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### REPLIES TO LEIDENHAG AND TRAKAKIS

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**Abstract:** In this essay, I reply to the comments of Joanna Leidenhag and Nick Trakakis on my book *Religion After Science: The Cultural Consequences of Religious Immaturity*.

I am grateful to the editors of this journal for suggesting this symposium on *Religion After Science*. Many thanks, also, to Joanna Leidenhag and Nick Trakakis for their thoughts on the book. In my own contribution I hope to profitably engage the themes that matter to my co-symposiasts. I will also address their objections to what I have had to say and, where necessary, correct the record.

#### REPLY TO LEIDENHAG

Let me start with the piece by Joanna Leidenhag. I was glad to see that she begins her essay by trying to give her reader some sense of the overall shape and substance of *Religion After Science*. This effort proceeds happily enough until the last sentence of the second paragraph, about a page in, where it is suggested that the central claim of the book's first half, that the religious dimension of human life is developmentally immature, rests entirely on my views about time. This is not the case. I have a three-legged stool, I say in the book, to support that claim. And the relevant facts about *deep time* — in particular, that human views about religion have largely been formed by people with a radically mistaken picture of our place in deep time — furnish just one leg for my stool. The other two come from reflection on the *incredibly large ambitions* of religion and our *notably poor record* of religious investigation (with the latter understood in the widest possible sense). And these three arguments are also mutually supportive in various ways. Deep time alone gives me a chapter, not half a book.

In her critique of the book, Leidenhag takes an historical approach. She claims to find in my work the influences of humanism, enlightenment thought, and romanticism, which she sees as the three interwoven threads of modernism. I am a modernist through and through, we are told, and modernism suffers from clear inadequacies. This historical approach of hers permits me the opportunity to say what I have often thought but rarely expressed: that my work does indeed have a certain affinity with the outlook and dispositions of the nineteenth-century Romantics. In the Romantics there is an elevation of emotion and the imagination, a restlessness with the present, and a yearning after what some might call unattainable goals. I resonate with much of this, and it is not hard to see how the themes of my work might be linked with it. (Of course the Romantics knew little of deep time, but some of them might have gone a similar direction with it had they known.) It is important to note, though, that for me the emotion with which it all begins is bound up with a *desire to understand* — to see, or see more fully, how things really are. I have sometimes spoken in this connection of cultivating a 'passion of indifference,' which involves wanting to know the truth, *whatever it may be*. Whether the passion of the Romantics included such a passion of indifference, I am not sure. I suppose it is a contingent fact that my effort to cultivate it has led me to concede that we have not yet made nearly as much progress, in matters of mind and spirit, as we could do with more time well spent. (In some possible worlds, I expect, I am a Christian philosopher or theologian.) But here we are. This is the view that argument seems to me to support.

So there are currents of romanticism in my work. But what can be done with this fact, especially given that the first half of *Religion After Science*, as already suggested, contains a series of arguments to support my claim about limited religious progress? Perhaps it is the Romantic spirit that brought to my attention the fact that this concession allows entry to an exciting new terrain, visible only once we have made it. In the second half of the book I explore this terrain. But I also give arguments to support my claims about its prominent features. Shouldn't we be asking whether any of these arguments is forceful rather than focusing on the disposition that may be expected to make them appealing to me?

Leidenhag suggests that the relevance lies here: the romanticist element generates in the work under discussion a “refusal to imagine an ending” or eschaton-like event. Most naturally interpreted, this is false, for in the book, I speak of certain goals of religious investigation that might conceivably be reached. But it quickly becomes evident that what Leidenhag primarily has in mind is the ending, the eschatological state of affairs, that Christians see as in a way already accessible to us *in the present* as they “reimagine the world” in light of the decisive Christ-event of the past. As she puts it: “it is this ‘now’ of Christian eschatology that Schellenberg rejects.” All I am *left* with, therefore, as Leidenhag goes on to say, is the “not yet.” And this, she thinks, cannot be sufficiently sustaining, religiously speaking: “Without the poetry of the prophetic or event for the imagination to re-remember, Schellenberg’s own ‘not yet’ remains contentless, and all his appeals to a more imaginative religion fall flat... Without an eschatology [presumably this is a reference to the end she has referred to, viewed as already realized in the present] Schellenberg’s religion has nothing to feed and sustain the imagination.”

The first thing I want to say about these suggestions is that they address only the second last chapter of *Religion After Science*, where I develop and apply the idea that human religious immaturity has the odd — but exciting! — consequence of suggesting a new form of agnostic religiousness, one that may surpass in its rational qualities forms of religion presupposing our religious maturity (that is, such forms of religion as we tend to actually find in the world today). But set that point aside. The *main* thing to say is that no Romantic worth her salt will *need* the distinctively Christian sort of psychological nourishment for an imaginative religious life. The thoughts, which knowledge of deep time helps to illuminate, that the human journey with religion may have just begun; that our species’ best religious ideas and most exalted religious feelings might lie ahead rather than behind; that with what we do today, in awareness of human religious immaturity, we *may* help to secure such advancements for those who come after us — such pioneering thoughts can be deeply inspiring for people with the right disposition, a disposition not infrequently exemplified in the world at large, and also among the Nones, the people of no religious affiliation, to whom *Religion After Science* is primarily addressed. (To her credit, Leidenhag sees that the book is meant more for the Nones, many of whom have thoughtfully rejected Christianity, than for Christian theologians, but I wonder whether she has fully noticed the consequences of this point for the present issue.) There is plenty of content here for the imagination to feed on, if one is disposed to notice it. There is also much to hope for, especially if one feels the world’s suffering, when the notion of a triply transcendent reality is imaginatively engaged.

Now this is not to say that existing forms of religion, including Christian religion, cannot afford their own sources of imaginative engagement and hope or, more generally, that troubling forms of religious immaturity must be equally distributed throughout religion as we actually find it. Though it may be tempting to caricature my view as implying that all existing religion is equally troubling in this or that or in every respect — and Leidenhag does not always succeed in resisting this temptation: she says I think “every religious thinker claims to hold all the answers” and paint “all members of established religion” with “one brush” — this is indeed a caricature. I would take it as a fair point that I should have said more in this book about the positive and invigorating features of established religion. In other books I have. But even here, where the sins are underlined, I say “often” or “most” and not “all,” and certain humanizing trends in Christian religion are noted (in Chapters 4 and 9).

So much about romanticism. As I have indicated, this is the third of three historical influences Leidenhag claims to detect. What about the second, *enlightenment* thought, which as it turns out is broader in its application? Central for Leidenhag here is the notion that we need to be emancipated from the “tu-

telage” of traditional religion. Enlightenment thinkers offer “a neutral and objective perspective outside of religion which promises greater insight.” Leidenhag supposes that my talk of religious immaturity, especially in its epistemic aspects, is shot through with this thought — a thought she plausibly regards as friendly to, and naturally allied with, the Romantic progressivism we were just talking about. She sees a link to Kant’s thinking on related subjects and sees me as following the dream of “a view from nowhere” and “rational neutrality.” Unfortunately for her interpretation, I have said nothing about any of the things mentioned in the previous four sentences. One wonders why there is not more attention to what I have said. She does in this connection refer to my notion of a “10,000-year test,” but contrary to what Leidenhag suggests, this is not associated in the book with full and final knowledge on religious matters. (If it were, there would be some tension with her idea, earlier mentioned, that there is nothing like a hoped-for eschaton in my view.) Rather, my suggestion was that we need to give the human dimension of religious life *at least that much more time to develop before judging it a failure* — a rather different notion.

Leidenhag seems to recognize at certain points that I am not quite as rationally optimistic as the enlightenment figures of the past to whom she refers. But she still thinks that to have an alternative to religious revelation, I must be treating some “process like biological evolution,” perhaps supplemented by cultural evolution, as “truth-directed.” This is not the case, at least if by ‘truth-directed’ we mean that this process includes some mechanism we can count on to reliably lead us to the truths we seek. We don’t need that much to motivate or to make rational the continued pursuit of understanding on matters that most deeply affect us. (Here, perhaps, the fact of my ‘romanticism’ needs to be more fully appreciated!) Leidenhag says that we require some “agreed authority,” and that “only the transcendent being itself could have such an authoritative perspective.” Even if this were so, why suppose the revelation that will supply the needed insights must already have been received? I would certainly not want to rule out future divine revelations with more power to persuade the passionately indifferent than purported revelations of the past, but here one should note that something rather more humble could also do the trick. Perhaps, just for example, the future will see developments permitting a mode of reasoning *against* the existence of anything transcendent with more power to persuade than *naturalism* possesses today. This is one way in which our religious questions could satisfactorily be answered. On the religious side, short of a theistic-style revelation, we might see the development of capacities which permit religious experiences more illuminating and widely prevalent than any seen so far. (This and other, similar possibilities are discussed in the book.) Leidenhag favours investigation that begins from some *religious commitment* that provides a point of orientation. But much as in the other section of her essay, discussed before, where the exercise of Christian imagination is lauded for its psychological contribution to the support of a religious life, so here, I suggest, a sufficient condition of some desideratum is mistakenly treated as a necessary one.

I do appreciate Leidenhag’s suggestion, made in this context, that my thoughts on deep time and human immaturity, if weighty at all, have important consequences for *other* dimensions of human life and *other* areas of philosophy, and want to observe in passing that this is quite right. In another, less slim, book that I hope will be published before long, I try to do at least partial justice to this point.

Leidenhag’s notion of an enlightenment connection therefore goes astray. Such is also the case for what she says about the first and (so she thinks) most dominant of the three modernist themes — humanism. One might suppose otherwise when one sees that the last chapter of *Religion After Science* has the word ‘humanism’ in the title and seems quite positive about what is thus named. But here again we have discussion of how the immaturity thesis enables interesting new results in debates over religion — to which topic the second half of the book is devoted. Support for a certain kind of *religious* humanism is put forward as an *application* of the immaturity thesis instead of any form of non-religious humanism being revealed as its source.

So why does Leidenhag think such a humanism *is* its ultimate source? Humanism, she says, sees “the human subject as the centre and source of rational inquiry, ethical deliberation and all other activity,” and this very perspective, she thinks, is visible in my work: “According to Schellenberg, the projects of politics, science and philosophy, which all concern knowledge of the natural world, can and must all progress quite happily without knowledge of this triple-transcendence who remains (and may remain for quite some

time yet) nebulous and ineffable.” Again: I am making the “basic assumption that the scientific, natural, or political world is a given that can be adequately interpreted apart from transcendence.” Moreover, “since this triple-transcendence does not fill the cosmos with meaning and value, it is left to humanity to define value and search for meaning.” Accordingly, when I come to speak of transcendence, “instead of searching to discover that upon which all our knowing and striving depends, we are (like toddlers) to seek the petty gods that suit our needs.” Already we can see why Leidenhag thinks a humanist approach inadequate. Here she is even more specific: “Humanism (religious or secular) commits the precise sin that Schellenberg cites as his reason for abandoning established religion: an over-confidence in one’s own position of knowledge.”

I am afraid this is all quite misguided. Preconceptions appear to be guiding the way here rather than careful reading. In the book I explicitly indicate, when comparing politics, science, and philosophy with religion, that insights from the latter may indeed be needed to understand the former. For example, with statements representing these areas of inquiry numbered (1) through (4), respectively, I say this: “Depending on what you say about (4), what you need to know about (1) might...go deeper than nature.... Realities beyond nature might matter for us positively in ways we can’t now imagine” (*Religion After Science*, p. 3). At the end of her essay, too, Leidenhag expresses the view that I accept the “very modern premise” that the human religion project is a “special little sphere in an otherwise secular world.” But I do not accept this premise, and so to that extent I do not accept modernism as she defines it. Of course if naturalism is true, then something like this premise is correct, but as Leidenhag surely realizes, one of the other results of the immaturity thesis discussed in the second half of the book is agnosticism about naturalism. Instead of displaying over-confidence in a position of knowledge, then, the book explicitly defends religious agnosticism or skepticism of a sort that, by its very nature, leaves *wide open* the possibility that a transcendent reality is “that upon which all our knowing and striving depends.” Now my sort of skepticism too may be problematic, for one reason or another, but in identifying historical roots for any such problem, if problem and roots there be, one will be led into rather different regions of historical discussion than those Leidenhag has in mind when arguing that my work is animated by humanism.

Contrary to what Leidenhag suggests in her historical explorations, therefore, *Religion After Science* offers something new — though I grant it would be worthwhile to investigate further whether any part of it should be called the ‘new romanticism’! In these historical explorations, and also in her claims about Christianity offering the Nones something preferable to what is found in my book (which to a considerable extent depend on those explorations having been on the right track), Leidenhag’s attitude is “Nothing new here!” But this reaction, I fear, may only evince the very insensitivity to an open future against which the book aims to warn us.

## REPLY TO TRAKAKIS

I turn now to the essay by Nick Trakakis. Trakakis says relatively little about what is in my book. He is more concerned with what is not in it. He would especially like to see attention to *existentialist* themes and to *art*. As his essay unfolds we hear from a troop of thinkers and artists who have been doing what he thinks really needs doing in relation to fundamental questions like those addressed in my book — in particular those associated with religious doubt.

This is all a little disconcerting, since one might think that even if existentialists and artists and fellow travellers have a good deal to offer (which I agree they do), there could be value in other work as well. But it becomes apparent fairly swiftly that Trakakis not only thinks well of what I have not been doing but thinks that what I *have* done in *Religion After Science* is in various ways inimical to an appreciation for what is valuable in the work of these other figures. He is quite certain about this — more certain, perhaps, than someone who praises doubt should find it comfortable to be. It would have been possible to probe the extent to which what I have to say about doubt and other themes is really irreconcilable with the views and practices he values, with an openness to learning something new in cases where reconciliation seems impossible, should they ever present themselves. But Trakakis does not do this. So instead I must probe his certainties.

One certainty that misleads is expressed in the following words: “As the very title of his book suggests (religion *after science*...), Schellenberg, like many analytic philosophers of religion, remains beholden to a quasi-scientific model of philosophy of the sort that existentialism sought to contest.” Apparently Trakakis thinks I think that the work we do on religion ought to be modelled on science, and that my title conveys this thought. Actually, I say what the title is intended to convey quite clearly (*Religion After Science*, pp. 5–6), and it has nothing to do with this but rather, most especially, with my idea that were we to see transcendentally-focused religion aright, we would realize that it ought to receive as much “dedicated attention” as science has received. Let’s work on religion *after science*. I do speak of ‘the religion project,’ and this may seem to Trakakis to sound scientific and thus to reinforce his point. But he knows I mean a multi-generational *species*-level activity aimed at understanding on matters of transcendence, which could as easily be compared to similar activities involving art or morality (Philip Kitcher has spoken in a parallel way of “the ethical project”) as to scientific projects. And what I say in the book about how the religion project must be pursued clearly opposes the view Trakakis here attributes to me. For example, I say this: “Philosophers who prize a narrow sort of metaphysical insight will...be thought rather one-sided by the religious. Those scientists who think nothing more than their own discipline is needed for a full understanding of life will seem similarly one-sided. For religious success, beauty and the good must be understood along with metaphysics. And knowledge of value acquired from music or painting may be as important as that communicated in books” (*Religion After Science*, pp. 31–32). These thoughts are echoed elsewhere in the book, for example in the chapter I devote to a new view of the relations between religion and science.

Such clear contrasts between what Trakakis claims to find in the book and what is actually in it suggest that in his essay too preconceptions are brought to the text, or else the author’s agenda is leading the way. Something similar seems to be happening when near the beginning of the essay, as a lead-in to his larger themes, Trakakis very swiftly fastens on what I say about the nature of religion, trying to show my insensitivity to “challenging questions about borders and identities.” In his view, much more attention to methodological matters in this domain is required. With respect to these matters, I am “not skeptical enough.” Instead, I show the “predilection of philosophers for ‘clear and distinct’ ideas, names or systems of classification.” (Before it was “quasi-scientific;” now it is “clear and distinct ideas.” This is starting to sound a bit like Leidenhag on modernism!)

But Trakakis has only missed the point. If one looks carefully at what I have said on the theme of the nature of religion (*Religion After Science*, pp. 7–10), what will one find? I tell my readers about the dimension of human life I am interested in, which comes with claims about transcendence. It is obvious that there *is* such a dimension, is it not? (One might contest my view that it is a *triple* transcendence; if Trakakis had done so he would have a relevant objection, but he did not.) Calling this the religious dimension of human life has a good deal of academic support — spelled out in notes at the back of the book — and I suggest to my readers that they will at any rate regard it as *included* in human religiousness. And I don’t mind if that’s all they agree to. For, most important, this is the sort of religion I want to defend against its cultured detractors — and in a new way. Although robust, transcendentally-focused religion is often viewed as defunct, dead in the water, I will show that such a judgment is vastly premature, given the immaturity of human work on it. Indeed, such religion deserves to be reconsidered, and work on old and new transcendence-oriented ideas and practices ought to receive at least as much careful and focused, collaborative attention as science has received. Such a project, were we to accept it, we would naturally call ‘the religion project.’

As shown by this reminder of what is in the book, my clear and distinct idea about religion only reflects my *purpose* in it, which is to defend a central part of human religious life in a new way and to expose the surprising consequences that can be reaped when we do. Should I have a detailed discussion of definitions of religion or of methodology in religious studies to support such an effort? Clearly not. To suppose otherwise betrays misunderstanding of my purpose. Am I assuming, as Trakakis suggests in this context, that our understanding of religion will not *change* in the next 10,000 years? Whyever would one think so, when one sees that the notion of 10,000 years is a device (though grounded in serious deep time thinking) used to bring home to us how much work may remain to be done on transcendent themes? Moreover, if the religion project as I describe it were taken up and dedicatedly pursued, *this itself* might

have rather a lot to do with how religion is thought of in the future! Such points are not hard to discover if one approaches my text carefully and with an open mind, and they will put a somewhat different complexion on what I say about the nature of religion once they are discovered.

Moving on to the existentialist themes in the Trakakis essay, we find the issue of whether someone with my views must show a lack of appreciation for the insights of Trakakis's series of thinkers and artists. Trakakis suggests that the answer is Yes and again applies his point that I am not skeptical enough, though in a slightly different way. After all, the religion project involves looking for *answers* to big questions, he says, instead of seeking the “capacity to remain with difficult doubts without seeking to quash them.” What he himself encourages us to strive for is “not knowledge and enlightenment...but...a meditative, free-spirited and open-ended form of thinking where the questions matter more than the answers.” Skepticism, presumably including religious skepticism, might best become for the agnostic “a source of personal anguish and destabilization as they relentlessly grapple with the big questions of life and death without the security of final answers.” Since my ideas about the religion project, according to Trakakis, are at odds with these existentialist themes, he finds them questionable.

Perhaps the first thing to say here is that Trakakis does not spend much time defending the premise, missing from this reasoning, that *the relevant existentialist (and existentialism-friendly) themes are worthy of our acceptance*. He proceeds conditionally: “But what if we were, instead, to follow Camus?” However perhaps we still need some reason to suppose that we *should* think like Camus.

But let us set this aside. Let us grant that there are insights in the existentialist and associated ideas we hear about in the Trakakis essay, even if we might quibble about a jot here or a tittle there. The next thing to consider is whether my work in *Religion After Science*, and in particular what I say about the religion project, is really at *odds* with them. What might a careful and reasonably imaginative study of the text reveal?

One thing it would quickly reveal is that I do not construe the completion of the religion project, were it ever to be attained, as necessarily resulting in *knowledge or justified belief* with respect to whether any transcendentally-focused religious claim is real. One way of reaching its goal, as I explicitly say, would involve a justified acquiescence in the notion that the truth about the transcendent is “inaccessible” to human beings, no matter how far advanced they may be (see *Religion After Science*, pp. 12, 61). Here religious skepticism is not “overcome,” as Trakakis suggests it must be if the goal of the religion project is reached.

But, you say, the skeptic still *hopes* to lose her skepticism, on my view. Not quite. More accurately, the skeptic hopes that *the species* will develop further, religiously speaking, and to the point where knowledge on religious matters, whether *yea* or *noy*, becomes possible. She may have little hope of herself witnessing any such events, and the more so as she contemplates such evidence of human religious immaturity as is presented in the first half of the book and the immensities of deep time. What this means is that my skeptic is perfectly free to welcome the thought that in her life she must “remain with difficult doubts without seeking to quash them,” striving for “a meditative, free-spirited and open-ended form of thinking where the questions matter more than the answers” and “relentlessly grappling with the big questions of life and death without the security of final answers.” Indeed, she can welcome this thought for *the present stage of human existence*. In other words, existentialist themes may be embraced by my skeptic, quite compatibly with her desire to participate in the religion project.

And a reasonably imaginative reading of my text might go further. It might recognize that there is nothing in the argument of my book to prevent us from saying that the religion project could be *aided* by the activities — for example, artistic activities — of the cultural figures Trakakis admires. (That their work and the dispositions expressed in it are instrumentally valuable in this connection, if they are, does not prevent them from mattering intrinsically too.) In other words, there is nothing to prevent us from agreeing with him when he says this: “A novel, play or poem — indeed any creative or artistic work — can... be something other than an entertaining distraction, by functioning as the site of ‘disclosure’ (of meaning, or its absence) and ‘encounter’ (with the real world, in all its ambiguity and complexity).” Or this: “Even the kinds of philosophical questions posed in Schellenberg’s religion project can only be treated adequately or ‘authentically’ by way of a medium and method that reflect the true depth of our doubts.” It

is actually quite easy and natural for me to agree that this is true, having been deeply involved with music all my life and having married a religiously sensitive visual artist. (An artist friend contributed the book's cover image.) But Trakakis did not need to know all this to be deterred from his mistaken assumptions. He just needed to read the book with an open mind.

So the either/or Trakakis sets up in his essay is entirely unrationalized. It can be both/and. Now it would be a just criticism to say that I could have told the reader *more* about the artistic and existentialism-friendly side of this. I am happy to take the point! But Trakakis's criticism is that what I do say cannot accommodate it, and this view does not hold up under scrutiny. There is no need to reject my thoughts in order to offer due regard to those others.

One wonders why Trakakis is so drawn to his misleading perspective. I will close with a speculation. Perhaps it is more a matter of *affect* than of intellect: the ardent doubter, grappling endlessly with questions and resisting what we earlier saw Trakakis call "the security of final answers," accepting that this is our lot, that we are, as he puts it on his last page, citing Heidegger, "thrown into the world," and noting nuances of reality in himself and in the world thus made available — there is, perhaps, something of the heroic in such a figure. But we need only return to the romanticism Leidenhag detected in my work to see that the latter is not ungenerous to affect. In the Trakakis vision our own private dramas and the death of past dreams, including religious dreams, loom large. We must give up the security associated with the latter. But it is not for security that my skeptic joins the religion project. There are no guarantees. However she does notice that there is a future as well as a past — and that we individuals with our private dramas represent but a moment in the larger life of the species. Moreover, there is that burning desire to understand mentioned at the beginning of this essay: to see things as they are, however that may be, or (we may now add) to contribute to possible future enlargements of vision among our kind. This, as it happens, already brings some enlargements to us in the present — an enlargement of vision with respect to humanity and also the paradoxical personal enlargement featuring humility about our own present role in the unfolding human drama.

There is something to win our hearts here too. Of course — and this applies to Leidenhag on modernism and Christianity as much as to Trakakis on modernism and existentialism — one must shift from memory into imagination long enough to see it.

