talk of epistemic risk, in the above sense, could just be a roundabout way of saying ‘*I don’t find P plausible*’. For, how is one to determine the likelihood of a particular proposition’s being false, and so, risky? Well, by their own lights, given the available evidence. But if epistemic risk were wholly relative to subjects and their available evidence in this sense, it would be uninteresting. It would be the philosopher’s way of saying ‘*I don’t buy it!*’.

First of all, our point is not merely a probabilistic one. For example, Lanaster (2018) has argued that Theism is almost certainly false because its probability is minuscule, especially compared to what he calls ‘alternative monotheisms,’ such as Deism and the existence of a non-maximal God. His argument is Bayesian, or probabilistic, in nature.¹³

Our point, rather, is to understand the epistemic risk of certain religious commitments in terms of their *extraordinary nature*. It doesn’t seem as though every proposition ought to be given equal weight; some things are more plausible, more likely to be true, than others. (1) just is more likely to be true, and so is less risky, than (2). This is due to the fact that (2) is a relatively *incredible* or *extraordinary* way to explain the fact that it seems to you as if a tomato is on the table. For the purposes of our argument here, we don’t find it necessary to provide an account of what makes a proposition (or anything else) extraordinary. We think examples make our point clear enough. Extraordinary, and so, risky, propositions include:

Human beings are subject to the whims of reptilian overlords.

Water just appears to be H₂O, but it really isn’t; it is something else.

Solipsism is true.

We think it is obvious that these propositions are very likely to be false. And so, we think it is obvious that endorsing them is risky. Thus, one probably should not endorse them.

We do not think that religious commitments, such as that God became human, belong on the list above (although some, no doubt, do think so).¹⁴ We’re more confident in the truth of Christianity than the

truth of Solipsism, to be sure. But if we were to rank propositions according to their riskiness, some core religious commitments would approach these and other obviously risky propositions. Thus, one probably should not take up those religious commitments. Or, more minimally, given one's other epistemic commitments and dispositions, it is, on the whole, better not to take up religious commitments.

Baggage

Romantic partners, new houses, and religions have the following in common: they come with baggage. When you begin a new relationship, the side effects, aftermath, and other interesting leftovers from previous relationships sometimes come to the fore slowly (or not slowly at all). When you move in to a house, you might notice that beneath the agreeable grey is a kaleidoscopic stratum of offensive paint colors. And, when you endorse a worldview, philosophical position, and, especially, a religion, you realize you must address a bevy of philosophical and theological issues. In other words, most religious theists have to take on a good bit of work to inhabit the spaces they do. Deism and Philosophical Theism avoid that work, and this speaks in their favor.

Think, for example, of the problems and mysteries Deism and Philosophical Theism avoid compared to traditional Christianity: they avoid the need to make sense of the trinity, the incarnation, the presence of Christ in the host, and issues regarding the interpretation and reliability of scripture. Deists and philosophical theists marshal their preferred arguments for the existence of God, consider and respond to objections to those arguments, and head home. The religious theist must do this all too, but they must further try to make sense of (sometimes) bewildering doctrines, or simply take them on as mysteries. But no one should be happy with bewildering doctrines or mysteries. This is not to say that there are no adequate accounts of the trinity, *et cetera* from religious theists. But insofar as Deism and Philosophical Theism avoid even having to deal with bewildering doctrines and mysteries, they are more attractive than Religious Theisms.

To put our point differently, and more vividly: imagine what is supposed to be a peaceful cocktail party for those who believe in a traditional conception of God. While everyone in attendance shares the core

and fundamental belief in God, their differences soon cause both intramural and inter-sect strife. In one corner is a shouting match over what ‘real presence’ amounts to; in another corner is a lively discussion about whether or not Arians are Christians; and, throughout, there is clamoring about who the final prophet is. While this is unfolding, deists and philosophical theists look at each other, lean back on the bar, and say to themselves, ‘Get a load of this!’ Deism and Philosophical Theism are fairly clean and unencumbered views, especially compared to their religious counterparts.¹⁵

Rationality

Our third and final point is bound to sound overly controversial. So, let’s hedge off any misunderstandings. We do not think religious commitments lack justification, or make one irrational. We do not think that taking things on faith makes one irrational (Buchak 2012; Jackson 2020). We do not think that the only rational response to the current evidence is Deism or Philosophical Theism (Pettigrew 2022). We do not deny that religious beliefs may be properly basic (Plantinga 2000). We do not deny the possibility of genuine religious experiences, that religious experiences or perceptions may ground religious beliefs (Alston 1991). We do not deny that seemings—ways the world *seems* to us—can justify religious beliefs (Gage and McAllister 2020). We do not think testimony is a bad or defective way to acquire knowledge, or that authority is epistemically worthless (Zagzebski 2012). We do not reject the possibility of special divine action, and so, the potential legitimacy of revelation (see Larmer 2015 and other contributions in the same issue). We do not think philosophical reflection on religious commitments is misguided, or that these various sources of justification cannot be construed along evidentialist lines. However, we think it is better to have the support of natural reason for a proposition than it is to not have the support of natural reason. And we think the deist and philosophical theist have the support of natural reason maximally while the religious theist must take on various commitments not supported directly, or very well, by natural reason. This speaks in favor of the former.

There are various ways to get, and various kinds of, evidence. So, there are various ways to support or justify our beliefs. We think that some are better than others. As with our discussion of extraordinary

propositions above, we don't quite have a theory of how one way of gathering evidence, or, supporting our beliefs, is better than another. We think the idea is fairly intuitive. In justifying our belief about whether or not it is raining outside, it is better to rely on our own sensory experience than it is to rely on the 'testimony' of a magic eight ball. We're unsure about there being one, universal, best way to support beliefs. It seems to depend on the nature of the belief we're trying to support. For example, propositions concerning the weather outside our office are supported best by our own sensory experiences and not, say, formal proof or philosophical argumentation. Formal proof is best, though, for supporting mathematical beliefs. However, things are different with the existence of God. The existence of God is not verifiable, and so, relying on sensory experience is out of the question. Formal proof could work, but seems less than ideal (we're not enthusiastic about ontological arguments). But philosophical argumentation, as evinced by natural theology, seems well-suited to support the belief in God and other metaphysical beliefs.

Consider now various religious commitments, such as that God is of three persons. This is not something accessible to natural reason; the question 'how many persons is God?' would not occur to the natural theologian. The Christian theist takes on the trinity as a religious commitment. How do they support it? Testimony. (Of course, the doctrine is articulated and elucidated via philosophical argumentation, but its initial and core support is of a testimonial nature.) Our point is that the doctrine of the trinity, along with other religious commitments, would be better off if supported by philosophical argumentation. In general, a proposition concerning the nature of the divine is better off when supported by independent philosophical argumentation. But religious theists take on a whole host of commitments not supported by natural reason. Insofar as deists and philosophical theists only go as far as the best evidence permits, they're in better epistemic position than religious theists.

Here's another, perhaps better, way to put our point. Generally—although this is an idealization—when forming beliefs, we look to what the best evidence supports. That evidence comes from direct sensory experience, empirical science, formal proof, and philosophical reflection and argumentation. When forming beliefs about how many fingers are on our right hand, we consult sensory experience. When forming beliefs

about gestation, we consult embryology and its constituent work. When forming beliefs about the sum of two numbers, we consult formal arguments (or something near enough). When forming beliefs about the nature of normativity, we consult metaethics and its constituent philosophical arguments. However, when it comes to forming beliefs about God, many consult revelation and tradition, or justify their beliefs in non-ideal ways. We think this is odd. Why would we not form our beliefs about God by the usual, best methods? Why, for so many, is there a glaring exception in their belief-forming practices (cf. Sikka 2017)? We don't think that there is no legitimate empirical work or philosophical argumentation that supports the religious commitments of religious theists. Nor do we think special revelation is epistemically useless. Rather, we think that there is an odd asymmetry in how many go about forming their beliefs about the divine compared to how they form their other beliefs.¹⁶ If we all went about forming our beliefs about God in the usual, best ways, more of us would be deists or philosophical theists, not religious theists. In other words, we think that, given the best evidence, there should be a presumption of Deism or Philosophical Theism over Religious Theism (cf. Flew 1972).

Objections

The positive case for Deism and Philosophical Theism is straightforward but fairly thin. Overall, we think Deism and Philosophical Theism fare better, from an epistemic point of view, than Religious Theisms: Deism and Philosophical Theism (1) avoid risky views, (2) are relatively unencumbered, and (3) are the views we would likely hold if we followed only our best belief supporting procedures when considering the divine. But the objections are legion.

Incommensurability

Deism and Philosophical Theism, as we've painted them, are philosophical positions; places one occupies after inquiry and reflection. However, Religious Theism seems to be more than just that. It provides an entire worldview with built-in, practical upshots: an arc of the universe, a normative theory, a framework for interpreting our experience of the world and our place in it, rites, rituals, and other devotional procedures. In short, Deism and Philosophical Theism are a different kind of *product* than Religious Theism.

This incommensurability brings to light two worries. (1) Most people don't go around 'shopping' for the most well-supported sets of propositions to endorse; they look for worldviews—with their various practical upshots—endorse them, and then try to make sense of their various constituent doctrines.¹⁷ Normal human beings form conceptions of and relations with the divine in a way radically different than the deist and philosophical theist seem to. Perhaps this signals that what's virtuous or praiseworthy in the formation and adoption of philosophical and other views isn't so in the case of our view about the divine. (2) Suppose you accept Deism or Philosophical Theism. You might then ask yourself, 'Now what?' It seems that, insofar as Deism and Philosophical Theism are merely philosophical positions, and not wholesale worldviews, that they lack the practical aspects of Religious Theism—rites, rituals, and other devotional procedures—that make religion worthwhile and rewarding. In other words, Deism and Philosophical Theism don't seem like religious live options.¹⁸

In response, both worries seem to take for granted that *there simply must* be more to God and our relationship with the divine than Deism and Philosophical Theism suggest. But this isn't obviously true. It might be that God's existence has no bearing on our place in the world, or how we should live, or our journey through the universe. It might be that God neither wants nor wishes for our gratitude and praise, or, if God does, that God does not care what form it comes in. In other words, it might be that the connection between the existence of God and the rest of one's worldview is weaker than we often suppose. If so, the force of these objections weakens.

Now, in response to (1) specifically, just because most human beings don't go around 'shopping' for views based on reason alone doesn't mean that they ought not to. Again, this is the very heart of Deism and Philosophical Theism: we *ought* (or have good reason, at least) to conceive of the divine and our relation to it only insofar as unaided natural reason allows, just as evidentialist considerations in other domains seem to require. Moral realists don't get to declare victory just because most human beings assume their view tacitly and go around looking for a normative theory. The sociological fact that most of us commit to a worldview

and then aim to support it with reason is no critique of those who commit to only those views supported by reason alone.

In response to (2) specifically, there is nothing about the range of views we're advancing that prohibits, shuns, or chides rites, rituals, or any other devotional procedures.¹⁹ While Deism and Philosophical Theism may seem fairly bare-bones in terms of religious and devotional practices, they needn't be so. It is just that, on their face, they don't commit one to any particular religious practices. Or, if they do, then it is to be shown by philosophical argumentation, not appeal to authority, revealed testimony, and the rest. So, instead of thinking of Deism and Philosophical Theism as incomplete views lacking practical guidance, we think of them as views with a fair bit of epistemically underdetermined content.²⁰ Just as it would make little sense to criticize religious theists early in the history of their tradition for a lack of practical advice or precise rites and rituals, we feel it makes little sense to criticize deists and philosophical theists for their dearth 'doctrinal guidance' on such matters.²¹

Wagers

Part of the motivation for Deism and Philosophical Theism is that they commit us to fewer risky propositions than Religious Theisms. They aim at truth accessible to reason, and that's it. But there is no obvious payoff besides that. Religious theists, on the other hand, have reasons for thinking that there is more in store for us. In broad stroke: belief in God, but, more specifically, belief in the *right* God, following the teachings of the *right* prophet, partaking in *certain* rites and rituals, is argued to offer salvation, eternal bliss, endless reward. So, you might think that there is a wholly pragmatic reason for being a religious theist: the risk-reward ratio favors Religious Theism over Deism and Philosophical Theism insofar as the former comes with the promise of infinite benefit. In short: religious theists seem to have a wager-style argument in their favor.²²

First, note this objection rests on several assumptions. It supposes God offers salvation and the rest. Second, religious pluralism, at least as it is usually understood, must be false. Third, it assumes that more, or something more specific, than belief in God is required for salvation, for example, that accepting, say, Jesus,

is the only way to God. We've said nothing about God's salvific plans (if there are any, what they are, how they're achieved) or pluralism, and we do not plan to. However, take on these assumptions for argument's sake. So, a particular kind of religious theist has the benefit of a decision matrix with infinite value in a quadrant whereas the Deist and Philosophical Theist do not.

Our worry with this kind of objection is that it can underwrite wild wagers. Any subject with a non-zero credence in this kind of religious theist's claims must submit to the wager. But this can license truly incredible beliefs. Come up with any extravagant Religious Theism you want. A wager in this theism will always prove rational when compared to more modest positions like those in the range we're defending. So, if this objection succeeds, we think it proves far too much. Our credence in the proposition that eating apricots daily is necessary for salvation is not zero, but we do not, nor will we begin to, eat apricots daily. Obviously, this doesn't make us irrational.

The Value of Faith

There are many different accounts of faith (see Rettler 2018). However we understand faith though, it seems to be valuable. Persons of faith might be thought to have a resilience and grit that others lack. But Deism and Philosophical Theism seem to chide faith: they follow reason, and reason alone, concerning matters of the divine. Insofar as deists and philosophical theists chide religious faith, they lose out on the value and meaning it can offer. This is a count against these positions.

To be clear, we don't think that faith lacks value, even epistemic value. We simply think that faith is a less-than-ideal justification for many beliefs, particularly risky religious ones. To see this, all one needs to do is imagine how strange it would be if we relied on faith to justify beliefs about the number of stars in the universe, what our partner is making for dinner Tuesday evening, or what the correct normative ethical theory is.

That said, deists and philosophical theists may have room for faith, or, at least, its cognates. Shifting to the religious domain, while the deist and philosophical theist, as we've painted them, won't assent to

religious propositions on faith, it seems reasonable that they could hope for them to be true. Compare: 'I have faith that my partner is making meatloaf Tuesday evening' and 'I hope that my partner is making meatloaf Tuesday evening'. The former seems to cognitively commit the speaker, to some degree, to a state of affairs obtaining, while the latter expresses a desire, inclination, or other positive conative attitude towards a state of affairs obtaining. Should quiche be what's for supper on Tuesday, we'd have an epistemic strike, of some sort, against the former speaker but not the latter; the latter would simply be disappointed.²³ If there is something to this distinction, we think the deist and philosophical theist can fruitfully incorporate hope, even religious hope, into their lives, and so, reap its benefits.

Might this admission undercut motivation for Deism and Philosophical Theism though? If hope is admissible, might the deist who hopes for the truth of Christianity be, well, a Christian or something near enough? No. Insofar as positions like Deism, Philosophical Theism, and Religious Theism are defined in terms of core propositional commitments, we do not think this admission undercuts our motivations. If Susie doesn't believe in God, but hopes God exists, she is an atheist. In the same way, if Jimbo believes in an interventionist God, but denies that Jesus Christ was God incarnate, even though he hopes Jesus was God incarnate, Jimbo is just a Theist. While it is plausible that hope is constituted in part by some non-zero credence (Jackson 2021: 44), it seems wrong to call someone who all but denies, say, the divinity of Christ, a Christian, even if they hope or wish for the divinity of Christ. In other words, the cognitive component of hope, supposing there is one, seems as though it could be so miniscule as to make no genuine difference to the doxastic profile of an agent.²⁴

Explanatory Resources

One might concede that Deism and Philosophical Theism are in a better epistemic position compared to Religious Theism, but doubt these views are the best views wholesale. Perhaps the religious theist has certain resources that allow for better explanations of other issues in the philosophy of religion? Take, for instance, the problem of evil. It seems Christian theists have unique resources that potentially make their views more explanatorily powerful. For instance, it would be of significant theodical value if God became man and

participated in a representative sample of human suffering, demonstrating solidarity with all human beings (see, for example, Adams 1999 and Bell 2020). If this is so, then perhaps Deism and Philosophical Theism, whatever their epistemic benefits, just don't do enough explanatory work to be taken seriously.

While we believe this to be an important objection, explanatory power must be weighed against other theoretical virtues. Even though the doctrine of the incarnation provides Christian theists with special resources which can help explain how the existence of an all-loving and all-powerful God is compatible with the presence of evil and suffering in the world, the incarnation comes with its own attendant problems. Whether things balance out in favor of Christian Theism or Deism and Philosophical Theism in terms of overall explanatory power is unclear. Obviously, we think that there is a strong case to be made for Deism and Philosophical Theism.

Moreover, the range of views we're defending has its own unique explanatory resources and maneuvers. Deism, in particular, has open to it a wider array of responses to evil, divine hiddenness, and related issues than Religious Theism. Indeed, it is noteworthy that Epicurus, who famously gave one of the earliest formulations of the problem of evil, did not argue for God's non-existence, but for a non-interventionist conception of the gods. According to Epicurus, the gods live in a state of perfect happiness, completely detached from the human world and its affairs; for, if the gods did care about human life and were concerned with the innumerable tragedies that define human history, this would infringe upon the gods' perfect tranquility (on Epicurean theology, see Obbink 1989). Similarly, someone who found both cosmological arguments for the existence of God and, say, the evidential problem of evil convincing could adopt a broadly deistic picture (see Harper 2020, ch. 5; Mulgan 2015, ch. 1) While we do not endorse or develop this Epicurean line of argument here, it is worth flagging as an explanatory advantage unique to (at least some of) the views we're defending here.

Incomprehensibility

Plausibly, there are things that we cannot know about God through the use of reason alone: whether God has a providential plan for creation, what that plan is, if God wants us to behave in certain ways, whether there is

punishment or reward awaiting us. In other words, God and our relation to the divine is not wholly accessible to us through reason alone. Religious Theisms, however, have the means to fill in the gaps: tradition and revelation. Because of this, Religious Theisms can give us a richer, more detailed picture of the divine, and so, are to be favored over Deism and Philosophical Theism (cf. Moser 2010, ch 3).

Many historical deists were motivated by the idea that God's plans must be available to all human beings, regardless of time and place (Byrne 1989, 53-61). Because God is omnibenevolent and perfectly just—attributes we may arrive at through the use of reason alone—salvation must be 'open access.' Our motivations and commitments are different than these historical deists however. We haven't argued that unaided reason alone gets us everything that there is to know about God. We're not arguing, for instance, that we can deduce God's providential plan (if there is one) from our own conceptions of justice. We're not religious rationalists; man is not the measure of God (Byrne 1989, 56). So, we're happy to admit that we are in the dark concerning much about the divine. However, this doesn't support Religious Theism. That Religious Theisms outstrip Deism and Philosophical Theism isn't evidence that Religious Theisms are true; they simply purport to give us a more detailed picture of the divine. So, this objection either presupposes that revelation and matters of faith are on equal epistemic footing to reason in giving us truths about the divine—something the deist and philosophical theist will reject—or is just a version of the explanatory power objection, already considered, above.

Conclusion

We've argued that a range of neglected views about the divine, from Deism to Philosophical Theism, has a host of epistemic benefits compared to its religious counterparts. Once more, we're *not* endorsing these views, nor do we think religious theists are irrational or epistemically irresponsible. We simply think that, qua philosophical positions, Deism and Philosophical Theism are serious, worthwhile views. Whether or not our case is robust enough to bring in any converts, we hope it at least brings attention to views that have received strikingly little attention in analytic philosophy of religion.

That said, we think that there are a host of other important questions those attracted to Deism and Philosophical Theism could explore. First and foremost: how can and should deists and philosophical theists organize their spiritual lives? Should they develop their own rites, rituals, and communities? Or, could they find space, somehow, in organized religions? Moreover, if faith, testimony, and other sources of evidence have some justifying power, are Deism and Philosophical Theism genuine positions, or just precursors of Religious Theism? That is, are Deism and Philosophical Theism just phases of the life of a Religious Theist? What accounts for the overwhelming success of Religious Theism compared to Deism and Philosophical Theism? While we have thoughts on these and other questions, again, we hope just to have brought attention to an underdiscussed position.²⁵

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Notes

¹ For further discussion of alternative conceptions of the divine, see the many contributions in Diller and Kasher (2013).

² We will appeal to Christian doctrines to demarcate our view. This is purely for reasons of convenience and familiarity. Our point applies to most organized religions.

³ This is especially so given that work in the sociology of religion suggests that many Americans are deists of a sort. See Smith and Denton (2005).

⁴ Neither of us are committed to or endorse Deism or Philosophical Theism, but we do find these views attractive, interesting, and strikingly underdiscussed. However, if one prefers to think in Bayesian terms: our credence in there being a transcendent ontological source of the world is fairly high relative to our credence in various religious claims, e.g., that God became incarnate.

⁵ For historical discussion of Deism, see Byrne (1989), Hudson (2009), Waligore (2023), and Walters (1992). For a recent philosophical defense of non-interventionist Deism, albeit one based on an idiosyncratic interpretation of physical theory, see Harper (2020). Mulgan (2015) defends a view, what he calls Ananthropocentric Purposivism, that can be interpreted along fairly Deistic lines; see Trigg (2017).

⁶ In a tweet—of all the things that we could cite—Kenneth Pearce calls this view *Generic Theism*. We're happy with either label, but stick to Philosophical Theism throughout.

<https://twitter.com/KennethL.Pearce/status/1542613267192827904>

⁷ You might wonder whether a traditional or classical God, or a God possessed of these attributes, could be a person or personal, as we've indicated the God of Deism and Philosophical Theism is. For example, some worry that a simple and infinite, and so immutable and eternal, being could not be personal in any familiar sense (see Kittle and Gasser 2022 and the references therein). We flag, but do not engage, this worry here for two reasons. First, our focus is on the specifically *areligious* nature of Deism and Philosophical Theism, and not the particularities of the God that they are committed to. Second, we're open to the God of Deism and Philosophical Theism being im- or a-personal. It is just that, for the same reasons we want to consider the specific *range* of views we're considering—contingency points to the *election* to create—we are attracted to a personal conception of God. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing to our attention this concern.

⁸ We do not have an account of what a religion is, but we hope our appeal to the Abrahamic tradition makes our gesture clear enough. As will become clearer below in section 4, however, we're comfortable with and assume something like Yandell's (2016, 10) definition: 'A religion is a conceptual system that provides an interpretation of the world and the place of human beings in it, bases an account of how life should be lived given that interpretation, and expresses this interpretation and lifestyle in a set of rituals, rites, institutions, and practices.'

⁹ Our focus here is on *defining positions*, not the nature and value of faith, and so, our concerns are different than those of Kvanvig and Rooney. However, given our focus on the propositional make-up of views we endorsed, we side with Rooney squarely. We discuss faith and its cognates more below.

¹⁰ While we don't have a theory of belief, we assume that we do have *some* control over what we believe. For further discussion, see Chignell (2010/2018).

¹¹ Our arguments do not hinge on accepting Evidentialism wholesale or in religious contexts. As will become clear, our arguments are merely of an evidentialist *flavor*. For a formulation and defense of Evidentialism, see Conee and Feldman (2004). For defense of Evidentialism in religious contexts, see DePoe (2020), Dormandy (2013) Dougherty and Rickabaugh (2017), and McAllister (2019). For a broader discussion of Evidentialism in religious contexts, see the contributions in Clark and VanArragon (2011).

¹² We believe that there are good non-epistemic arguments in favor of Deism and Philosophical Theism too. We hope to lay them out in other work.

¹³ There is a related, but boring, sense in which Deism and Philosophical Theism are obviously less risky than, say, Christianity: they seem to commit one to fewer propositions. We flag this point here, but pay it little attention, as this points one towards a sort of quietism we find objectionable. We consider an adjacent worry below.

¹⁴ We hope that it is obvious, but to be explicit: we mean no offense to religious theists with these examples. Our point with this list is just to get an intuitive sense of what we mean by extraordinary.

¹⁵ You might wonder whether this point about baggage and avoiding mysteries applies to Deism and Philosophical Theism as much as we claim it applies to Religious Theism. For, you might acknowledge that religious theists must deal with various baggage, but also think that belief in a personal, transcendent creator is itself 'baggage-constituting.' Compared to the likes of, say, Pantheism, and other alternative conceptions of God, Deism and Philosophical Theism, as we're considering them, have plenty of baggage. So, if avoiding baggage and mystery is the driving force, why stop at Deism and Philosophical Theism? Why not endorse some even less mysterious view? In response, we think that there are good independent grounds for Deism and Philosophical Theism in particular: some of the most convincing arguments from natural theology point to a personal transcendent creator (again, see O'Connor 2008, ch. 4 and Rasmussen 2009). Our point isn't that baggage and mystery should be extirpated from one's worldview, full-stop. It's that a particularly plausible range of views on God are so very often saddled with baggage and mystery that they, *qua*

conceptions of the divine, needn't be saddled with. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing to our attention this worry.

¹⁶ However, see the work of Rodney Holder (2021), and other 'Ramified Natural Theologians', who argue for the truth of particular religious claims, viz., those constitutive of Christianity, along the same lines of which we're advancing Deism and Philosophical Theism.

¹⁷ Or, perhaps, some are first convinced of the existence of God and then join a religious community. Either way, our points below stand.

¹⁸ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for comments that prompted us to sharpen and make clearer our thoughts in section.

¹⁹ For discussion of the related worry that the God of Deism and Philosophical Theism wouldn't be an appropriate object of worship, see Mulgan (2022).

²⁰ It is for this reason that we don't think, as some have suggested to us, that Deism and Philosophical Theism constitute a mere genus of which Religious Theism is a species. For, you might worry that the epistemic benefits that we claim Deism and Philosophical Theism enjoy are the uninteresting and obvious result of their being less specific than Religious Theisms. And, because of this—the distinct explanatory levels these views occupy—that our case for Deism and Philosophical Theism fails. To see the worry, suppose you come home and notice a freshly baked pie sitting on the kitchen window sill. There are two possible explanations: (1) someone left you a freshly baked pie, or (2) Angel, your elementary school friend who lives on the other side of town, left you a freshly baked pie. (1) is clearly less risky and the rest compared to (2). So, on our view, you should clearly endorse (1). But this is obvious: (1) is boring and uninteresting—albeit more likely to be true—because it is eviscerated of worthwhile and properly specific content. The lack of content in (1) compared to (2) shows that the latter is a species of the former, and so, that the two are operating at distinct explanatory levels. So, the worry goes, the epistemic benefits of endorsing (1) over (2) are specious. As should be clear from our discussion, however, this kind of objection begs the question against Deism and Philosophical Theism: these views do not reject the specificity of Religious Theisms. All they reject are the *particular specificities* that many Religious Theisms endorse.

²¹ All that said, many historical deists and philosophical theists had well worked-out rites, rituals, and devotional procedures. For a recent and detailed account of the rich spiritual lives of many historical deists and philosophical theists, see Waligore (2023, ch. 5).

²² See Jackson and Rogers (2019) for a recent and thorough defense of wager-style arguments for theism.

²³ We do not have an account of faith, nor an interest in committing ourselves to one, besides those that incorporate some cognitive or doxastic element. For discussion of various accounts of faith, see Bishop (2002), Howard-Snyder (2013, 2019), Howard-Snyder and McKaughan (2023), McKaughan (2017), Tarnowski (forthcoming), and Vahid (2023). For discussion of faith from an Evidentialist perspective, see Dormandy (2018, 2023) and Dougherty (2014).

²⁴ What about those who have faith but lack belief (Howard-Snyder and McKaughan 2023)? Suppose Martha has belief-cancelling doubt about the existence of God and the divinity of Christ, but has faith that God exists and became man. It seems reasonable to count Martha as a Christian. But we're committed to denying this; Martha is an atheist. As noted above, we take it that positions are defined in terms of the propositions they include, and so, people labeled according to the propositions they endorse or believe. That said, we're not interested in how faith should be incorporated into that labeling. If Martha considers herself a Christian because of her faith, so be it.

²⁵ The authors are grateful to their colleagues for discussion about ideas in this paper and for very helpful comments from two anonymous reviewers for the journal.