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Truth-triggered religious commitments

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Abstract: **This article describes a new type of religious commitment that is activated only if the associated religious propositions are true. The notion of a conditional intention provides the mechanism for understanding how it works, and the justification for forming such an intention in the religious case comes from an awareness of human immaturity combined with a more fundamental and unconditional commitment to truth, goodness, and beauty. The article's argument promises to contribute widely and to supersede certain older arguments, including Pascal's Wager.**

It has generally been assumed that to respond positively to religion one must choose. Such a relation to religion involves being selective: it requires giving oneself unconditionally to a single religious possibility while excluding all others. Pascal's Wager, for example, is premised on this idea. But if the view I will develop in this article is right, then it is possible to respond positively to religion without choosing among religious possibilities in this way. Then we can choose *all* the religious possibilities, conditionally, letting the truth of the matter determine which religious commitment, if any, is realized. Then, moreover, even if the truth accommodates religion and a religious commitment is indeed realized, the commitment may be one we do not explicitly attend to and of which we are not aware.

If it can be made plausible and applicable to our situation, this initially odd-sounding view will bring illumination to a number of problems in the philosophy of religion. As we'll see, it may also supersede certain older stances – including that of Pascal's Wager. Much of the reasoning I shall offer to defend it rests on the idea that thinking about religion in this way is especially appropriate for beings like us who find themselves at a relatively early stage of human religious development. The notion of conditional intentions, we'll find, provides the mechanism for a

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new understanding of how one might relate to religion, but our place in evolutionary time and our level of maturity give it salience.

My development of the view commending this understanding begins, however, with a more fundamental point: that any positive response one offers to religion should be made subsidiary to and be embedded within one's response to truth, goodness, and beauty.

Truth, goodness, beauty . . . religion?

The gifts of evolution for virtually all who belong to our species include intellectual powers, moral scruples, and aesthetic sensibilities. To these corresponds the great triad of truth, goodness, and beauty.[1] Given the nature of our evolved capacities, we are *responsive* to truth, goodness, and beauty and can become *committed* to them as well.

The commitment we see here is a general life commitment which anyone so gifted can make. The true – understood here as a true proposition or propositions – invites us to seek it and whenever we find it, to believe it; the good invites us to seek it and whenever we find it, to conform our behaviour to it; the beautiful, to seek it and whenever we find it, to love it. When we accept this threefold invitation and intend to live accordingly, we make the general commitment to which I have referred. To facilitate discussion I will call this commitment to truth, goodness, and beauty *the TGB commitment.* The facts involving truth, goodness, and beauty – with the notion of 'facts' taken as broadly as you please – I will call *the TGB facts*. The TGB commitment we might then also call a commitment to embody the TGB facts in one's person as fully as one can. I will sometimes speak in the corresponding way.

Now there are some interesting issues about relationships among members of the triad and our commitments to them. I will not linger over these for long. We speak of loving *truth* as well as beauty, and it may be *good* for us to love liberally in this way. Beauty might seem subsumed under goodness, but if we think of goodness as broadly moral goodness we will have a sharper distinction enabling sharper points. Accordingly I would recommend thinking of goodness thus. Truth and the commitment to truth may in a sense be fundamental here, since when one seeks to be conformed to goodness or loves beauty one thinks it *true* that something is good or something beautiful and also true that one should respond in that way. But goodness and beauty will, for some, stand behind the invitation to seek truth, and they may exert their own influence on how we look for it. The issue about what, if anything, is fundamental in this domain would, it seems fair to say, take some time to deal with adequately and in any case does not have a bearing on my main concerns. So I propose to set it aside on this occasion.

The general life commitment I have described, the TGB commitment, we must now distinguish from the more specific life commitments people tend explicitly to

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make, such as familial commitments, social commitments, humanitarian commitments, political commitments, and of course religious commitments. We tend to start specific, and need to learn the general. Perhaps we stick to some specific commitments longer or more tightly than we otherwise would when we don't notice the general alternative.

This is not to say that the two kinds of life commitment must be at odds with each other. Not at all. Indeed, the general commitment might in appropriate circumstances be seen as mediated by one or another specific commitment, such as a religious commitment, when the latter is rightly taken as offering a more fine-grained conception of the true, the good, or the beautiful. Nevertheless, once having noticed the general TGB commitment and how it is distinguished from the others, several things become possible: one may realize that the general commitment is the more fundamental; accordingly, it may become clear as well that specific commitments will need to be embedded in this general one if we are to listen to wisdom (which certainly could not speak with any voice unapproved by truth, goodness, and beauty), and moreover that one can always fall back to the TGB commitment when some specific commitment falters or seems to be undermined or shown to be unworthy.

Now, also, we may notice that it is not always obvious that specific commitments are yet appropriate for us. Caution may seem especially appropriate when we consider passing from the general TGB commitment to *religious* commitments, which give to T, G, and B a unified and highly profound and also detailed complexion. For example, the truth may be regarded as being explicable in detail in terms of God's creating and saving activity, the good in terms of obedience to God, and the beautiful in terms of God's inner nature which, if properly devoted, we may progressively enjoy. Especially if we attend to human limitations and to our early and, in some respects, immature stage of development in deep evolutionary time, we may see that T, G, and B themselves call for caution here; it would be contrary to the TGB facts to plump too quickly for such religious details, to be seduced by what we might call *premature specification*. Perhaps we are not yet in a position to explicitly or deeply or fully recognize the TGB facts: perhaps the details are and will for some time be hidden from us.

That would not be at all surprising. Because of our notorious lack of intellectual humility (or of an understanding of what it requires), which lack is commonly expressed by the assumption that almost any question can be answered with the answer rising to the status of knowledge, and is arguably manifested by the common contentment with early personal and agential notions of the divine and reliance on the religious experiences of family or tribe – because of this lack, I say, we have got quite used to specific religious TGB commitments. They represent the norm. But acquaintance with some neglected facts about human religious life can suffice to inject a different attitude into our thinking. The religious commitments we see all around us are, after all, associated with traditions only a few thousand years old. These traditions may seem ancient, but when we shift

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from the micro level of particular human doings to the macro level of evolution, noting, for example, that our planet will remain hospitable to life for another billion years, our perspective will change. The human species is about 300,000 years old, and at that seemingly advanced age is in fact still quite youthful in evolutionary terms, having traversed less than a third of the time that is, on average, allotted to mammal species on our planet. Some species might of course be prodigies, advancing swiftly through many stages of development, but it would be hard to defend this assessment for the human species – certainly where religion is concerned. Our religious traditions, like some other cultural artefacts of early *Homo sapiens*, display a profuse variety of developmental shortcomings: moral, psychological, social, and – in part because of this immaturity of shortcoming – intellectual, too.[2] Consider only how dogmatism and a lack of empathy have governed so much religious behaviour; the jealous anger of so many human gods, including the god of the Christian Old Testament; the rampant sexism; and the sparse investigation of 'other' people's religious ideas. Though it would be rash to infer that nothing can be learned on religious topics in such circumstances, it would be perfectly reasonable to question whether everything of greatest importance to someone who has made the general TGB commitment has already been ascertained and has turned out to be religious in nature.[3]

So, yes, specific religious life commitments are the norm. But in these circumstances of evolutionary infancy and cultural immaturity, starting from the general TGB commitment and maybe even staying with it for some considerable time while *resisting* the norm may seem to make a good deal of sense.

Conditionally intended religious commitment

A bit of reflection on the matters I've just raised might well convince someone that religious commitment is simply not on the cards, rationally speaking, for limited human beings at our species's present stage of development. Or perhaps it might lead them to favour and emphasize a non-doxastic religious commitment, which substitutes something like accepting or assuming or imagining for believing, over a doxastic one, which must somehow find justification for religious belief. Both approaches, however, are likely to make a questionable assumption: that to respond positively to religion in a manner compatible with religious commitment, one religious stance or another must consciously and explicitly be selected to the exclusion of others. I will now show how this assumption can be questioned, and a new possibility friendly to religion made to emerge, by applying the notion of a *conditional intention* and noticing how, in our circumstances, the general TGB commitment favours its application to a range of religious views rather than to any one.

Let's start with the second of these two points. A TGB commitment, even when it is general, will still involve a very great interest in a more detailed grasp of the TGB facts. One wants to be aligned with the true, the good, and the beautiful as closely

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and intimately as possible. So if there is some way for someone who has made the basic TGB commitment to be aligned with the detailed TGB facts, or to make it more likely that she will be thus aligned, she will naturally and rightly be drawn to it. Of course at our stage of development, we realize that the details may be virtually anywhere. A TGB commitment should make us interested in all the more fine-grained and detailed conceptions of the true, the good, and the beautiful that humans have uncovered (with the exception of those – like the picture of gambolling Greek gods atop Mount Olympus – that are rightly judged obviously false on the basis of investigations already undertaken; that it would, as one might say, be untrue to truth *not* to ignore). Moreover, our fundamental commitment should prompt us to strain to develop as many new TGB conceptions as we can. For in any of these, the details of TGB facts may be hiding. Therefore we should qualify the statement from before: if there is some way for someone who has the basic TGB commitment to make her alignment with the detailed TGB facts more likely *while remaining sensitive to our place in time and our immaturity*, she will naturally and rightly be drawn to it.

And thus – as I will now show – she will naturally and rightly be drawn to a form of religious commitment that presupposes the formation of a conditional intention. A conditional intention, as I shall understand the notion, is an intention to bring about a certain result R, provided that some condition C is satisfied. On my construal, we should not think of a conditional intention as an intention to make a conditional true (the statement of the intention would then be 'I intend to make it the case that "If C then R" '), nor is it conditional in the sense that formation of the intention must await the satisfaction of some condition ('If C, then I will unconditionally intend R').

An analogy is to conditional bets. They are not bets on conditionals. Nor are they predictions that *if* some condition holds one will bet on some statement. They are bets that are called off – no-one wins or loses – if some condition fails to obtain and are not called off otherwise. Similarly, conditional intentions, as understood here, are moot if the relevant condition fails to hold, that is to say they can no longer be carried out, but they behave like normal unconditional intentions otherwise.[4] And so, back in the good old days of nuclear stand-off between America and the Soviet Union, each side conditionally intended to blow up the other – that is, intended to rain down nuclear bombs on the other provided the other became sufficiently provocative, as it would by launching a first strike. The Soviet Union never did become thus provocative, so the conditional intention formed by the Americans ended up moot. If the Soviet Union had launched a first strike and the American intention had held up, action to carry it out would have followed just as it would have had the thought of bombing the Soviet Union entered the head of some intemperate American President and caused the formation in that head of an *un*conditional intention to do so.

Now in many, perhaps most, cases of conditional intending, the condition is the occurrence of an event at some time in the future, which we expect to come to

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know about if it happens. Indeed, a pertinent example is afforded by a conditional intention that quite uncontroversially comes precisely with the general TGB commitment: the intention to conform one's life to a specific religious detailing of TGB (call it TGBR), provided TGBR is discovered to be true in the future. But notice how this still keeps one at a certain distance from TGBR. Because the discovery in question must occur in the future, if it occurs at all, this intention cannot be construed as one that might yield its result in the present. The sort of intention I aim to introduce and explicate for religious purposes *can* be thus construed. So we need something other than a future event. What we need is, I suggest, provided by a state of affairs that obtains in the present, if it obtains at all. The bare truth of TGBR would be such a state of affairs. So we are getting closer to the sort of intention I have in mind if we think of intending to bring about some result provided that TGBR is true.

Notice now that TGBR could be true though I never discover that it is, and so if the sort of conditional intention here imagined is to be accepted as possible, we have to countenance the notion of an intention producing the intended result even when I do not know that it has done so. How are we to make sense of such a thing?

Analogies will help – and they will also bring us closer still to the sort of conditionally intended religious commitment I have in mind. So imagine a child who comes to his recumbent father asking for money to take to the mall. The father, without rising or opening his eyes, says: 'If there's anything left in my wallet, you can have it'. Here we have the expression of a conditional intention. 'I intend that you shall be allowed to take what's in my wallet, on the condition that there is anything in it'. Now should there be no money in the wallet, nothing is allowed. But suppose there is money in the wallet, which the child then takes to the mall. If his brother asks him where he got it, wouldn't he be correct to say: 'Dad let me have it'? And wouldn't this statement be correct though Dad immediately forgot the whole incident, and never thought of it again – even when collecting his wallet the next morning to go to work?

Another analogy. A man close to death and making up his will is initially inclined just to leave all his money to the Mennonite Central Committee. Then he nostalgically remembers four romantic relationships with women who have long since passed out of his life. He realizes that, for each relationship, there is at least some small chance that it has, unbeknownst to him, produced a child who rightfully should inherit. So he inserts in his will the following conditional statement: 'I intend that any would-be inheritor who comes forward in the first month after my passing shall be given one quarter of my money, provided he or she is proven to be my child'. Now suppose the man dies, and a young woman comes forward with a proven claim to be his child, thus inheriting one quarter of his money. If she is subsequently asked 'From whom did you get that money?', wouldn't she be correct to say 'My father gave it to me' – and this even though her father never knew or even believed that he had a child?

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Another analogy. You live in a time of war and are working on experimental technology that you hope will help in a certain way *W* to drive out foreign invaders who are occupying your country. You realize that much other secret work with a similar aim could be going on, and that some of it might be highly sophisticated, so through private channels you communicate this message: 'I intend that anyone doing resistance work shall be allowed to make use of my efforts and their results, provided that my efforts are found to complement their own'. On balance you don't believe there is anyone like that and you continue your lonely pursuit of *W*. But now suppose there *is* another secret and sophisticated resistance effort. Those involved with it find that although their way of resisting, *W**, and *W* don't quite line up, your work, which they now secretly examine, fills a conspicuous and stubborn gap in their own efforts, and so they are able to make use of it to pursue *W** successfully. You never come to know that this has happened, dying before the war ends. But after the war, aren't these other resisters right to say that you *gave* them this critical help and to support the government's desire to award you a posthumous Medal of Honour? (It's true that these other resisters could have got access to your work anyway, just by stealing it, say, but then you wouldn't have given it to them. Now you have.)

What we see in these analogous cases is that when the condition belonging to a conditional intention is the concurrent obtaining of a state of affairs, all that's needed for the intention to be fulfilled is for it to be *true* that the state of affairs obtains. The person whose conditional intention it is need not know or even believe that this is true. She or he may indeed believe it to be false! Call the sort of result R that comes with a fulfilled conditional intention like this a *truth-triggered* result.

Let's now take this notion of a conditional intention that, if fulfilled, yields a truth-triggered result and see if we can apply it religiously, remembering that we are doing so against the backdrop of a general TGB commitment maintained in circumstances of a recognized deep religious immaturity. Suppose that in these circumstances you are thinking about how some religious view you don't actually believe could still right now be correct. There is at least some small chance that it is. If it *were* correct, that would have special implications for how the TGB facts can most deeply be understood and/or most fully embodied by you, and so given that you're TGB-committed, you would desire if it were correct to be led into the corresponding pathways of thought and behaviour – explicitly and knowingly if possible but at least implicitly otherwise. (Here's how it might happen implicitly: say there's an important difference between treating suffering as arising from ignorance and treating it as resulting from moral failings, and that one of these ways of treating it is correct; without ever seeing how, you might – by the Powers that be – find yourself guided in one direction or the other and so become properly aligned with the truth of the matter.)

It's now possible to respond to such a TGB-inspired desire as I just mentioned, the desire to be led into any correct and TGB-relevant religious pathway either

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explicitly or implicitly, by forming the following conditional intention: 'Provided some religious view is right now correct and I could under its auspices be led in more refined TGB directions, I intend that the Powers that be shall be permitted to exercise a corresponding control over my life'. Though a personal divine would be able to control my life anyway, such 'permission' affords a new reason for it to guide me into certain pathways – or, if the Powers aren't personal – promotes such guidance in a new way.[5] If what is here conditionally intended were sincerely intended – and we have seen how the more fundamental TGB commitment could make it so – and if also it came to be, one would be religiously committed, given over to Divine Powers, so we can think of the result R in this case as a religious commitment. (One must be careful here to distinguish the *practical* commitment to do or bring about something that any intention embodies and the *religious* commitment that in this case is the 'something' in question. The former one evinces in any event; the latter only if the condition C specified in the practical commitment – it being the case that some religious view is right now correct and that I could under its auspices be led in more refined TGB directions – is realized.)

The notion of 'Powers that be' should be taken very broadly here, to allow for quite unknown ways in which transcendent agency or something transcendent in some way analogous to agency or at any rate with relevant causal powers might operate. As just suggested, one might intend the religious commitment while in memory and imagination surveying all the religious possibilities, known and unknown, taking them disjunctively, or one might do that and *also* form the intention for *each* of an assortment of known possibilities, reasoning that one can show greater respect for possible truths – and thus be more meticulous in a TGB-recommended way – by taking them individually where able to do so. In the latter case, recalling TGBR, we'd have something like the following conditional intention: 'Provided TGBR is true and this truth makes specific TGBR pathways objectively right and I can be led into them, I intend that such guidance shall be permitted'.

What we see here is similar to what Christians sometimes talk about in terms of 'giving one's will over to God'. And of course it might be that it is God one has in mind. You might intend that your life be a gift to God on the condition that there is a God. But one might want to accommodate many other known religious possibilities too, in each case intending to give over one's will and one's life on the condition that the TGB facts can thus more deeply and richly be embodied in one's person.

Be sure to notice that you or anyone can conditionally intend such a religious commitment, and such a commitment can also be realized in your life, even if you do not believe and indeed even while *disbelieving* that the religious possibility in question corresponds to reality. Suppose you disbelieve. Let's take the two possible situations here in turn, starting with the one in which your disbelief is correct. In that case there is no religious truth, and there are no associated TGB-relevant mental and physical movements that you have not made but could make under

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its auspices. In that case it would not be right to call you religiously committed, even conditionally. Instead, your conditional intention is moot. It cannot be satisfied. But in intending to give yourself over to religious realities on the condition that they are there and could become productive in your life, you do conditionally intend to be religiously committed. The motive with which you do so might seem unusual and suspect, but a bit of reflection on human immaturity and the TGB commitment should suffice to dispel this impression.

And now what if instead we have the very different situation in which your disbelief is *mistaken* and the religious possibility you have in view when you form the conditional intention *does* correspond to reality and *can* in some way be brought into your life productively? Well, then the truth of these things triggers a religious commitment for you, activating a new life commitment even when it is in the nature of the case that you may never explicitly realize that this has happened. What we see here allows, again, for a diversity of possible 'Powers that be' and is an option designed for a situation of human immaturity and uncertainty in which, nevertheless, one finds oneself gripped by TGB. It involves a conditionally intended religious commitment, to which one is attracted by an unconditional TGB commitment.

Interestingly, what we see here – as in part I've already suggested – is an option favourable to religion that is *universally accessible*, that anyone at all might select. And we might go further, saying that everyone *should* form a conditional practical commitment of this sort, realizing that it could trigger a religious commitment. Think about it. Why wouldn't any person of good will be ready to do so? If we haven't done so, it's simply because it hasn't been recognized as an option before. By doing so, we increase the chances of being specifically committed to TGB in the right way, and this must surely look good from the perspective of the TGB commitment. Of course, if the response of the religious Powers that be, supposing there are any, does not enable explicit knowledge of TGB details, the result may appear somewhat limited even where a religious commitment is triggered or activated, but if this inspires dissatisfaction then we are again forgetting our evolutionary circumstances and, in particular, the possible absence or undeveloped condition of certain religious capacities. When we remember, we will allow that what we have here is a response to religion quite appropriate for creatures such as we are.

I have said that the sort of conditional intention that might yield a truth-triggered religious commitment is available to anyone. Are we to suppose that even conventionally religious people – Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and so on – can form such an intention? Yes, indeed. The view applies also to people of conventional religious faith who, much like conventional nonbelievers, may be led by reflection on our limitations and our evolutionary circumstances at least to be open to the thought of lacking the right detailed picture of truth, goodness, and beauty – in the present case, by having the wrong one. (Open how? It would suffice to make our conditional intention attractive were one less than absolutely

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certain about the completeness or correctness of one's TGB beliefs.) A Christian, for example, could follow that view while remaining a conventionally committed Christian believer – could follow it, that is, in relation to other religious possibilities. You could have the intention that your life be a gift to God B on the condition that God B is real while believing that God A exists and being in a conventional way committed to God A. Indeed, you could conditionally give yourself to many gods. At this level there is no need to choose.[6]

But could a conventionally religious person really continue to be committed in the usual way while also thinking positively about another commitment? How could their commitment be wholehearted in that case? Wouldn't it be rather like the 'commitment' of someone who is married but willing to leave his partner should someone seemingly better come along?[7] The analogy is inapt. Notice how a marriage commitment *includes* committing oneself to never enter a relationship with someone else under such circumstances. A conventional religious commitment does not analogously include committing oneself to never become aligned with other religious ideas should those one presently believes to be true in fact be false. A better analogy would work with a somewhat different scenario: a scenario in which the person one is living with is an imposter – not at all the individual to whom one believed oneself to be married. Could one's marriage commitment be wholehearted even if one agreed that in such circumstances – which of course one does not believe oneself to be in – one would wish to live with someone else? It seems so. And similarly a religious commitment can be wholehearted even if one agrees that should the religious propositions one firmly believes to be true in fact be false, one would wish to become aligned with other religious propositions that *are* true.

The religious commitment I have been talking about may at first sight seem odd, since it is triggered or activated only if there's a religious truth of one sort or another, the intention that then would produce it being moot otherwise. If there are no religious truths then no-one ever has a religious commitment in *this* sense. But it's not as though you have no commitment at all otherwise; you still have at least the broader TGB commitment which produced the conditional intention in question, the former being itself quite unconditional and absolute. For those who have no conventional religious commitment – and no unconventional religious commitment of a different sort – things revert back to the TGB commitment alone if there's no religious truth. And that, as we have seen, is not at all a bad place to be.

Other problems may be suggested. It may seem that I have made things too easy for nonbelievers: that what we have is a recipe for laziness when it comes to religion. But there are a couple of problems with that idea. First, it fails to notice that the TGB commitment may independently require continuing involvement in strenuous religious investigation, among other things, and will involve for one who has conditionally intended a religious commitment the cultivation of a love of the truth sufficient to allow the recognition of any new religious influence

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grounded in the truth. Second, and quite importantly, the idea that what we have here is a recipe for laziness assumes that there are no religious truths of the relevant kind! If, say, you're a Christian you should think that the life of the nonbeliever who forms a conditional intention of the relevant kind in relation to Christianity is about to get a lot more interesting – a lot more religiously involved and perhaps demanding – as God responds to the TGB-motivated nonbeliever, even if for God's own good reasons this fact is never explicitly divulged to her.

But this may only seem to generate a further problem. The nonbeliever just described, who isn't explicitly aware of what's going on, may have another and explicit orientation that is contrary to the Christian commitment – perhaps she's a metaphysical naturalist. Or a Muslim, say, would, if what I've been arguing is right, have to be able to retain her explicit Islamic commitment while also having a Christian commitment triggered. Are we to suppose that one can be a metaphysical naturalist and a Christian at the same time, or a committed Muslim and a Christian at the same time?

A quick answer is that the activated Christian commitment is highly unconventional in nature, and so there can be compatibility with other, more conventional kinds of commitment. But to take this issue seriously, we should dig a bit deeper. Our metaphysical naturalist, let us suppose, believes metaphysical naturalism to be true, but notice that despite her activated Christian commitment she does not believe any Christian metaphysical proposition to be true; indeed, we might expect that, quite consistently with her naturalism, she will believe all such propositions to be false. As we've seen, having her conditional Christian commitment triggered is consistent with this. So there's no conflict at the level of belief. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same thing holds for our Islamic believer. What about non-intellectual behaviour, and the desires and emotions associated therewith? Here there may be areas of overlap anyway between what the two stances call for, and the Christian God could easily guide our naturalist or Muslim into these overlapping regions. And important new desires and emotions, as well as conjunctions of desires, emotions, and beliefs, will come with conditional religious commitments for any Muslim or naturalist – for example, the desire that if one's personal metaphysical beliefs are mistaken, one be moved, practically speaking, in the direction of what the truth requires. The unnoticed effects of the triggered Christian commitment would be quite in line with such a desire. And although such effects might sometimes seem at odds with the contrary metaphysical belief taken all by itself, they would be quite in line with the conjunction of that belief and the mentioned desire.

Another problem may be suggested that applies to atheists who wish to accept the argument of this article – at least to any atheists who also accept the hiddenness argument. Specifically, it may seem that the argument of the article, as thus far developed, is committed to a claim at odds with a claim of the hiddenness argument. For the hiddenness argument says or implies that if God exists everyone open to God believes in God,[8] and here I may seem to have suggested that if God

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exists we can be open to God *without* believing in God (since the commitment realized might remain implicit instead of becoming explicit).

But there is no real problem here. Notice that we get the apparent inconsistency only by assuming that the antecedent of each conditional – the one from the hiddenness argument and the one from my article – is the same, namely 'God exists'. And that assumption is false. Going along with the argument of this article, we will not say that *if God exists* we can be open to God without believing in God but rather that *if we have formed the conditional intention involving God and God exists*, this is the case. 'We' in the more complex antecedent of this conditional refers to actual human beings who are open to God but do not believe in God, and there would be no such beings in a scenario including God's existence if the hiddenness argument were correct. So someone who affirms this conditional and is a supporter of the hiddenness argument will notice that she is thinking about a state of affairs in which the hiddenness argument is unsound and God exists. Open to being mistaken about the hiddenness argument, she is imagining how things might be if that were so. And, of course, if that were so there would be nothing preventing God from remaining hidden! So there is no reason for her to deny that, in such a scenario, a nonbelieving religious commitment of the sort we have been entertaining might be realized.

A final problem may seem to come with the very word 'conditional', which will strike some ears jarringly. But here a quick answer is possible. Do notice that we're not talking about making a religious commitment conditional on such things as finding one's keys when one prays for this result on losing them, or more generally on being successful or happy in life. The intention to be religiously committed is not made conditional on anything that could fail to obtain while the religious view involved is true. And caring about the truth is of course at the heart of any TGB commitment.

The idea coming into view here, then, is that there's a genuine and important sort of positive response to religion for which you don't need religious knowledge, belief, acceptance, or imaginative faith, for which religious truth alone suffices, together with your conditional intention. Though at another level you may also enter into a religious commitment featuring one or more of these other commodities, you don't have to do so to respond positively to religion (or even to be religiously committed, should truth be on its side), contrary to what's generally assumed when we bring knowledge, belief, acceptance, or imaginative faith into the discussion of religious commitment. It's usually thought that truth *isn't* necessary for a religious commitment though belief or something like it *is*. We've just seen how, for the sort of commitment we all should conditionally intend, the very opposite is true.

Putting the view to work

I will draw the article to a close by considering what its results might, if confirmed, contribute to discussions across the philosophy of religion. Some

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relevant points – for example, about how a positive response to religion, leading to a genuine religious commitment if any religious claim is true, is now universally accessible and justified – have already been made. But there are quite a lot of others. My results, it seems to me, may have consequences for discussions of deathbed decisions, the agnostic's prayer, religious scepticism more generally, Pascal's Wager, the nature of naturalism, and the notion of anonymous Christians. Even a new way of testing religious claims emerges here. Let me very briefly say something about each of these topics in turn.

Deathbed decisions

I hit on the view of this article when thinking about how I could respond to my evangelical Christian sister on my own deathbed if she were to attend me and – as seems likely – express worries about the condition or destination of my soul. I imagined myself saying: 'I have nothing against God; indeed, I love God in ways only an atheist can (only an atheist can think this world unworthy of God). So I'm very comfortable right now making explicit that, supposing I'm mistaken and there is a God, I give myself, my life, unreservedly to God'. Let's say in fact there is no God. Then nothing happens. I haven't given anything to anyone. But if there is, then what's to stop us saying that I've just given myself to God? Does it depend on God's response dispositions? But surely we can tell that God would respond positively to such a prayer or thought, sincerely expressed, if God does exist.[9]

The view of this article emerges when we consider how one could say what I imagined saying to my sister, and other things like it, at any time, and not just on one's deathbed. But it applies there too. Of course on that solemn occasion one's earthly life is virtually over, so one isn't looking for it to be subsequently influenced by any God there may be. But something similar still holds retrospectively. Think about the usual sort of religious conversion, whether experienced on one's deathbed or earlier. When this sort of thing happens, it's natural to look back over things in one's life and do a kind of retroactive move that involves what psychologists call reframing. You can construct a new narrative with your life events under the auspices of the religious conception you've taken on board. Well, the person who on his deathbed conditionally intends to give his life to any God there may be can do so in a similar way, by in imagination allowing some notion of God to illuminate and infuse all the events of his life, now past, as well as the event that is about to end it, and conditionally approving or affirming the interpretation of his life and death that results. (And of course the same sort of action can be repeated for other gods.) Does this count as a conversion? Probably not. The notion of conversion, when linked to religious commitment, also buys into the idea that we have to choose; one converts to a single religious possibility selected from a perhaps large menu. But instead of casting any doubt on the religious meaningfulness of the deathbed decision we've

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envisaged, this fact should lead us to question the fundamental importance, in just any religious life we can affirm, of *conversion*.

The agnostic's prayer

The agnostic's prayer, sometimes taken seriously in the philosophy of religion but often found amusing, is 'Oh God, if there is a God, save my soul if I have a soul'. This prayer can be seen as expressing a conditional intention, an intention to accede to God control over one's life on the condition that there is a God. Or at least it's in the same neighbourhood, and could easily be turned into a conditionally intended religious commitment. This sort of positive response to religion, as we've seen, turns out to have considerable importance for creatures such as we are. Thus the agnostic's prayer, instead of lurking questionably at the periphery of our discussions in the philosophy of religion, can be seen as leading us right to the heart of what's important.

Religious scepticism more generally

From the one who is simply agnostic about theism we can broaden our view to a more general religious scepticism. Often thought to be left out in the cold, religiously speaking, the one who finds no religious view believable can in fact put herself in the way of any religious commitment most deeply worth having through a conditional intention of the sort we have explored. In a very important sense she will not miss out on religious truth, if such there be, and this without ever graduating to belief, since there is this religious commitment that is truth-triggered. Indeed, the religious sceptic now has at least one advantage over anyone who makes a more robust religious commitment: she both *can* be religiously committed, if there's anything real in this domain worth committing to, and *can't* be wrong.

Pascal's Wager

I have imagined the conditional intention we've been discussing as issuing from an impulse to do everything one can to be aligned with the true, the good, and the beautiful in the specific forms they actually take, despite one's ignorance on that score – and this while wanting such an alignment for its own sake. But even if the intention therefore does not betray any instrumental, prudential motive, it could *be* instrumentally effective too (even – especially? – with a holy and righteous God), and so it is arguable that this notion superannuates and replaces Pascal's Wager, which bids nonbelievers talk or otherwise act themselves into belief in God from a motive of self-interest. What's important, if there's a God, is to be committed to God, and here we have a new way of being thus committed, should God in fact exist when one forms the conditional intention involving God. What could be lacking, prudentially speaking, if one took this approach? For here a commitment is triggered by the one situation that really matters to Pascal and to

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me as I consider his wager from the perspective of prudence, the one in which his religious view is true. And if that view is instead false, my continuing to live, as a nonbeliever, in the way that seems best to me, in the absence of divine intervention, will make it possible for me to access any benefits associated with its falsehood. Arguably, then, the new approach should seem superior to Pascal's, and from a prudential perspective. And that is before taking account of what is perhaps the most interesting point supporting such an assessment. This has to do with the problem of plurality that notoriously has troubled many present-day Pascals (perhaps it should have troubled the original more). The present approach faces no such problem since it allows one to respond positively to many god possibilities at once.

The nature of naturalism

Metaphysical naturalism, the view, roughly, that everything concretely real belongs to a single system governed by natural law, is generally viewed as very sharply opposed to religion and the idea of religious truth. And indeed it is. Where by naturalism is meant *belief* of the naturalistic claim, it would generally be held that the same is true. But from our results it follows that this is not, or at least need not be, the case. The second opposition does not hold even if the first does. Instead, for those who are naturalists the possibility of being at the same time religiously committed now arises, in the same conditionally intended way that it does for everyone else, including religious believers.

Anonymous Christians

The Catholic thinker Karl Rahner is often reviled for his seemingly disrespectful idea that good pagans might be called anonymous Christians. But if my results hold up, then another and less objectionable use of the phrase suggests itself. For then, if relevant Christian claims are true, anyone who has conditionally intended a commitment to a Christian picture of TGB and has no response from God leading to explicit Christian belief has made of *herself* an anonymous Christian. Indeed, anyone at all could in an important sense count as Christian if my view were generally adopted and if a relevant form of Christianity were true.

Testing religious claims

What if the nonbelieving world quite widely and enthusiastically took on board the idea of truth-triggered religious commitments – and no apparent response from religious Powers were forthcoming? Would this provide empirical disconfirmation for the idea that there is any religious truth to be triggered? A perfectly general problem of divine hiddenness? It's true that, as I've formulated the conditional intention that might have such a commitment as a result, no reference to explicit religious guidance in the future or discovery of religious truths is included, but certainly the TGB commitment would lead one to find such things

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eminently desirable at some point. And the nature of religion might lead one to expect such a desire to be satisfied somehow, somewhere. For religious ideas, as opposed to bare metaphysical possibilities that might already get a philosopher's heart racing, have a soteriological component: the suggestion is that the ultimate or the transcendent is productive of an ultimate or transcendent *good-for-us*, and it would be odd if the latter's source never were revealed; indeed, the good yielded by a truth-triggered religious commitment might be thought to be rather less than ultimate if this never occurred.

There is a way of trying to avoid the apparent consequence of this train of thought. It once again refers us to the early and immature stage of religious development we are presently in. Perhaps some unknown religious view is true, one that we, as presently constituted, cannot know, but whose truth even so is the guarantor of a good appropriate to our immaturity and will in the end, in some unfathomable way, spell the redemption of the world. Perhaps the good appropriate to our immaturity, of which this truth is the source, is one we have not yet learned to identify. Perhaps it even involves reaching out to the unknown in the way that a conditionally intended religious commitment would allow.

Does this response succeed? I don't know whether it does. Even if it does, we might have this interesting result: if there is a divine reality, then it is one we presently lack the capacity explicitly to engage. In any case, the issues emerging here show the power of the view described in this article to turn our minds productively to the future and the still unknown. And that itself is a consequence of great importance for philosophy of religion, given the latter's tendency, throughout its short history, to be preoccupied with what in the religious realm is regarded as having already been revealed.

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Notes

1. I shall not have in mind specifically truth, goodness, and beauty *as understood by Platonists*, or truth, goodness, and beauty *as understood by mediaeval Catholicism*. Explicitly or implicitly, the triad has appeared at many different times and in many different contexts, and what I have to say about it is correspondingly broad.
2. As suggested, the bare fact that we come early does not *imply* that we must be developmentally immature. But, having noticed the one fact, we may learn to look for the other – and (at least in the religious domain) have little difficulty finding it.
3. There are various ways of resisting a completely unqualified religious scepticism here. One argument would proceed by analogy. You learn things in Grades 1, 2, and 3 even if they don't bring you all the way or even close to Grade 12. And even if, whizzing through those early grades, you should mistakenly think that you're ready for high school, it would be a further mistake were you to conclude, on discovering the first

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error, that your having yet learned anything or much of anything at all is now cast into doubt. What you should reassess is not *whether* you have advanced but how *far*.

4. I am borrowing the term 'moot' from a nice piece by Luca Ferrero (2009).
5. I owe this point to Brian Leftow.
6. Your conventional commitment to God A might seem to depend on the same kind of condition, but it does not; if your intention to follow God A is conditional, the condition is the persistence of your current beliefs and desires and maybe the evidence continuing to look to you as it currently does, not simply the truth of certain religious claims, as with God B.
7. I am grateful to a *Religious Studies* referee for pressing me on this point.
8. See Schellenberg (2015).
9. This claim might seem in tension with the suggestions about human religious immaturity made earlier in the article. But it is the maturity of our religious capabilities that I have questioned, not the idea that we have any religious capabilities at all. Relatively simple problems such as those involving, in quite general terms, how a morally perfect person who seeks our commitment would respond when we sincerely offer it might be manageable for us even if the heights and depths of religious truth are beyond our grasp.

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