SKEPTICISM AS THE BEGINNING OF RELIGION[1]

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> *The principles which ought to govern the cultivation and the regulation of the imagination – with a view on the one hand of preventing it from disturbing the rectitude of the intellect and the right direction of the actions and the will, and on the other hand of employing it as a power for increasing the happiness of life and giving elevation to the character – are a subject which has never yet engaged the serious consideration of philosophers.... And, I expect, that this will hereafter be regarded as a very important branch of study for practical purposes, and the more, in proportion as the weakening of positive beliefs respecting states of existence superior to the human, leaves the imagination of higher things less provided with material from the domain of supposed reality.*
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> JOHN STUART MILL*, THREE ESSAYS ON RELIGION*

1. MAKING ROOM FOR SKEPTICISM

This conference – so we are told by the conference website – is for people interested in "rethinking our usual understanding of the relationship between faith, belief and skepticism." The usual understanding, presumably, is that faith entails belief, and that belief is incompatible with skepticism and so must resist it. In which case it will usually be supposed – at least if the usual understanding is sensitive to logic – that *faith* is incompatible with skepticism and must resist it. This notion is certainly worthy of rethinking.

But there are various sorts of thinking or rethinking concerning these matters that, as I begin, I wish to set aside as confused or otherwise in error, the better to make room for my own. It will be useful to bear in mind, as I run through these alternatives, that in conformity with my understanding of the 'usual understanding' of faith and belief, when speaking of *belief* I mean believing-*that*, which is focused on how things are. William James spoke of this sort of belief as "the sense of reality."[2] Touching the salient points, and without much controversial precision, we

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[1]This paper was presented at Claremont Graduate University's 31st annual Philosophy of Religion Conference, held in February 2010.

[2]See William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 913. Elsewhere in James's work – for example, in his famous essay 'The Will to Believe' – a more voluntarist understanding sometimes appears. But here one is only led to wonder whether James is really still talking about *belief*. As I have argued – see chap.

might think of it as a natural, spontaneous, and in itself quite involuntary mental response involving the thought or feeling that some state of affairs is realized or obtains. This sort of believing is to be distinguished from believing-*in*, which is a matter largely of positive emotion and evaluation. (Here compare believing that a certain friend exists with believing in your friend.) Believing-that and believing-in often go together in religion, and indeed, this combination may help to explain the unusual power of persistence that religious cases of believing-that often display. But where belief is compared with skepticism – by which I mean, in accordance with fairly common usage, a state of uncertainty or doubt entailing the *absence* of belief on the matter in question – we should in the first instance take the relevant sort of belief to be believing-that.

Now for the views opposed to our usual understanding of faith, belief, and skepticism that are to be set aside. Some religious persons may think that faith can do without belief and so need not come into conflict with skepticism because faith need not involve the endorsement of particular religious *doctrines*, such as the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. But this is a confusion, encouraged by a tendency among us to speak not just of religious belief but of religious *beliefs* – that is, claims typically believed by religious people – and a subsequent tendency, among some of us, to suppose that the former extends only as far as the latter. Even if a religious person eschews all traditional doctrines, she will normally find that there are yet other ideas to which she *is* believingly disposed, such as the idea that the world is infinitely deeper and richer than a philosophical naturalist could allow. This is still religious belief, as opposed to religious skepticism, which is uncertain about such things, suspended in a state of nonbelief between believing and disbelieving.

Another confused way of supposing that real faith does not involve belief conflates the latter – a simple sense of how things are – with considerable *hesitation*, of the sort I might express if I say, in response to a question from someone on the street, 'I *believe* the next gas station is just around that corner.' Distinguishing between a speech act expressing hesitance in which the word 'belief' or one of its cognates is used and the mental state properly so designated, we ought *not* infer that belief must be hesitant and so is for *that* reason inappropriate to religious faith.

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11 of my *The Will to Imagine: A Justification of Skeptical Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009) – alternative interpretations are possible and can be made very plausible.

The state of believing-that is in fact quite hard to escape in religion as we know it. But it is also possible to find religious reductionists who wish to solve problems of belief by *changing* religion into a beliefless program of social or moral or political transformation, in which the old words about God or transcendence are still uttered but only as a means of providing colour or giving emphasis or for some other entirely non-cognitive purpose. Here belief is truly gotten rid of. But such movements deal with traditional religion's implausible claims about the world by going to the other extreme, seeking to dissociate religion entirely from claims about the world. This move I regard as an overreaction and as unwarranted *if* a more robust form of religion respectful of religious claims (or at least of the *aspiration behind* claiming) can, as I shall argue, be made compatible with skepticism.

Finally, there is a move which seeks to learn from Wittgenstein. This view is not the crass non-cognitivism just touched on, nor does it in any other way suggest that faith does not entail believing-that. In fact, it agrees that faith entails belief and that faith is therefore incompatible with skepticism. What it denies is that people of faith must for this reason *resist* skepticism by playing the evidence game skeptics love to play. Since the *entire function and meaning* of religious believing-that is to be understood in broadly pragmatic terms – in terms of such things as the provision of psychological support, inspiration, admonition, a framework for living, and so on – an evidential critique is simply the wrong sort of critique: it does not even apply. In short, to suppose that faith and skepticism truly come to grips with each other – to engage as a religious person in any dispute with skepticism or feel threatened by skepticism – one must confuse religion with some quasi-science concerned to do theoretical work instead of the work of redemption to which religion is in fact committed.

My response, in brief, is that although the believer, as believer, is not necessarily interested in religious pictures of reality *as* facts, she nonetheless needs them to *be* facts, and so must resist skepticism concerning them when it is presented to her. If you said to an ordinary believer, such as the many I have known or the believer (and indeed Christian minister) I myself once was, "You only believe that there is a God because of the emotional/moral work that belief is doing for you," you would probably elicit the reaction that *of course* he believes there is a God because he thinks it *true* that there is, and would cease to believe if he thought otherwise! But then the discussion of

evidence can begin.

Any contrary notion forgets that part of what we may require in order to be redeemed selves is *deeper understanding of the world* (Aristotle's conjecture that all humans desire by nature to understand should be set alongside Wittgenstein's conjectures about religion). Certainly we also need *integrity of being*. And that need too can go unfulfilled where the emphasis of the present argument is maintained. According to this argument, the religious believer's belief is not an attempt at developing a theory, and so needn't be defended as such. Fine and good, I say. But something the believer believes may still *entail* claims that are true *only if certain theories are true*. If, for example, the believer holds that her God is all-powerful, what she holds entails that the existence of the universe is properly explained by reference to the power of God. Seeing this, can she – while retaining her belief – fail also to believe that the existence of the universe is properly explained by reference to the power of God? (Remember here the involuntary operation of believing-that.) Now suppose there is an argument showing this explanatory claim to be false, and she sees it is a good argument, and sees that, logically, the explanatory claim's falsehood entails the falsehood of her claim that God is all-powerful. How can she continue to believe that her God is all powerful without self-deception? (The sense of reality fades when falsehood is made evident, unless one takes steps to hide the latter from oneself.) But then we are landed in a serious problem. For the inner divisions and dishonesty produced by self-deception – a lack of integrity in both senses -- militate strongly against what both religious and nonreligious people will rightly regard as the best sort of life. It follows that an open and honest and intellectually alive believer, unwilling to shut herself off from the world, or to shut certain parts of *herself* off from other parts, cannot remain unconcerned about the evidential claims of skeptics, even if the usual functioning of her belief in the overall economy of her life has nothing to do with theorizing.

So much for views that might have led to a preemptive dismissal of my own argument, which takes skepticism much more seriously than they do. I hope I have succeeded in exposing the errors in these views. And I hope that in moving further we can in any case proceed on the assumption that they are in error so as to see an entirely new way of addressing the usual understanding of faith, belief, and skepticism, which may succeed, providing both philosophical and religious illumination, even if they *should* be in error.

So what is my alternative view all about? My own position embraces skepticism or uncertainty *fully and unequivocally*, holding indeed that it is only when we do so that we can make a proper *start* in things religious. There is a sort of 'gestalt shift' that can occur when we get skeptical enough – and when our skepticism is fed appropriately, by certain broadly evolutionary considerations (more on this in a moment) – whereby all the religious terms of reference are transformed and we see things in an entirely new way. In particular, we can come to see ourselves as somewhere near the *beginning* of a long voyage of discovery undertaken by our species (perhaps among other species) instead of near the end, and notice how a skeptical religion of the imagination is a form of religion more suited to this place in time than any believing one.

John Stuart Mill, in my epigraph, gestures at this possibility – the possibility of a more mature imaginative religion *after* skepticism – and it is true that it has "never yet engaged the serious consideration of philosophers." Mill speaks of the need for "principles" here: perhaps if he had been able to engage the subject more deeply, he might have seen the relevance of his contemporary Darwin's evolutionary thinking – or an extension thereof. Evolutionary principles of a sort are, it seems to me, going to be central in determining the proper role of the imagination in religion. Perhaps we, today and tomorrow, can help this "very important branch of study" to grow. Of course, the idea of religion flourishing after the embrace of skepticism may sound quite counterintuitive at first. But it is often by pushing the counterintuitive far enough that, in our history, we have arrived at new levels of the intuitive. And that is what I suggest we need to do where religion and skepticism are concerned.

But why be skeptical in the first place? Why not just give belief – the sense of reality ('supposed reality' in Mill's way of speaking) – its head in matters of religion, perhaps endorsing one or other of the many sophisticated maneuvers recently employed in analytical philosophy of religion to defend it? Why should *nonbelief* be more mature or more suited to our condition?

This is where the impact of broadly evolutionary considerations needs first to be felt (and in a way very different from any suggested by all the superficial talk about evolution and religion in the popular literature). Not only do we need to see faith differently. To appreciate its full force, we need to see skepticism differently. Indeed, this will *help* us see faith differently. And so I shall next explain a new, ultimately evolutionary way of developing religious skepticism. It is from this

starting point, as we shall see, that interesting religious developments, leading to a new but still robust form of faith, can unfold.

2. SEVEN MODES OF RELIGIOUS SKEPTICISM

My case for religious skepticism, for the inappropriateness of religious (as well as irreligious)[3] believing-that, begins in the same way arguments for religious skepticism generally do, by stressing human limitations as well as the seemingly unlimited ambition of religious belief. Here we have, respectively, what I have elsewhere called the Subject Mode and the Object Mode of religious skepticism.[4] The basic ideas involved in these modes of reasoning amount, roughly, to Hume's mitigated or moderate skepticism applied to religion. Hume's mitigated skepticism is a kind of fallibilism that recognizes our cognitive limitations and proneness to cognitive errors, and instructs us to limit our thinking to the matters that "are best adapted to the narrow limits of human understanding."[5] Those limits have seemed to him and many others to fall well *this* side of facts about the ultimate nature or destiny of things, which religious belief of course purports to reach.

These skeptical points, common enough in the literature, deserve to be both deepened and sharpened. This can be done by thinking of the danger we limited beings face as soon as we move beyond the the unavoidable outputs of certain universal belief-forming and belief-revising practices – sensory, introspective, memorial, intuitive – which provide us with both our basic picture of the

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[3]By irreligious believing, I mean believing that there is no Divine reality of any sort. (Notice that one might believe false some more detailed *interpretation* of the more general idea of a Divine reality – such as traditional theism – without such irreligious belief.) Since we are here concerned with the skeptical reconception of religious faith, I shall hereafter normally leave tacit the application of religious skepticism to irreligious belief.

[4]See J. L. Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007). Many of the ideas in this section of the paper are developed much more fully in Part I of this book.

[5]David Hume, *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, in *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edition revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 162. The application to religion is famously made in the opening pages of Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*.

world and the means we must use to fill it out. This danger is the danger of *believing on non-representative evidence*. By believing on non-representative evidence I mean believing-that in response to indications supporting a different judgment than we would form, were we in possession of *all* the evidence bearing on the case at hand. To believe-that reflectively – for example, to believe that there is a Divine reality – is to believe something *to be the case*, and we can hardly reflectively be of this mind without regarding everything *bearing* on it being the case – the total evidence, in my phrase – as supporting it. Hence, where we have to be in doubt about whether the total evidence (as distinct from the examined evidence) *does* support something being the case, we must also be in doubt about whether it *is* the case, and thus – assuming that reason does not flee from us or we from it – cease to possess the relevant instance of belief-that.

And we *should* be in doubt about what the total evidence shows in matters religious. This is due, in part, to the fact that religious views fall among views sharing certain special properties: properties of precision, detail, and profundity. Views having any of these properties and, even more so, views in which they are overlapping are ones having very many alternatives (where an alternative to a view is a view logically incompatible with it, representing a way in which that view can be false). Such views, as we might put it, are in one measure or another *alternative-rich*. Religious views of the sort humans have come up with during our short tenure on the planet are enormously alternative-rich. The central religious idea, as I understand it, is the idea of a Divine reality, of something ultimate both in reality and in value, in relation to which an ultimate good for humanity and the world may be attained. I call this idea *ultimism*. Other religious ideas, such as traditional theism, are variations on this theme. Someone who believes ultimism has a view that is about as profound as any could be. And of course most religious ideas – here again traditional theism is an example – dress ultimism up in conceptual raiment positively gleaming with precision and detail.

Having identified religious views as alternative-rich, we should also note how easy it is for limited beings like us to *miss evidence relevant to the elimination of all such alternatives*. The point here is one that it is easy to make in terms of Darwinian natural selection, which often enough is described as responding to needs for things other than intellectual acuity; but it is not dependent on the *details* of any such theory. A basic acquaintance with life in the world should forcefully press it

home. As any of us can see, relevant evidence might be such as we are capable of recognizing, but overlooked, neglected, or even inaccessible (by which I mean that the particular directions of our thinking conspire to obscure it from us). It might also be such as we are *incapable* of recognizing: undiscovered or undiscoverable. The importance of these five ways of missing relevant evidence is itself something we tend to overlook. Even allowing that some alternative-rich views may escape skepticism by falling among the unavoidable outputs of the universal belief-forming and belief-revising practices earlier mentioned (call the latter sort of view *skepticism-proof*), we are, when we recognize these five ways, forced to a skeptical conclusion: where the examined evidence clearly supports an alternative-rich view that is not skepticism-proof, such as a religious view, our evidence must still fail to justify belief of that view. Especially when we note that religious views tend to feature the *overlapping* of our properties of precision, detail, and profundity, it becomes evident that we may well through neglect or oversight or on account of inaccessibility or the contingent or necessary limitations of our conceptual resources have missed evidence showing to be true some *alternative* to any religious view that the examined evidence supports.

This is one way of showing that we ought to be in doubt about what the total evidence shows in matters religious, and so in doubt about *those matters* instead of religiously believing-that. To summarize: religious views that are alternative-rich but not skepticism-proof are instead skepticism-vulnerable. And a mature person of moral and intellectual virtue is simply unable to overlook *this* fact![6]

So far, I have only been suggesting how to deepen and sharpen the claim, at least implicit in other religious skeptics such as Hume, that the cognitive failings to which we are prone combined with the profound ambition of religious claims should lead us into skepticism about such claims.

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[6]Why are religious ideas not skepticism-proof? Because even the best religious approximation to the requirements of universality and unavoidability – religious experience – still falls short. Although some of us grow up experiencing the world religiously, we may also come to wonder whether this experience tells the truth about the world. And many people evidently can and do deny the truth of religious beliefs, even when they have been quite certain about such beliefs before. Religious belief-forming practices are by no means universal or unavoidable. So while it is correct to say that we have our basic, unavoidable picture of the world, it is equally clear that the deliverances of religious belief-forming practices are not a part of it.

Elsewhere I have spoken of this as a *combination* of the Subject Mode and the Object Mode into the even more powerful Limitation Mode.[7] Let's now add two new dimensions – two more skeptical modes – that will help us to see even more clearly the power of religious skepticism. I call these modes the Retrospective Mode and the Prospective Mode. As you may have guessed, they refer us to the past and to the future, respectively.

Here, broadly evolutionary ideas come more explicitly into play. Looking into our past with the best science, we see how short and violent and messy it is. Of course there are many strands of beauty, too; the past has its profound thoughts, glittering deeds, and transcendent art. But it is a sad beauty, hemmed in by the ugliness of hatred and ignorance, and continually threatening to come undone. (Thin is the fabric of culture that hides our nakedness.) Our *religious* past is especially short, in scientific terms. And looking into our future, we see how extremely long and also how transformative it may be – especially if in that word 'our' we include species that may follow the human.

Let's consider some relevant numbers. According to science, our planet has supported life for about 3.8 billion years now. But only about 5 million years ago did the human lineage diverge from the ape lineage. You'd have to travel almost all the way through that period, stopping just 50,000 years short of the present, to finally meet beings both anatomically and behaviourally like us, capable of practicing some form of religion.[8] What's more, you'd have to make it almost *all the way through that 50,000 year span of time* to arrive at the forms of religion, including Christianity, that preoccupy us today.

Now contrast all this, the human religious story of about the last 50,000 years, still touched by the violence that is in our genes and conspicuously heavy at our end, with the fact that according

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[7]Here I have actually said very little about the Object Mode per se. The whole of chapter 2 in *Wisdom to Doubt* is devoted to it.

[8]For an authoritative survey of the most recent scientific thinking about these early periods, see Nicholas Wade, *Before the Dawn: Recovering the Lost History of Our Ancestors* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006). The behavioural changes I've alluded to are visible in the archaeological record of about 50,000 years ago, and recent genetic evidence suggests they were spurred by the advent of fully articulate language – something that may well be required for anything more than incipient religiousness.

to science, although the sun will eventually scorch our planet, earth may remain habitable for as long as another *billion years more*.[9] That's 10 million centuries, 20,000 times as long as beings anatomically and behaviourally like us have graced this planet! (Even if the numbers are off by a good bit, the implications are staggering.) This disparity is usually not appreciated, perhaps because our brains were not built to comprehend easily such vast timescales, but that should not prevent us from considering its implications when it is forcefully drawn to our attention. Long story short: earthly religion, as experienced by humans and, for all we know, by species not yet a twinkle in evolution's eye, might only be getting started. When we refer to the twenty-first century, we should think of this as indicating how *very brief and flickering* has been the existence of religion so far, rather than (as is more usual) taking it as grounding claims of ancient venerability.

Of course, in thinking about the future, we are often only able to talk about epistemic possibilities, by which I mean claims we are not justified in believing to be false. We are talking about what 'may' be. But the intellectual power of 'may' is considerable, and in my view it is one of the many things we have overlooked when doing our epistemology. It is also relevant in overlooked ways to *religious* epistemology. Perhaps most obviously, we can, by reference to it, immediately add to the power of arguments already sketched. For we should be even less sure that we can, in the present, reasonably discount alternatives to profound, detailed, and precise religious claims when we consider how short a distance we have travelled along the path of inquiry, and how incredibly much further we may yet have to go. Let the human species develop some of the more advanced capacities that may in the future come with a larger brain, or with the overcoming of violent tendencies, one wants to say, and think *then* about what the evidence supports concerning ultimate things! Believing now is premature!

There are also more specific evolutionary arguments that can be made in this connection. I'll give an example. What exactly the future holds we of course don't know. But that's just the ticket for this argument. Even though much of the future represents only epistemic possibilities, these *possibilities*, which should loom ever larger as we studiously contemplate what developments

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[9]As recently confirmed in K. P. Schroder and Robert Connon Smith, 'Distant future of the sun and earth revisited,' *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* 386 (2008), 155-163.

another million years might see, are sufficient to rule out as unjustified many currently exemplified beliefs about what is or will be *actual.* For example, upon contemplating the future, we should regard it as epistemically possible, and so as not justifiedly believed false, that religious experiences of the future will, because of much greater future intellectual and spiritual capacities, reveal a transcendent reality with defining characteristics different from those of any such reality we have yet conceived. But then no claim *today* can justifiedly be believed that noticeably *implies* this is false – and of course I have in mind here the claim of naturalism that nature is all there is as well as all religious claims of past and present less general than ultimism, including the claim that the ultimate reality is a personal, parent-like God.

Now, even before these ideas have had a chance to sink in, I fear, many theistic philosophers of religion will already have formulated a reply: if theistic belief is justified, then we may use the proposition that God exists to confer justification on belief of many other propositions – namely, all its noticeable implications. But one of those implications is that no future event or experience will reliably reveal a transcendent reality whose existence is incompatible with God's. Thus if theistic belief is justified, so is the belief that what I here regard as epistemically possible is *false*! It follows that my argument simply begs the question against the claim that theistic belief is justified.

This reply would be correct if I were starting with the bald claim that such-and-such future scenarios are epistemically possible. One of the problems with *sketching* a view like mine is that it can appear as if one is doing so. But I am not. I am really starting with an invitation and a request – one that cannot be honoured without the expenditure of much more time, in which what should be stunning facts about the larger timescale within which we strut upon our tiny stage are seriously contemplated. And my argument in effect makes the *prediction* that such studious contemplation will lead to belief of the proposition at issue as an epistemic possibility for any fairminded inquirer.

When the sheer enormity of the Great Disparity between our past and the possible future starts to sink in, we should get a radically different sense of our environment, temporally, that is comparable to a sudden new sense of geographical environment. Developing hominids confronted with the possibilities of the future in this way are something like gophers poking their heads out on the Manitoba prairie where I grew up, after thinking their burrow the whole world (or like the boy

growing up on the prairie who thought *that* was the whole world). We need to get intellectually reoriented, taking this startling new fact into account.

We have, then, these two new modes of religious skepticism, which cite relevant facts about our messy and violent and impressionable past – the Retrospective Mode[10] – and about our possible futures – the Prospective Mode. And now notice something interesting: by putting them *together* we have another *combined* mode of religious skepticism, more forceful than either of the parts that compose it alone. I call it the Immaturity Mode. We are immature both in the sense of having done less well than might have been hoped with the time already allotted to us and in the sense of being relatively undeveloped in our capacities. And you may already have guessed what comes next. Combine our previous *combined* mode – the Limitation Mode – with this Immaturity Mode and you get a seventh and final mode, arguably the most powerful of all, which I call the Presumption Mode. If you take, on the one hand, our obvious limitations in quest of the unlimited, and on the other, our evident immaturity in the quest, you can see the evident intellectual *presumption* of religious belief. Surely, given such limitations as we have surveyed, one would at least want maturity before drawing religious conclusions. But here we see that, in fact, we are both profoundly limited *and profoundly immature*. Thus, a fortiori, religious belief is intellectually unjustified for beings such as we are.

3. A GESTALT SHIFT CONCERNING FAITH

I may have led some of you to be religious skeptics by means of my sketch of seven modes of religious skepticism, with each combination more forceful than the last. But I doubt it. It seems more likely that you will be looking for holes in my arguments! That might be a profitable activity, though I hope you will also be open to having any initial impression of forcefulness confirmed through the careful investigation these new arguments call for. But to finish the story – to see what the new view is really all about – it will be necessary to go with me a little further. So please assume with me, at least for the sake of discussion, that religious skepticism is justified on the broadly evolutionary grounds I have presented.

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[10]Here I have also said relatively little about the Retrospective Mode per se. The whole of chapter 3 in *Wisdom to Doubt* is devoted to it.

Thinking only of what religion has *been* for the human species, and the centrality to that of belief and indeed of conviction, one might well regard the powerful development and spread of religious skepticism as religion's death knell. But precisely because it is an *evolutionary* skepticism that we are talking about, and because of the new things we have come to notice in developing it, this pessimistic conclusion does not follow. Indeed, though no evolutionary thinker seems yet to have appreciated this fact, something more like the opposite follows.

Consider first how reflection on the Great Disparity should lead to a new, diachronic conception of religion – we should picture religion unfolding over vast periods of time instead of fixating on what it is in our time. Thinking of how short a distance humans have travelled along that line leading into the future and of our present immaturity, we should, furthermore, accept a kind of 'primitivity postulate' with respect to religion in our own time: to have the best chance of developing into deeper maturity, we need to regard ourselves as still in the *early stages* of the long process of development that we picture when we picture religion diachronically.

And seeing this positions us to notice not only that believing religion isn't tenable in our time, but also that *even if* believing religion isn't tenable in our time, some *other* sort of religion *may* be! There is a deep untapped potential in the religious dimension of life. The fact that religion to this point has had an emphasis on specific belief is a purely contingent fact, and in thinking about other ways in which it might have developed, we can open windows to other, possibly better forms of religious practice in the present. Perhaps religion has had an unfortunate start in the world, intellectually speaking – maybe we have gotten ahead of ourselves in all our talk about specific, detailed beliefs concerning ultimate things. (This is of course compatible with some aspects or some levels of religion as we see it being quite above reproach, and even life-giving and maturity-conducive.)[11]

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[11]I hope that readers will resist the temptation, which may here arise, of interpreting my claim as unrealistically and uncharitably entailing that little or nothing is good in religion as we have seen it so far. That would itself be uncharitable! Upon reflection we can see that much of the beauty in religious scriptures (for example, stirring expressions of human frailty and religious longing) and much of the wisdom of religious teachers (for example, much of the psychological insight included in the Four Noble Truths and Eight-fold Path of the Buddha) retain their power to motivate and illuminate even for one who finds many religious claims false and all at least doubtful. And though most traditional religious claims are also sectarian, in the sense of

It is at about this point that a gestalt shift may occur. We have to be deep in the valley of doubt, and we need to have arrived there by an evolutionary path, to achieve this perspective. But the skepticism I have developed puts us on just such a path. And at a certain point on this path one can come to see how, in matters religious, our culture has had things almost completely backwards. Belief tells you that you have arrived at the end of the investigative road. We should rather think of ourselves as just setting out, as humans, on the investigative journey. The *criticism* of belief has for centuries nurtured the sense that religion is in serious trouble. A properly formulated criticism would add an all-important qualification: religion is in serious trouble *so long as it continues to base itself on belief*. And why must it do so? Evolutionary skepticism, if indeed it is *evolutionary* skepticism, can teach us to embrace skepticism and the loss of belief as a possible step to the rebirth of religion in our time. It can lead us to think in a more discriminating way about religious attitudes, helping us to dig up attitudes more modest than belief, by which religious propositions more modest than the detailed 'isms' with which religion is cluttered can be embraced. At a certain point, influenced in the right way by evolutionary thinking, it may occur to us that the beginning of religion in an evolutionary context pretty obviously *should* be skeptical, springing from attitudes more imaginative than believing and featuring an emphasis on the development of capacities that may, over time, yield ever more of the multi-level maturity that a real grasp of basic truths concerning the Divine might presuppose. The next stage of insight here is that a more gracile skeptical-imaginative religion would also be much easier to *support*, rationally speaking, than religion weighed down by detailed beliefs. To complete the shift – and the irony – we may even see how such religion, unlike its overambitious believing ancestors, could turn out to be rationally *required* for beings like us, facing our evolutionary challenges. The upshot? Instead of falling behind, religion, paradoxically, may come out *far ahead* by 'going skeptical' in an evolutionary context.

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providing detailed interpretations of ultimism that manifestly conflict with other interpretations, it must be said that existing religious traditions, properly viewed, will also be seen to include propositional formulations that are much less inclined to ascribe specific properties to the Divine. (Think of what would be said by the Islamic mystics known as Sufis as compared with the detailed beliefs of Islamic fundamentalism.) If, then, someone considering a non-sectarian approach to religion of the sort I shall develop is looking at *these* aspects of the traditions, she will find much less to disagree with.

All of this the gestalt shift brings with it. But of course these ideas need development, and we need more support for the view that – on the assumption we started with in this section – we should let ourselves be caught up in such a shift, coming to see religion in such a radically different way. I cannot here provide everything that is needed.[12] But I do want to develop some central points, which may lead you to think at any rate somewhat more favourably of my suggestion than you otherwise would. These can be organized into three clusters, concerning (1) a new *attitude* for faith; (2) a new *object* of faith; and (3) new *arguments* about faith.

(1) Attitude. The common attitude of religious belief, our evolutionary religious skepticism tells us, is premature. Is there anything that can take its place? Yes, there is. And this is where the surge of recent discussion in the philosophy of religion concerning the possibility of nondoxastic religious faith (religious faith without religious believing-that) becomes relevant. Our evolutionary answer to the problem of faith and reason indeed provides for such discussion a significance – and a 'home' – that it might otherwise be deemed to lack.[13]

What has recently been argued is that one can evince the attitude of faith-that with respect to a religious view of the world and also a larger life-involving religious faith-in (faith *in the Divine*) informed by such faith-that even where one does not acquiesce in *believing*-that.[14] Among

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[12]It has taken three books to make a reasonable attempt at doing so elsewhere. See my *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), as well as the other two members of the trilogy already mentioned: *The Wisdom to Doubt* and *The Will to Imagine*.

[13]The idea of nondoxastic faith was at least suggested by F. R. Tennant and H. H. Price; and it is or would be defended today, usually in connection with religion, by such philosophical stalwarts as William Alston, Robert Audi, and Richard Swinburne. See F. R. Tennant, *The Nature of Belief* (London: Centenary Press, 1943), p. 78; H. H. Price, *Belief* (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1969), pp. 484-485; William Alston, 'Belief, Acceptance, and Religious Faith,' in Jeff Jordan and Daniel Howard-Snyder, eds., *Faith, Freedom and Rationality* (Rowman & Littlefield,1996); Robert Audi, 'Belief, Faith, and Acceptance,' *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 63 (2008), 87-102; and Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), pp.115-117.

[14]There are subtleties here that I will not pause to expose, except to say this. (1) Though faith-that is often called *propositional* faith, to be at all adequate, talk here of faith *or* belief with respect to a proposition has to be taken broadly enough to allow that, in the mental state in question, one may not have in mind any *formulation of words*. Expanding a little on James,

defenders of nondoxastic faith, there is some disagreement as to what the nonbelieving attitude here suggested amounts to. For that matter, there's disagreement on exactly what *belief* amounts to! Some explicate belief largely in terms of confidence; others would speak of a disposition to feel true, or of a disposition to think or be struck in a certain way that something is the case, and so on. There is however broad agreement with our earlier point drawn from William James about belief involving 'the sense of reality,' which agreement leads to agreement that there belongs to belief *some* component that, like those listed, is fundamentally *involuntary* and *fully engaged* in a sense that implies learning of the falsehood of the relevant proposition (the proposition describing the view of the world in question) would normally engender *surprise* for one who believes.

The alternative nonbelieving attitude is also characterized variously, though a common emphasis, as one might expect, is on the absence of that involuntary component and a different sort of mental engagement. It is common to find people speaking here of a nonbelieving acceptance or of presumption or assumption; the notion of a simple trusting-that also appears, as does the notion of assenting or consenting imagination. The phenomenology of belief is in all cases replaced by something more voluntary, something of such a nature that although disappointment would still be felt if the proposition in question turns out to be false, surprise normally would not. It is also agreed on all sides that the faith in question is more than hope (hoping-that), which, at least as normally construed, is weaker, less assertive than faith, and quite involuntary.[15]

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believing-that or nonbelievingly having faith-that amounts to seeing the world thus-and-so, in the former case involuntarily in a 'sense of reality,' in the latter case purposively, deliberately, and voluntarily in a manner I shall be detailing. Since we can often fill in the 'thus-and-so' propositionally, it is natural to speak of propositional belief or faith. But this way of speaking can also be misleading unless understood in the context I have here briefly sought to provide. (2) Faith-in, unlike the belief-in earlier encountered, is plausibly analyzed as moving beyond positive emotion and evaluation dispositions to the more active and practical disposition manifested when one *acts on* what one takes to be the case – here compare (say, with respect to his driving ability) believing in your friend with putting your *faith* in him. To my mind, faith in *both* forms – faith-that and faith-in – pushes us more to the voluntary side of things than does belief of any kind.

[15]In his *Three Essays*, Mill speaks of the religious imaginative disposition he has in mind in terms of hope, but perhaps this is just because he accepts the common assumption that faith must be understood doxastically. In any case, what he describes there has more affinities with the sort of faith I will go on to detail here than with hope as ordinarily construed.

Now, in contemporary philosophy of religion, the discussion of nondoxastic faith I have just briefly outlined is having a bit of a hard time gathering steam, primarily – so I would hypothesize – because most people (and certainly most contemporary philosophers) just take for granted the link between religious faith and religious belief. But of course the gestalt shift I have been encouraging you to consider should lead us strongly to *question* this assumption, and indeed to *look for* appropriate new and nonbelieving ways of construing the intellectual side of religious faith. So I want to suggest that here necessity meets invention! The resources for reconceiving the propositional attitude of religious faith are before us.

From among them I now select the notion that, to my mind, is best suited to religious needs in an early stage of evolutionary development, one emphasizing the role of *imagination* – a phenomenon that, with Mill, we must sadly still regard as relatively underinvestigated in science and philosophy. Bring religion and evolution and imagination together and you get a most stimulating and illuminating set of ideas. But just how can the imagination be put to work here?

I suggest that an imaginative, nondoxastic way of having faith with respect to a religious view of the world can be realized in circumstances where one does not believe that view to reflect reality but sees that it would be *good* for it to be true and takes its truth to be at least epistemically *possible* (here is another difference from hope, which can get by on a logical possibility). In this state, instead of being involuntarily represented-*to*, one represents the world *to oneself* through the power of the imagination as conforming to the view in question. One resolves to do so as needed on an ongoing basis, as a matter of policy. And, very importantly, in all of this one grants to that picture of the world, through a sort of mental 'consent' that is easy to experience but hard to describe, a certain *dominant status* in the relevant regions of one's mental life. So, for example, one pushes aside worries and questions about its correctness and allows it, imagined as true, to occupy the forefront of one's consciousness and assert its dominance, bringing it back there from time to time, and thus preserving it in that dominant position, by imagining and mentally affirming that it is correct. (It doesn't follow from this that one is willing to *publicly and verbally* affirm it: one may see that such behaviour would be deceptive, given that engaging in it would contextually imply that one's attitude in relation to the view is one of *belief*.)

Clearly what we have here is more than hope (though it may well include or presuppose

hope), and also more than a mere non-cognitive intention to engage in certain physical behaviours, recalled and acted upon from time to time.[16] Neither is it belief, nor must it turn into belief, especially given that the weakness of the relevant evidence may remain obvious (as recent investigation has shown, children from at least the age of four are able to avoid the sort of slip from imagination to belief that a critic may be worrying about for adults here).[17] At times, as when less effort is involved because imagination is kept aloft by the attractiveness of what is imagined (or by the reinforcement provided by acting *on* what is thus imagined), it may be tempting to regard such imaginative faith-that as belief, but this would be a mistake, as can be determined by noticing that the subject takes her view as being no more than epistemically possible, or by thinking about what her reaction would be were that view on good evidence to be judged false – surprise or just disappointment?

It follows that someone who adopts such a nonbelieving faith response after endorsing religious skepticism does not lose her skepticism. Faith grounded in imagination is perfectly compatible with doubt and religious investigation. It is content with epistemic possibility. Thus it is ideally suited to provide an alternative intellectual attitude for religion in the evolutionary circumstances I have been emphasizing. Notice that this need be no ad hoc scrambling response to the shortage of good arguments for religious belief, and no reluctant 'fall back' position. Again, it may follow upon the gestalt shift earlier described, which allows us to see that we are not yet *ready*

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[16]Formation of intention one may still see in such nondoxastic faith, but what matters is the *kind* of intention it is. Is it the intention, subsequently implemented, not just to do certain physical acts but to be of a certain *mind*? If so, and if being of that mind involves voluntarily forming certain thoughts, and if those thoughts are truth-valued, then don't we have the voluntary entering of a cognitive state, of the sort we might expect a voluntary form of faith to instantiate?

[17]For a documentation of the evidence and some possible neuroscientific explanations of our ability to keep imagination and belief apart, see Timothy Schroeder and Carl Matheson, 'Imagination and Emotion,' in *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretense, Possibility, and Fiction*, ed. Shaun Nichols, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), esp. p. 34. See also Deena Skolnick Weisberg, 'The Vital Importance of Imagination,' in *What's Next? Dispatches on the Future of Science*, ed. Max Brockman (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), and also the references therein. It's important to note that while by picturing the world a certain way, one is in effect imagining that the *total* evidence relevant to that view supports it, this is perfectly compatible with seeing the *available* evidence just as a pure skeptic or disbeliever might see it. There is no need to occlude what one ought to concede about the latter evidence.

for belief and so should *look for* an attitude other than belief to characterize religion at our early stage of development. Imaginative faith, so I suggest, fits this description admirably.

(2) Object. 'Ultimism', as indicated earlier, is my label for the general religious view that there is a reality unsurpassably deep in the nature of things and unsurpassably great (metaphysically and axiologically ultimate, as we might say), in relation to which an ultimate good for us and the world can be attained. The idea of a caring God concerned to enter into personal relationship with us represents *one* way of trying to give more specific content to this view; it is, we may assume, one of the disjuncts going to make up the big disjunction to which ultimism is logically equivalent. But there are other attempts to fill out this notion in existing nontheistic religions – consider monistic Hinduism or Buddhism or Taoism – and it may well be filled out in many completely new ways in the future. And whatever may be true about theism, there is, as our earlier conclusion about the force of religious skepticism implies, no way to rule out the truth of ultimism at the present stage of our development.[18]

In talking about the attitude of religious faith a moment ago, no assumption was made as to the content of the 'religious view of the world' that it might take as its object. What I want now to suggest is that *ultimism* is a more appropriate focus for religion at an early stage of development than theism or any other detailed 'ism.' In other words, skeptical religion should be skeptical at two levels: replacing belief with imagination as its fundamental intellectual attitude, and preferring simplicity – as opposed to the complexities of conventional religious views – in the *object* of that attitude. Ultimism is the simple heart of religion; it is as generic or simple a view as one could take up without leaving religion altogether. As such, it is perfectly adapted to an evolutionary religious faith. It is, as one might put it, set at a *good distance* from us, conceptually speaking: not so distant as to be incapable of evoking and fortifying a religious response to the world, but not so close and defined in its features as to foreclose all investigation and make us forget our place in time. It is in the balance between these two things that ultimism's religious promise can be discerned.

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[18]Elsewhere I have defended the view that there are some new arguments for traditional atheism which we can appraise as strong arguments even given the modest means at our present disposal. (See, for example, *Wisdom to Doubt*, Part III.) But skeptical religion does not depend on the success of such arguments for atheism: it is compatible with the conjunction of doubt about ultimism and doubt about traditional theism.

Let's explore this balance a bit more fully. We can be moved emotionally by what ultimism represents, if we contemplate it appropriately; and we can even identify some of our 'religious' experiences as possibly giving us some early form of contact with what it represents. Furthermore, ultimism has enough content to provide a basis for defining certain patterns of behaviour as appropriate and others as not – and so to function as a distinctively religious guide of behaviour. But at the same time, ultimism is general enough indeed to permit, as an evolutionary sensibility demands, uncommitted investigation of every *other* religious view – every disjunct from that big disjunction. We have here the best of both worlds: a framework for ongoing religious investigation of the whole panoply of more detailed religious views, both actual and undiscovered, to none of which one is committed, and also an object of religious imaginative commitment capable of sustaining a multiply-layered emotional and practical commitment, namely *ultimism itself* – the disjunction instead of any of the disjuncts.

When trying to see from what may be a great distance, we should be pleased at having located something with the broad outlines of our desired object of vision, and content to leave the details for later. But it is easy to dismiss an object of religiousness so general as *too* general. A little more exposition may be needed to quell doubts about the ability of imaginative ultimistic faith to set before us a distinctively religious path of attitudes and behaviour – particularly because of a certain similarity some may see between my conception here and one that emerges from the work of John Hick, which has been similarly criticized.[19]

So notice that by thinking of a reality as both metaphysically and axiologically *ultimate* and also *salvific*, we posit a number of relevant properties. We have nothing as lacking in content as Hick's 'Real,' which, influenced by Kant, he describes as in itself completely unknowable and indescribable. Although Hick sometimes uses such labels as 'the Ultimate' in place of 'the Real,' it is important to notice that my notion of ultimism does not share this feature. In saying that a reality is metaphysically ultimate, we say that it is ontologically fundamental, that it is deepest in the nature of things; in saying that it is axiologically ultimate we say that it possesses the deepest possible value. And it is the *combination* of these two elements taken together with the content specified by 'salvific' – the idea that the value of the Ultimate *can in some way be communicated to*

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[19]See John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

us – that produces something distinctively religious, according to the definition of 'religion' I have defended.[20]

In *seeing* that we have something distinctively religious here, something that can clearly be distinguished from what a materialist might say, and from what a certain sort of cosmic pessimist might say, who thinks there is something axiologically ultimate but holds that it must forever be out of reach, we see the significant content that remains in ultimism. And, furthermore, we can begin to define the patterns of behaviour that would result from acting on ultimism, imagined as true, and notice how they make for a rich and substantial religious life – religion after skepticism.

I cannot provide much detail here, but elsewhere I have identified and grounded in the various sorts of richness ultimism represents *three dimensions or directions* within an ultimistic religious life. These can be distinguished as 'downward' (into the depths of an understanding of ultimate things, through a relatively unrestricted but scrupulous and meditative inquiry), 'inward' (into the self, with the aim of reshaping such dispositions as those of anxiety or acquisitiveness, which are inappropriate to the truth of ultimism), and 'outward' (into the world and an engagement with its needs through risk-taking behaviour on behalf of the good, which behaviour is now seen as aligning us with the deepest nature of reality). One can also find *two distinct levels* in such a life: the actions and dispositions that would immediately reflect the content of one's faith in the ways just suggested, and those one undertakes to perform or cultivate in order to make actions and dispositions at the first level easier, more natural, or stronger – including participation in a suitable religious community. This *might* be a community of imaginative skeptics, bound together by a commitment to skeptical religion. But in our own time it might also turn out to be a more conventional religious community in which the skeptic practices her religion alongside traditional believers, with whom she can be at one on more general matters even if not on specifics, and this even if the attitude she takes up on those more general matters is imaginative instead of believing.[21]

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[20]See *Prolegomena*, chapter 1. Of course another difference from Hick appears precisely in my diachronic, evolutionary orientation, which leads me to be just as skeptical about Hick's Kantian insistence that we will never know more about the Divine 'in itself' than we do today as I am about traditional religious belief. Both excessive optimism and excessive pessimism are ruled out by such an orientation.

[21]See *Will to Imagine*, Part I.

The simple view of ultimism, therefore, is quite capable of grounding a rich religious life – one that, when imaginatively engaged, may lead not just to intellectual dispositions easier to approve than traditional ones, but to more completely approvable behaviours, too. In this possible 'religion after skepticism' there is – along with no belief – no sectarian rivalry, no religious violence. And the emphasis on inquiry is deepened and widened: here seeking can, in a sense, *be* finding.

(3) Arguments. So far, instead of giving up on religion as a result of our evolutionary skepticism about religious belief, we have begun to think about what *alternative* shape religion might assume, *consonant* with evolution and perhaps more appropriate to our time – such an early time in the history of intelligent and spiritually sensitive life on earth. We have seen that attention can be shifted from the specific to the *simple* and from religious belief to a purer *imaginative faith*. Such shifts seems necessary if religion is to be properly reoriented. In religion as in politics, partisan commitments can prevent one from seeing important new possibilities. By instead centering religion on the liberated imagination, we may, if all goes well, open up vistas of religious possibility that, were we to remain stalled in a believing form of faith, we would never come to see – new interpretations of ultimism that perhaps only, say, 10,000 or 100,000 more years of reflection on creaturely existence in our universe with enhanced capacities will expose to finite beings. And even if none of this were ever to come about, imaginative religion focused on ultimism of the sort I have all too briefly described would still remain the best sort of religion for humans today who seek to be properly mindful of human limitations and immaturity.

But is such religion good *enough* to earn endorsement from the rational side of our nature? What does *argument* show as to its intellectual status? Can evolutionary principles indeed lead to a thoroughgoing endorsement of *this* way of "cultivating and regulating" the imagination after skepticism?

I want now to consider an attempt to justify a negative answer to these questions. After showing why it does not succeed, I will show how a much more positive answer may successfully be attempted. The negative answer begins by suggesting that we may, far too easily, suppose that in this context, where our attitude is imaginative instead of believing, issues of evidence fall to the sidelines. Indeed, it would be tempting to suppose that, so long as a background condition of 'not

epistemically impossible' is satisfied, evidence should not have much of a role in our assessment of the attitude of skeptical-imaginative faith, directed to ultimism. But this is not the case. Even in this evolutionary context – indeed, *especially* here, given the need to discipline our wayward thoughts as part of growing beyond immaturity – we should want our intellectual attitudes, imaginative ones as much as believing ones, to go no further than is warranted by available evidence.

Even in his brief comments on religious imagination, Mill was able to expose a similar argument and the principle on which it rests: "the rational principle of regulating our feelings as well as our opinions strictly by evidence." Call this the symmetry principle. Mill holds that the symmetry principle is correct *only if* imaginatively dwelling on evidentially unsupported ideas must disturb "the rectitude of the intellect and the right direction of the actions and will."[22] He thinks the consequent here is false and accordingly holds that the symmetry principle is false.

In support of his view, he offers the example of a "cheerful disposition." This, Mill says, is "always accounted one of the chief blessings of life" and yet what is it "but the tendency, either from constitution or habit, to dwell chiefly on the brighter side of the present and of the future?" He elaborates:

> If every aspect, whether agreeable or odious of every thing, ought to occupy exactly the same place in our imagination which it fills in fact, and therefore ought to fill in our deliberate reason, what we call a cheerful disposition would be but one of the forms of folly.... But it is not found in practice that those who take life cheerfully are less alive to rational prospects of evil or danger and more careless of making due provision against them, than other people. The tendency is rather the other way, for a hopeful disposition gives a spur to the faculties and keeps all the active energies in good working order.... [I]n the regulation of the imagination literal truth of facts is not the only thing to be considered. Truth is the province of reason, and it is by the cultivation of the rational faculty that provision is made for its being known always, and thought of as often as is required by duty and the circumstances of human life. But when the reason is strongly cultivated, the imagination may safely follow its own end, and do its best to make life pleasant and lovely inside the castle, in reliance on the fortifications raised and maintained by Reason round the outward bounds.[23]

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[22]John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion*, 4th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1875), pp. 244-245.

[23]Ibid, pp. 246-249.

An analogous point, Mill then suggests, can be made about religious imaginings. It is precisely *through* imagining the world religiously, so he appears to think, that we may benefit other important causes, such as investigative ones, for it will make us more inclined to engage in them. In other words, devoting energies here will result in renewed zest for living and thus *magnify* or *replenish* energies in all other departments of life instead of in any way competing with them.

Is this right? After developing the notion of imaginative religion much more fully in an evolutionary context, is Mill's surmise borne out? I would suggest that it is. There is no reason to suppose that skeptical religion threatens to weaken or misdirect the intellect, or to make us behave in a manner inconsistent with a love of truth and understanding. Here we must resist illicitly conflating skeptical religion with the more familiar notion – which the critic may be having a hard time getting past – of someone without investigation being swept into detailed religious belief under the influence of nonrational forces in a context of naive unreflectiveness. It is, after all, only after careful investigation leads to evolutionary *skepticism* that, in our picture of imaginative religion, the commitment to imagine the world religiously *begins*. And in imagining that the most general religious claim is true, our skeptic imagines not that the available evidence is any different than it is, but rather that the *total* evidence, about which no belief is at present justified, speaks in favour of that claim. Nothing known or justifiedly believed to be false is here imagined as true. Furthermore, she makes the imaginative commitment in response to *arguments supporting it* (more on this later), and so from the side of reason – not from the side of an unreflective and traditional religious sensibility. She sees how immature and short-sighted it would be to yield to any desire for belief. And the religious activities (for example, wide religious investigation) that she undertakes as part of her skeptical religion are designed to strengthen that very distinctive sort of religiousness. So we should not expect her to be swept down the path of self-deception.

The critic may be starting to see the light, but she may still be inclined to wonder whether a use of the imagination that is not simply occasional but pervasive, inflecting all one's thoughts, emotions, and actions, won't involve a kind of willful self-blinding – a state in which one more or less willfully conceals from oneself the fact that the view by which one orients oneself has a weak epistemic status. Such behaviour – for obvious reasons – would have to be deemed highly

objectionable from the standpoint of reason.

But as already suggested, to sustain her religious practice, our skeptic can quite easily hold before her mind, in a blend of admission and imagination, the conjunction 'The available evidence is weak but the total evidence supports ultimism,' finding her religious life *sustained* thereby. Of course it may be that much of the time the first conjunct of that conjunction – the fact about the available evidence in support of ultimism being weak – is *not* before the mind of the religious skeptic as she goes about her religious activities. But to see that this is in no way problematic from the standpoint of reason we need only notice that there is a difference between *not thinking about a proposition* such as the proposition that the available evidence is weak in order to get on with some commitment, and *concealing it or its truth* from oneself in any dishonest, self-deceptive manner. The latter state in no way – logically or causally – follows from the former state, and it is certainly absent in one who recognizes the force of skeptical arguments regarding ultimism.

Consider here the analogy of a pilot who, concentrating on the flying of the plane in the midst of a storm, is not thinking about the possibility of a crash. Must the pilot really be *concealing* this possibility from himself in any dishonest, self-deceptive manner? If there is good reason to adopt such an attitude as faith, then there will also be good reason to countenance such an innocent by-product as the 'not thinking' at issue here. And, again, if thoughts about the available evidence do come to mind, they need not be rejected or ignored, but only paired with the above-mentioned possibility about the total evidence.

Some important points about investigation should also be considered here. As background, recall that it *is* the *most general* religious proposition that is imagined as true in skeptical religion. And we shouldn't expect the issue of ultimism's truth to be definitively resolved by evidence anytime soon. Mill, of course, had in mind a religious imagination focused on theistic and Christian ideas. So perhaps he could not say the same. But certainly this can be said where the much more general claim of ultimism is concerned. We are quite immature as a species, and a correct understanding of ultimate things may be a long time coming – if it comes at all. In conjunction with this point, it may be observed that ultimism is the most *stable* of religious propositions, since with less content comes less vulnerability. Indeed, no religious proposition is more likely to remain undisturbed by apparent proofs of falsity long into the future than simple ultimism.

Given these points, it must be admitted that in skeptical religion as I have depicted it there is room for extended intellectual exploration of diverse religious possibilities. Even though *alternatives* to ultimism are set aside by the skeptic who has imaginative faith, an intellectual investigation of various *forms* of ultimism is indeed woven into the skeptic's distinctive religiousness, as we saw earlier. So intellectual inquiry will continue; it's just that its focus will change. Given that one must necessarily be selective in investigation and that much attention has already been given to ultimistic and anti-ultimistic arguments, also by the skeptic herself, it is hard to see how this focus could be faulted. Indeed, one might argue that because naturalistic options have been so dominant in (at any rate Western) thinking over the past few centuries – as everyone knows, their trajectory has tended to parallel that of modern science – and because before that, rather parochial religious concerns held sway, a new and apparently one-sided program of research into a wide range of religious options both old and new is needed to rectify this intellectual imbalance. We may therefore conclude more sharply that not only is the degree of openness and attention to ultimism's alternatives capable of being mustered here fully adequate to the skeptic's commitment to truth and understanding, but her new investigative focus is to be *applauded* as potentially forwarding the cause of understanding precisely where, heretofore, it has been sorely neglected.

Perhaps the critic's concerns about imaginative faith after skepticism inheriting the rational liabilities of believing faith *before* have already melted away. But I add one further argument about investigation for good measure. Ironically, because of how a commitment to ultimism within the context of recognized ignorance pushes us to seek an even wider and deeper and more finegrained understanding of our experience and of the world than we might otherwise be motivated to pursue, it can do justice not only to one side of the debate, as we have just seen, *but to the other as well*. If we think about it, we will see that by making an imaginative faith commitment to ultimism and fully living it out within a perspective of evolutionary skepticism, we are, if anything, more likely to discover any facts counting *against* ultimism that there may be than we are if we hold back. Certainly, we cannot be put in a poorer position in this respect. And the nonreligiously skeptical critic who urges holding back has nothing similar to say in respect of facts potentially *supporting* ultimism, which even more obviously are ones that an imaginative commitment to ultimism should

better position one to notice. But then anyone who seeks to act on impartiality of intellectual concern here must be driven *toward* ultimistic commitment rather than away from it!

So much for how a negative answer to the question about reason's endorsement of skeptical religion can be resisted. Taking things a step further, we can entertain the daring idea that reason may not only have nothing to say against skeptical faith but may actively *support* it, to the point where it would be unreasonable *not* to pursue a life of faith. For centuries the believingly religious have sought to shore up such a status for doxastic faith (though with efforts in many quarters decidedly flagging of late). Perhaps there is no need to give up here, but only a need to *shift focus* to the form of religion properly adapted to our time and our condition. Continuing in this reflection, it might occur to us to consider whether the old arguments for belief in God so often repeated in contexts of theistic religion and philosophy might somehow be *recast* as arguments for adopting skeptical faith – might be *adapted* to the needs of skeptical religion. It would certainly be appropriate to an evolutionary picture of religion if this turned out to be so.

In recent work, I have argued that it *is* so.[24] Not only Pascal's Wager, but also Anselm's Idea, Leibniz's Ambition, Paley's Wonder, Kant's Postulate, and James's Will, among other sources of theistic reasoning, can be bent to the needs of skeptical faith. A veritable river of powerful practical reasons – some similar to those that, as we saw at the outset of this essay, a certain sort of Wittgensteinian might offer in support of religious *belief* – flows from traditional argumentation when it is examined with a skeptical-imaginative eye. I cannot give many details here, but a theme *uniting* the details shows that here again the support for skeptical religion provided by neglected *evolutionary* ideas is front and center. This theme is that skeptical-imaginative faith uniquely engages and enlarges human characteristics and capacities, within the framework for living it provides, and promises to take us further in the journey toward ourselves. Slightly less compressed: we are all called to pursue skeptical religion because through it we are able most fully to express and honour and also *further develop and support into the future* the beautiful but fragile, multi-faceted and value-laden complexity we can see in the process of becoming human, as realized at various levels in individuals, communities, and the species at large. Such faith, though it requires imagining the facts to have a certain character and though it would be

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[24]See *Will to Imagine*, Parts III-V.

undermined if they were shown to have a contrary one, is therefore in the end a response not to fact but to *value*. It is deeply humanistic, but precisely because of the depth of its humanistic concern, it refuses to let go of the Divine idea.

To illustrate this theme, I offer one strand from the details I have mentioned – bound up with *honouring* the beautiful complexity of human life. Interestingly enough, this argument too can take as a point of departure some thoughts suggested by Mill in one of his *Three Essays* ('Theism') – this time, thoughts concerning the religious idea of an afterlife:

> The beneficial effect of such a hope is far from trifling. It makes life and human nature a far greater thing to the feelings, and gives greater strength as well as greater solemnity to all the sentiments which are awakened in us by our fellow-creatures and by mankind at large. It allays the sense of that irony of Nature which is so painfully felt when we see the exertions and sacrifices of a life culminating in the formation of a wise and noble mind, only to disappear from the world when the time has just arrived at which the world seems about to begin reaping the benefit of it. The truth that life is short and art is long is from of old one of the most discouraging parts of our condition; this hope admits the possibility that the art employed in improving and beautifying the soul itself may avail for good in some other life, even when seemingly useless for this. But the benefit consists less in the presence of any specific hope than in the enlargement of the general scale of the feelings; the loftier aspirations being no longer in the same degree checked and kept down by a sense of the insignificance of human life – by the disastrous feeling of 'not worth while.' The gain obtained in the increased inducement to cultivate the improvement of character up to the end of life, is obvious without being specified.[25]

Though there are hints of other ideas, Mill is here characteristically utilitarian, thinking of how imaginative hope in connection with an afterlife may prevent us from becoming demoralized in the tasks of life. But to support skeptical religion, I would suggest rather focusing on the loved and lost themselves. Taking up a life of faith can indeed be something one does *for* those loved and lost, as an appropriately serious gesture of respect or act of tribute or honouring. It is a way – the deepest way – of showing that some departed loved one *matters* to you and is valued by you, valued so much that even though you cannot be sure reality guarantees it, you will in your *imagination* live in a world suited to her needs: a world that will somehow bring her the opportunity for fulfillment of potential that she was on earth denied.

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[25] *Three Essays*, pp. 249-250

And it is not only for those whom we have intimately known that such a response is appropriately made. All of us either have loved ones like this, or else know of individuals like this who were loved by others, or of individuals like this who were *bereft* of love but deserve to be loved. For any of them or for all of them, the responsive gesture of imaginative religious faith is warranted.

Notice that this is not – certainly not – a gesture one makes as a *substitute* for the sort of active concern that might *prevent* lives from being crushed; nor should we expect unconcern about horrors gone through by those *still living* to be a corollary. It is all we can offer after our best efforts to prevent horrors have failed, and something we do while continuing to offer our best efforts on behalf of those still living, moved by the very motives of stubborn compassion as well as respect that made us imaginatively appropriate the idea of an afterlife in the first place. And even if there are other *self-centered* motives that can make faith connected to an idea of the afterlife questionable, the possibility of adopting it and deepening it into a stable disposition from such motives as I have emphasised means reason can commend it for us all.[26]

The reasoning in support of skeptical religion that can thus be adapted from the thoughts of Mill has particular poignancy for me, and should have poignancy for others, too, since for so many of us, it is the tendency of the world to *crush* human lives that is central among the various powerful objections to *theistic belief*. Here we are permitted an interesting realization in connection with that venerable old problem of evil. Put it this way. Indeed there are horrible events. They arguably show there to be no personal God, and also might lead one to question whether there is an ultimate religious reality of *any* kind. But the very religious notion that is called into question by such events is required, at another level, to do justice to the moral impulses that led us to call it into question in the first place. Thus similar moral considerations to those that may have led us to *abandon* religious faith (misunderstood as entailing theistic belief) should now be instrumental in our *regaining* it (in the form of ultimistic faith), and in our persevering with a new imaginative faith

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[26]Mark Johnston, in his book *Saving God: Religion After Idolatry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), warns us against the self-centered motives. Because of them he holds that afterlife belief cannot be saved. I too think afterlife *belief* is unjustified, but imaginative faith is another matter; and I fear that Johnston has given short shrift to the *other*-centered motives that might lead one to find the idea of an afterlife attractive.

after skepticism.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, let me offer some brief thoughts in response to an objection that is likely to emerge, not from the nonreligiously skeptical, but from those on the *other* side of the perspective I have sought here to expose: the religiously nonskeptical. It may seem insulting and arrogant to have something precious and integral to your form of religiousness – namely, religious belief – relegated to the first stage of an extremely long process of evolutionary development! And it will be tempting to complain of a certain vagueness or emptiness or thinness in the proposed replacement.

But I hope that, at the end of the day, it will be truth that matters most. For either evolutionary skepticism is correct, or it is not. If we conclude that it is correct, then we need to accommodate ourselves to this conclusion. Then also we should find intriguing the idea that a robust and rational form of religiousness can be glimpsed even from the depths of the dark valley of skepticism. And, at this point, perhaps the accusation of arrogance will be exchanged for gratitude at having this pointed out, and wonder at the strangeness of the world! If, on the other hand, we regard evolutionary skepticism as *in*correct, we should still feel the onus on us to show *how* it is incorrect, given all the powerful reasons that can be amassed in its support. And here a charge of arrogance can play no role – unless from the mouth of the *skeptic* urging humility enough to accept for ourselves the status of early hominids, whose desire for understanding must be balanced by a recognition of how easily, especially in profound details, we may go wrong intellectually.

As for the purported vagueness or emptiness or thinness in ultimism and the idea of a life built upon it: we are so used to highly detailed traditional religious formulations, whose re-formation from time to time seems only to produce new details, that it is hard to conceive anything less detailed having a richness sufficient to ground a *life*. But here it is important that we try a little harder to exercise a will to imagine (in the sense in which that means being open to new religious possibilities). Notice that the religious world already includes individuals and communities unwilling to put much detail into their doctrine, who flourish nonetheless. Think only of some Zen Buddhists – or even of the Universalist Unitarian Church. And remember that ultimism is the burning *heart* of any more specific religious view, from which any claim it might make as to

deepest richness must ultimately be derived. Furthermore, as I have mentioned a time or two, simple ultimism is equivalent to the disjunction of all more detailed religious views, both actual and possible. Now, this disjunction may be rather large indeed. And it seems to me that recognition of the potential hugeness of the disjunction – of the richness of the range of possibilities here – may fulfil a psychological role in the life of the person of non-sectarian faith analogous to that fulfilled in the traditional believer by attachment to one of its disjuncts. Thinking of this richness without knowing what would be preserved by the correct conception and what set aside – which describes a possible state of mind for the meditating skeptic – is one way of being freed to enter more fully into what 'ultimate' really means. One should never underestimate the religious power of mystery.

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And so we arrive at the end of the present endeavour. The outlines of the new view of religion that I suggested would appear if you were patient enough to follow me a little way beyond evolutionary skepticism are in place. And now there are *reasons* to acquiesce in the gestalt shift earlier described. The proper result of religious skepticism, should its powerful evolutionary credentials be granted, is not some entirely nonreligious secularity – as if we could by this point in our evolution have *ruled out* the truth of ultimism! – but rather the pursuit of skeptical religion, which turns out to be just as well supported by evolutionary thinking as religious skepticism. And such skeptical religion, were it to take hold societally, would, given its self-conscious operation within a diachronic frame of reference and its harmony with human reason, properly be seen as marking the *beginning* of religion rather than the end.

Of course, at another, later stage of human development, we may have developed enough maturity and insight to make religious belief (or a universal religious disbelief) intellectually credible. But for our own place in time and, I suspect, many more to come, imaginative religious faith and its supportive arguments represent the most rational option for human beings. Those who have instead sought to bolster detailed belief have only caused us to get ahead of ourselves in a big way and seriously confused us on the issue of faith and reason. Because of them, religion has had a bad start on our planet, intellectually speaking. But the story of religion needn't end with a bad start. Religion can be born again.