Three Ways to Improve Religious Epistemology

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Abstract
Religious epistemology is widely regarded as being in a flourishing condition. It is true that some very sharp analytical work on religion has been produced by philosophers in the past few decades. But this work, for various cultural and historical reasons, has been kept within excessively narrow bounds, and the result is that the appearance of flourishing is to a considerable extent illusory. Here I discuss three important ways in which improvements to this situation might be made.

In this paper I will identify three ways in which religious epistemology remains excessively narrow in its concerns, and three corresponding ways in which this important area of philosophical endeavour might be improved.

1. Beyond Naturalism and Theism

Religious epistemologists have the task of looking at both religious and nonreligious perspectives on the world, considering whether and how we can determine who's right, along with a host of other more detailed but related questions about knowledge as well as justified or reasonable belief or faith concerning religious matters. But in practice only two perspectives have become salient: *theism*, which says that there is a God upholding nature, a creator of heaven and earth who possesses all power, knowledge, and goodness, and *scientific naturalism*, which holds, to the contrary, that reality is a single unified system structured by natural laws, which science is working successfully to expose. Each tends to be treated as exhausting the category – religious or nonreligious – to which it belongs. Accordingly, religious epistemologists who thought they had learned that scientific naturalism is false would be inclined to infer that theism is true, and thus to say that belief of theism is epistemically justified for them or can even count as knowledge. Similarly, those who concluded that *theism* is false would be inclined to infer that *scientific naturalism* is true, and thus to say that

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belief of scientific naturalism is epistemically justified for them or can even count as knowledge.[1]

But these are inclinations that, if followed, can lead only into rather large errors. Let 'R' stand for 'Some religious possibility is actualized,' 'NON-R' for 'Some nonreligious possibility is actualized,' 'T' for theism, 'SN' for scientific naturalism, '→' for logical entailment, and '∼' for negation. Then it is correct to write

$$T \rightarrow \sim SN$$

and also (because it logically follows) correct to write

$$SN \rightarrow \sim T.$$

In words: if theism is true then scientific naturalism is false, and if scientific naturalism is true then theism is false. Furthermore, it may quite properly be said that

$$T \rightarrow \sim (R \ \& \ \sim T)$$

and also that

$$SN \rightarrow \sim (NON\text{-}R \ \& \ \sim SN).$$

In words: if theism is true then religious truth can't be realized in any *other and incompatible* way, and if scientific naturalism is true, then non-religious truth can't be realized in any *other and incompatible* way. But it would be a mistake to claim that

$$\sim T \rightarrow SN$$

or (therefore) to affirm what logically follows from that claim by contraposition:

$$\sim SN \rightarrow T.$$

In words: the falsehood of theism does not entail the truth of scientific naturalism, nor therefore does the falsehood of scientific naturalism entail the truth of theism. Of course, if someone did a lot more work than any philosopher has yet done to rule out o*ther* ways in which R could be true and *other* ways in which NON-R could be true, these results *together* with ∼T might legitimately be

[1] For representative discussion, see Daniel C. Dennett and Alvin Plantinga, *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

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said to entail SN. Similarly for ~SN → T. But given present circumstances of inquiry, we who are not religious apologists or scientific activists but philosophical investigators have to leave open, as a matter for further inquiry, that

$$R \,\&\, (\sim SN \,\&\, \sim T)$$

as well as that

$$\text{NON-R} \,\&\, (\sim SN \,\&\, \sim T).$$

In words: it could well be, there is no justification to deny, that the religion category gets things right while *both* of the views claiming all our attention today – both scientific naturalism and theism – are false, or else that the *non*-religion category gets things right while both are false. Now wouldn't *that* be interesting!

Yes, it would. But it is an interesting possibility to which most contemporary religious epistemology is closed by virtue of assuming to be true the claims that I have here suggested are *erroneously* assumed in the present context of inquiry about things religious.

Of course some will resist that suggestion. One way to try this would involve an appeal to the interconnectedness of philosophical concerns over time. Philosophers like other inquirers, so it may be said, do not rightly ignore the concerns of those who went before, or rightly pass up a chance to fulfil an agenda set by other philosophers years ago if such a chance comes along. And perhaps this is how well known Christian philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga are inclined to view their situation. But it's one thing to vigorously defend a theistic option and look nowhere else for religious ideas – as, say, Gottfried Leibniz and Samuel Clarke did in the seventeenth century – when theistic belief pervades the culture and is at the very least a live option for everyone in philosophy, and quite another to do so when your view is, in relation to philosophy as a whole, at best an outlier and when your main motive for defending it is non-philosophical. Arguably the latter is the Plantinga situation. Leibniz and Clarke themselves, if resurrected in our midst and as truth-intoxicated as we tend to imagine, might recommend to Christian philosophers that they drop 'Christian' from the label with which they identify, philosophically.[2]

[2] For defense of the view that bias infects contemporary philosophy of religion, see Paul Draper and Ryan Nichols, 'Diagnosing Bias in Philosophy of Religion', *The Monist* 96 (2013), 420–446.

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More generally, if we have seen how philosophical concerns of the past betray shortsightedness or blindness from which we need not suffer, there is no good *philosophical* reason to seek to advance them. Earlier thinkers had little access to the diversity of intellectually sophisticated religious views we now know can be found around the world, and none at all to such recent results of natural science as geological time, which should move us to note how early a position we *may* occupy in (what will be) the total history of inquiry on our planet.[3] Nor did they have the support we have from cognitive science for seeing humans as being, at this early stage, rather biased toward personal representations of divine realities.[4]

Might a theistic philosopher still appropriately say that the metaphysical explanations offered by theism, even if they only represent one small part of conceptual space, are what she is *particularly interested* in exploring, or that theism just seems obvious to her – she cannot help this – and so this is where she is going to *start* when doing philosophy? And might scientific naturalists respond similarly? Perhaps. But then there is still no basis for the assumption, so commonly made, that theism is in any more general way intellectually or philosophically *the only live religious option*, or for offering to the community of inquiry an inference from the falsehood of one of these views to the truth of the other. It's one thing to be working with theism or scientific naturalism or even working *on* making one of these views more resistant to opposition, but it's quite another to treat these two as constituting the only game in town. The game is much larger – or it would be if religious epistemology were properly developed – and theistic philosophers in particular need to reconcile themselves to making a move here or there rather than controlling the board.

Of course, these points, thus baldly stated, may not be sufficient to change many human minds. So let's consider another way of proceeding here, which yields extra confirmation for the idea that religious epistemology should be open to the view that, whatever may be said of R or NON-R, both theism and scientific naturalism are

[3] See J. L. Schellenberg, *Evolutionary Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[4] See, for example, Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2004), Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), and Todd Tremlin, *Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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false. This comes from a consideration of certain *tensions* that exist in both of the popular camps – both in the territory occupied by theism and in that claimed by scientific naturalism – between more familiar and accessible and less familiar and strange ideas.

Take theism first. Here the tension is between the kind and loving – or perhaps harsh and wrathful – *person*-like being many of us learned about at our mother's knee, a being who intervenes in the world and answers prayers, and the more abstract and metaphysically rarefied reality, perhaps outside time altogether, that one might learn about at the knee of Thomas Aquinas. Religious experiences of certain common sorts – sometimes prompted by historical events such as the activities of Jesus of Nazareth – as well as the community life of many vibrant religious traditions will get you the former, and serious theological reflection may lead you to the latter. Prominent theistic religious epistemologists such as Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and their acolytes have veered quite close to the person-like God in their reasoning. But they would try to convince you that they can accommodate everything important in the more metaphysically oriented God too. Other theistic philosophers, such as Brian Davies and Keith Ward, would strenuously disagree.

A similar tension exists *within* the personalist conception of the theist's God. For Swinburne and Plantinga would disagree with the sort of process theism that can be linked to the work of Alfred North Whitehead as well as with a view called panentheism, championed by philosophers such as Philip Clayton. And yet all of these views can be – and often are – formulated using the idea of a *divine person*.

So we have some tensions in the theistic camp. But similar tensions exist among scientific naturalists. Here a problem that arises stems from the fact that there are almost as many ways of filling in a naturalistic picture of reality, guided by science, as there are naturalists. Even my broad sketch above might generate quibbles. And of course there can be disagreements among advocates of these various definitions.

But I want to focus on a rather basic and well known tension one finds in this neighborhood, as to whether the science we should look to for our picture of reality is *present* science (represented by available results or those we might achieve from the current methods and assumptions of science over sufficient time) or *ideal* science – science as it might exist in a much more matured and complete and rather different form should scientists have, say, a few hundred thousand years more to plug away. Of course those who hold the former view will resist the latter – for them, in a sense,

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present science *is* ideal science. But many of those who practice science today would regard this as somewhat over-optimistic, to say the least! Considering what may be required to bridge the divide between quantum theory and general relativity (or to replace those theories with compatible ones), and giving careful attention to how radically different are the basic concepts of quantum physics from any that came before (say, in Newtonian physics), it may seem rather risky to suggest that science with a few hundred thousand years more to work would – assuming the work resulted in whatever advances are needed – look little different from the science we have now. Indeed, it might not seem too much to suggest that even if the world picture of many non-theists, after that much more time and rewarded effort, remained in some sense *naturalistic*, it would stretch our concept of science to the breaking point to call what they had come up with *scientifically* naturalistic.

My aim is not to resolve these tensions between the familiar and the strange (or potentially strange) in theistic and scientifically naturalistic pictures of the world or to suggest that they cannot be resolved, but rather to point out that they are signs of *unfinished business* – certainly just what we might expect if the view I am defending has it right. Even without leaving theism and scientific naturalism we can already observe *variation* within R and NON-R. And we can see the potential for more. Should we really suppose, then, that nothing *other* than theism and scientific naturalism will be revealed to have significance as we transcend the partisan motives that are still so often found among us, and work at ultimate questions a bit longer? Is there really justification to believe that? Here's a thought: it's not because of all we've already learned but because of a lack of humility, and the even broader immaturity of which it is a symptom, that we presently rest content with theism and scientific naturalism in our deliberations. Here's another: if at the *earliest stage* of inquiry we are disposed to think we've come so close to settling the *most profound* matters, it can't be *reason* that gives us this tendency!

Perhaps it will help if at this stage we summarize the reasons that have emerged in our discussion for broadening the discussion in epistemology of religion by moving beyond theism and naturalism to consider other regions represented by R and NON-R. There are basically four reasons. After the first, each strengthens the reason(s) that came before, and together the four make a formidable case.

(1) Intellectual humility demands a much more modest assessment of what we have so far learned in religious matters.

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(2) Committed scientific naturalists and theists have generally given little or no attention to the investigation of other regions of conceptual space represented by R and NON-R.

(3) Cognitive science of religion is providing support for the view that humans are specially attracted to agential conceptions of the divine, in such a way as to potentially yield a prejudice against other ways of construing it.

(4) Finally, and also from science itself, in particular from the contemplation of geological timescales, one learns that if the temporal demands of knowledge on relevant matters for limited intellects are more accurately expressed in *their* terms than in terms of the *human* timeframes we so take for granted, then even in a few thousand years we have barely got started on what would be (were inquiry successful) a long journey perhaps many thousands of times as long as that. Now we have no way of ruling out that the demands of knowledge *are* more accurately thus expressed. Therefore, we have no way of ruling out that we have just got started on the road toward knowledge on religious matters. (This consideration, as noted, strengthens those that came before, but it is also strengthened by them.)

So how should the proposed broadening occur, to make for a genuine improvement? It's clear that we have conceptual diversity, and we need to be open to discovering much more. But the details here might easily get away on us and become unmanageable – perhaps this suggests another motive for analysts who like things crisp and clean to stick to two options! Moreover, we have to make room not only for detailed religious and nonreligious pictures of the world that exist today and are ignored but also for views that haven't yet entered the discussion because they have not yet been *conceived* by limited and immature minds.

My suggestion is that, instead of adding other detailed options to theism and scientific naturalism, we should carve out a larger, more general, more basic religious idea – larger, more general, more basic than theism – that might serve the field of philosophy of religion as a whole, including epistemology of religion, as a sort of *framework* for detailed inquiry. To count, at least in philosophy, as a way in which R could be true, a proposition would need to entail this larger idea. Of course many detailed ideas, including many theisms, would do so. And not just scientific naturalisms, but potentially many different ideas, all those filling the space of NON-R, would count as *ir*religious, and as challenges to religion, by entailing

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the falsehood of that larger claim. Moreover a variety of other relevant ideas – of religious belief, religious skepticism, religious faith, and so on – might be defined in terms of the more general idea, bringing a heretofore absent *structure* and *organization* to philosophy of religion. By being more general and fundamental, the basic religious claim or proposition or idea would furthermore be much better suited to nonpartisan *philosophical* inquiry about religion than traditional theism, and more likely to remain stable, a continuing framework for inquiry that can weather many changes, as we move into the future.

So which general idea should we select? This of course is, and must be, a matter for broad discussion, but I will mention two possibilities, one more general than the other but both more general than theism – either of which, if widely taken up, would mark a signal improvement in how we do philosophy of religion, including religious epistemology. The first, which I have discussed at length elsewhere, I call *ultimism*.[5]

This claim – and it is important to note that 'ultimism' *is* the name of a claim or proposition, not of a proposed new religion – says that there is a triply ultimate reality, a reality ultimate in three ways: metaphysically (in the nature of things), axiologically (in inherent value), and soteriologically (in its value *for us and the world*, that is, in its conduciveness to the attainment by us of an ultimate good). And that's all it says. Nothing here about a divine person who created the world – though notice that that is one way in which the general idea of metaphysical ultimacy could be filled out. Nothing about attributes such as maximal knowledge, power, and love that jointly make for unsurpassable greatness – though notice that that is one way in which we might try to flesh out the more general idea of axiological ultimacy. Nothing, either, about salvation through the appropriate commitment to a personal God – though notice that that is one way in which we might add detail to the more general idea of soteriological ultimicy. Theism, which I have of course just been alluding to, would be regarded as entailing ultimism but ultimism does not entail theism. Theism may represent *one way* in which ultimism could be true, but there are others, maybe very many others. And we could try to determine *what are* these various ways of filling out the claim of ultimism, evaluating them in all the ways that religious epistemology allows. This is how ultimism can provide a better framework for philosophical reflection concerning religion than theism does.

[5] See, for example, J. L. Schellenberg, *Prolegomena to a Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

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But ultimism may not be as general or fundamental as things get in the religious domain, when the latter is construed in the manner most likely to benefit philosophy. Elsewhere I have argued that ultimism should, for philosophical purposes, be used to define religion and many other related things. But there are reasons for resisting this view.[6] A more general possibility which I think avoids all such problems as have been mentioned here would focus on the concept of *transcendence* rather than ultimacy. A reality might be transcendent – more than or other than the arena of mundane events or (depending on how it is defined) more than or other than anything physical or natural – and might be transcendent in each of the three ways already suggested, metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically, *even if it is not in any respect ultimate*. So we have as a contender for the status of 'basic religious idea of concern to philosophers' the notion of a triply transcendent reality. Out of deference to the repeated 't' in 'triply transcendent,' and with a wink in the direction of theism, we might call the claim that there is such a reality *t-ism*. Both theism and ultimism entail t-ism, but t-ism entails neither of them. Again, we have a broader and better framework for philosophical inquiry concerning religion.

Which more general claim should win out – ultimism, t-ism, or perhaps some notion yet to be introduced to the discussion? I offer no judgment on this here, though I would say that religious epistemology, for reasons set out above, would be much improved by having its inquiries developed within the framework allowed by one of these, rather than by the omnipresent but limiting and error-prone dispute between traditional theism and scientific naturalism. Even naturalists, among those who turn out to have irreligious positions in philosophy of religion, are here allowed to stretch and explore other ways (ways other than scientific naturalism) in which an irreligious perspective on the world might be true. Of course – and this is interesting – naturalists also need to be open to our ways of thinking about the world over time evolving in such a way as to permit the partial or complete erasure of our distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Perhaps 'nature' will one day be conceived in such a way as to be compatible with something like triple transcendence, as then understood. Something similar could happen on the side of theism: perhaps there will be future beings, more intelligent and spiritually sensitive than we, who one day countenance the idea that

[6] See, for example, Jeanine Diiller, 'The Conceptual Focus of Ultimism: An Object of Religious Concern for the Nones and Somes', *Religious Studies* 49 (2013), 221–233.

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personal qualities dimly analogous to those which theists now attribute to God represent *one dimension* of a much larger divine reality. Whether on the side of R or Non-R, there may be many more fascinating possibilities in conceptual space than are dreamt of in our present philosophy.

2. Beyond Belief

Religious epistemology as we see it today is limited, hampered, constrained not just by an obsession with naturalism and theism but by its obsession with *believing states* (whether understood categorically or in the graded fashion to be associated with popular talk of 'credences'). As a recent overview of religious epistemology has it, the field is concerned with a variety of theories about whether 'subjects' religious beliefs' can have 'positive epistemic status'.[7] But, you say, don't disbelief and skepticism or doubt also come in for consideration here, at least implicitly? Yes, they do. However notice that disbelief too is belief: if – perhaps because you are a scientific naturalist – you disbelieve that there is a God, you *believe* that there is *no* God. And doubt too has to be understood in terms of belief: if you are in doubt about whether there is a God, then (perhaps among other things) you *neither believe nor disbelieve* that there is a God.

But perhaps it will seem that a focus on these things need not make religious epistemology overly narrow. After all, aren't religious people commonly called *believers*, and aren't epistemologists, in philosophy more generally, concerned with the epistemic status of *beliefs* and with their possible contribution to knowledge and understanding?

To the first question: yes, but if that determines our approach then it is liable again to be shaped by present preoccupations and evaluative concerns – perhaps our own as religious believers or disbelievers – rather than by concern for a generally applicable picture of the field, whose principles religious persons of many different kinds and at many different times might recognize as responding to their situation.

To the second question: yes, these concerns have long been part of general epistemology, but more recently even epistemologists outside philosophy of religion have recognized that we need to be sensitive to the existence and importance of nonbelieving or potentially

[7] Trent Dougherty and Chris Tweedt, 'Religious Epistemology', *Philosophy Compass* (2015) 10: doi: 10.1111/phc3.12185.

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nonbelieving cognitive psychological states – states such as the state of *acceptance* explored by L. Jonathan Cohen.[8] Acceptance of the sort Cohen has in mind allows one to take a proposition as a basis for practical and theoretical inference and act on this even when one doesn't believe it, either in the categorical sense of thinking or feeling it to report what is the case or in the graded sense of having some *degree* of belief (perhaps this should rather be called confidence) with respect to it. In this sense one might accept that the prisoner is innocent, or accept that one's spouse is faithful, or accept that a certain path leads out of a cave, or accept that the theory is true while not in any sense believing the relevant proposition – perhaps without having a clue how probable one should say it is. And acceptance of this kind might be but *one* of the nonbelieving cognitive states found in everyday life and inquiry, with which epistemologists (therefore) should concern themselves, along with beliefs.

The two main points I have made here – about believers in religion and belief in epistemology – are connected. For one of the way in which nonbelieving cognitive states could prove their importance is *by showing up in recognizably religious lives*. This possibility should be of great significance for anyone who is intellectually curious, where religious matters are concerned, instead of functioning as an apologist or activist for some particular religious or nonreligious perspective (which stance human nature combined with facts about the nature of religious and irreligious allegiance – in particular *believing* religious and irreligious allegiance – conspire to make all too common even among philosophers). It should be of great significance for anyone thus minded because it might allow religious epistemology to become, at once, more relevant to religion on the ground (which features a goodly share of doubt) and to religion as it may come to exist in the future. If a nonbelieving religious cognitive commitment passes the appropriate epistemological tests whereas believing ones do not, we might even have here a new solution to the old problem of faith and reason.

There are grounds to think that we will find precisely such a disparity between nonbelieving and believing religious commitments, though more discussion is needed to confirm this. Theistic religious epistemologists such as Plantinga and Swinburne have laboured mightily in recent decades to defend the view that traditional theistic and even orthodox Christian beliefs can be epistemically justified or amount to knowledge, despite the sharpest critiques from other

[8] See L. Jonathan Cohen, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

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orientations – in particular those of scientific naturalists. But there are reasons to locate serious shortcomings both in their approaches and in their results. Our own results in section 1 have a bearing here (section 3 is relevant too, as will become apparent). For even if scientific naturalism – or indeed any present form of naturalism – were provably false, theistic philosophers today would be in no position to infer that any of their religious beliefs are true. More generally, much more investigation than any of us has yet undertaken of religious and nonreligious alternatives to views on religion we find attractive would be required to rationally uphold any religious view as a *belief*, given human limitations and immaturity.[9] There is even a new challenge, one that philosophers such as Swinburne and Plantinga have never considered: namely that theism should entail ultimism if it is the religious view it is thought to be *but in fact does not*, since the restriction to a person-like being is at the same time a derogation from axiological ultimacy, which would not be thus restricted.[10] (Of course other religious propositions may not be subject to *this* challenge, and theism does appear to entail t-ism, whatever may be said of its relation to ultimism.)

Now I've already said that such skeptical challenges await further discussion and confirmation or disconfirmation. But suppose they are confirmed. The interesting thing here is this. If our focus in religious epistemology is restricted to religious *beliefs*, then a widely applicable religious skepticism, if borne out by continuing inquiry, would have to be said to mark the end of rational religion. But if religious epistemology is expanded to include a consideration of alternative cognitive states and their evaluation in the ways I have suggested (and am about to suggest), *then it may be just the beginning*.

For suppose that what epistemologists of religion discover, when they develop the broader, more discriminating, and sensitive evaluative criteria needed here, is that a religious faith whose cognitive center is nonbelieving is *much easier to support*, rationally speaking, than are believing forms of faith, in ways that allow even limited, immature humans to rationally have religious faith in response to one religious proposition or another. Perhaps, for example, all that is needed is a simpler or more general proposition than any theistic

[9] See J. L. Schellenberg, *The Wisdom to Doubt: A Justification of Religious Skepticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

[10] See J. L. Schellenberg, 'God for All Time: From Theism to Ultimism', in Andrei Buckareff and Yujin Nagasawa (Eds.), *Alternative Concepts of God: Essays on the Metaphysics of the Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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one, an aim or set of aims – including truth-oriented aims – that is well or uniquely advanced by having religious faith in response to that proposition, and a lack of any good reason to *disbelieve* the proposition. If such were the case, we might be in a position, right now, to supply plenty of epistemic justification for religious faith. But notice: if we had never expanded religious epistemology beyond belief, we would never *know* this.

3. Beyond the Evaluation of Token Responses to Religious Propositions

The third improvement I want to propose requires us to raise our sights from a current preoccupation which may also stem, at least in part, from the partisan or activist orientation that can create an obsession with believing states. This is a preoccupation with whether the religious or nonreligious commitments of *particular people or communities*, usually individuals or communities to be found somewhere in the West today, are rational or epistemically justified or amount to knowledge. Often these people include those doing the inquiry – philosophers may be concerned with whether *they themselves* have achieved a certain epistemic status – and in part because these inquirers are usually religious or nonreligious believers, we tend to find a corresponding focus on particular *believing* commitments.

Again it may seem there is nothing particularly troubling here, at least beyond what we've already discussed in the previous section: isn't it a rather important question for religious epistemology whether (and how) religion or irreligion is, or is not, rational – and this whether it be belief or some other cognitive state that underlies the religious or irreligious stance? Yes, it is. But now it will be necessary to notice an ambiguity in what I've just assented to. When we say that a certain response to a religious proposition – a religious or irreligious response – is rational, we may be thinking of that response at the level of *token* or *type*. A response token is the response of a particular individual at a particular time and place; a response type is a *way* of responding that can exist purely in the abstract, without ever being 'tokened.' (Of course most relevant response types – including those involving some cognitive state other than belief – will have, corresponding to them, individual persons or groups in the world who *do* respond or have responded in that way.)

Most epistemologists of religion, as suggested earlier, are preoccupied with the evaluation of response *tokens* – though there is unclarity about this and the two levels are sometimes blurred – and for them to

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raise their sights in the way I am recommending would mean devoting at least as much attention to response types, in (so far as is possible) a clearly distinct and impartial discussion with other inquirers about which response types are rationally *worthy* of being tokened.

There is actually more complexity here than I've indicated so far, since each of the two main levels, concerned with response types and tokens, can be broken down into 'pure' and 'applied' invesigations. When the community of inquiry considers the epistemic worthiness of various types of response to religious propositions, what we want to have enabled is comparative discussion, for anyone who can follow the arguments, about which response to one or another religious proposition the ideal inquirer would or might choose or pursue, carried out by reference to the state of relevant available evidence, the likely (direct or indirect) contribution of a response to epistemic goals, and so on, and perhaps relativized to our early location in the possible history of inquiry. And so we need proposals in search of consensus about general principles by which to proceed here, and also about the results of applying them. At this level the philosopher acts as a sort of 'scout,' exploring the metaphysical and epistemic terrain and rendering a verdict by which others can be guided. She is certainly not putting forward her own beliefs and trying to justify them!

Similarly, we need work both on standards and on their application in connection with the evaluation of response *tokens*. Here we are enabling an assessment of how well people actually do when choosing or pursuing a response in this or that context with whatever (perhaps limited) information they possess. The discussion may involve reference to comparative evaluations but not at the level or in the way previously mentioned; rather it will be relativized to the particular circumstances of the individuals and groups involved – to whether, say, the relevant token responses emerged from a process in which all epistemic duties were fulfilled or intellectual virtues were appropriately cultivated or in which reliability of belief formation was achieved. Of course, as results from the first level, concerned with response types, become better known, we may expect connections between the two levels to manifest themselves more often, since (for example) it will be harder to fulfill epistemic duties without having appropriately taken account of those results.

At both levels we should seek community-wide consensus – where the relevant community is *not* a Christian or Jewish or Islamic community but rather the community of epistemological inquiry. (Otherwise we will have little of the protection from shallow and

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biased results that we should be especially eager to secure at an early stage of inquiry.) And *both* levels are indeed needed. It would be a great improvement of religious epistemology if we had them.

To see why this must be the case, from an epistemological perspective, simply *compare* what I've just described when indicating the full complexity of the work required at the two levels (and the potential interconnections among results) with an alternative one can find today in this connection, where you have religiously or naturalistically convinced philosophers focused on arguing that they – and members of their partisan communities – can rationally get away with believing as they do, or that their own partisan community's standards are satisfied by their own beliefs. In which of these two ways – the rich multi-leveled discussion aimed at wide community consensus or the alternative – are we most likely, at an early stage of inquiry, to make progress toward the truth on profound matters? And, recognizing that even today not all our results are as egregious as those I've here described in connection with the faulty alternative, how best can we *build on* our best work and minimize the likelihood of epistemological work that will not stand the test of time plus further maturing, intellectually and spiritually? It seems evident that the value of a rich multi-level picture of religious epistemology of the sort I have sketched is confirmed by reflection on these questions. Furthermore, working toward the improvement *it* represents will, in obvious ways, make easier and more natural the *other* two improvements I have discussed in this paper.

4. Conclusion

That these three improvements are needed in religious epistemology, I have at various points suggested, is in some way related to confessional or partisan motives driving much present activity in the field. These are rendered understandable by placing them in a larger context. (Of course 'understandable' is to be distinguished from 'justified.') Seeing how the field has come to have its narrow shape, we can make a conscious decision to no longer let our history or our culture lead us around by the nose, and deliberately improve what we are doing.

Science, as everyone knows, has enormous cachet in western culture today. Ever so many dark corners of human life have been illuminated by it. Almost everyone is inclined to accept that there is scientific knowledge, and that more of it is coming down the pike virtually every day. And contemporary philosophers work hard to

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accommodate scientific knowledge in their work. Psychologically, the move from awareness of these facts to the idea that science, fully developed, would be capable of telling the *whole* story of reality can be seductive.

History adds to its seductiveness, and also to the apparent force of the idea that theism is all that stands in the way of science being rightly accorded such a glorified status. It was their belief in the existence of a *personal God* that led many early scientists, such as Newton, to assume that the 'whole story' had extra-scientific elements. At many points, as in the struggles precipitated by Darwin's work, scientific explanations have been forged to defeat the previously regnant theistic accounts. Although there are still pockets of resistance, one can detect, over time, a steady weakening of theistic religion's intellectual power in the domain of nature, to the point where no Newton today would give to theism the sort of explanatory role Isaac Newton gave to it in the seventeenth century. But because of the cultural 'constant conjunction' of theism and science over the centuries, a Newton today, especially if as innocent of religious studies as many philosophers appear to be, might still quite naturally behave as though the only alternative to scientific accounts of the whole of reality is given in the name of the theist's God.

Theists in philosophy are, of course, as subject to such cultural and historical influences as anyone else. Turning to the recent history of philosophy, it's interesting to note that over the past few decades we've had some pushback from them to the idea that theism's intellectual power is waning. And where in philosophy has this been most conspicuously present? In religious epistemology! In this context, with the discussion thus shaped, one has to expect an emphasis on the *beliefs* of certain unjustly characterized individuals and groups, and on their defense. Philosophers such as Swinburne and Plantinga, though not denying that theism should stay out of science's way, have also argued (respectively) that there are places theism can go explanatorily which science cannot reach, and that there are experiences which can justifiedly ground theistic belief even if science at some level and to some extent explains them. In making their arguments, they have time and again had to answer objections from scientific naturalists, who hold that theism's explanations are unnecessary or inadequate and that science's explanatory power, when it comes to religious experience, is much more of a threat than theists realize.

But why have philosophers stuck to theism instead of exploring other religious options, or even clearly noting that they exist? In

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addition to the cultural factors already mentioned, we need to take account of how philosophers such as Plantinga and Swinburne have seen themselves as *giving contemporary Christian theology a hand*: at least to some considerable extent theirs has been *religious* intellectual activity undertaken on behalf of the larger Christian community. The similar dispositions of so many of their acolytes within contemporary religious epistemology, and the activities of those representing a very recent movement explicitly known as analytic theology, lend support to this interpretation. Theistic philosophers doing religious epistemology have not made room for other religious options in part because they are *religiously committed to not doing so*.

At the same time, it's hard not to see scientifically inclined philosophers – and virtually all non-theistic philosophers are scientifically inclined – as seeking to *give contemporary science a hand* by means of their defenses of scientific naturalism. This is perhaps not as obvious as the counterpart disposition among Christians. But it is not implausible to see what is starkly evident in the work of philosophically unsubtle thinkers such as Richard Dawkins or philosophically unmotivated thinkers such as Daniel Dennett as bringing out more clearly a trend of thought that is much more widely influential. In short: there is evidence that religious and scientific *commitment* are in this region of contemporary intellectual life constraining philosophical *imagination*.

By some such route as I have here briefly described, we have arrived at our present situation in religious epistemology. Our field's presently narrow shape, I've said, is thereby made understandable. But the next generation needs to change that shape and make improvements, including such as I have mentioned, if religious epistemology is to become a fully *rational* and *philosophical* activity. In no way is it appropriate for religious epistemology as an investigative enterprise to casually rule out or ignore options which would make both scientific naturalism and theism false, or restrict its efforts to the evaluation of belief tokens when our collaborative responsibilities in relation to various types of response to religious propositions beckon so obviously. This doesn't mean that we must from now on exclude from religious epistemology theists or naturalists bearing arguments in favour of theistic or naturalistic beliefs. Rather, we should distinguish between parochial and *investigative* theism, and between parochial and *investigative* naturalism. Only what is captured by the 'investigative' characterization could, in either case, have a place in philosophy. And those who satisfy it will, I suspect, not find it difficult to see that the three changes I have recommended would indeed

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make for improvements, or to summon the motivation required to work for their implementation.

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