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The exoteric/esoteric divide and Schellenberg's Sceptical Religion

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Abstract: In a ground-breaking series of books, Canadian philosopher J. L. Schellenberg (2005d; 2007b; 2009; 2013a) has developed a systematic non-theistic, non-naturalist philosophy of religion. One of the core claims within his system is that given our limited evidence (and limited capabilities for assessing what evidence we do have), scepticism concerning the truth of religious propositions is at present the only warranted epistemic response. In this article I draw attention to a potential complication for Schellenberg's assessment of the pragmatic implications of this evidential situation, a complication arising from the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion.

Introduction

The construction of novel philosophical systems has become relatively rare in analytic philosophy. Moreover the system-building that does occur tends to be more modest in scope than that seen in past historical periods. For instance the metaphysical systems developed by such giants as David Armstrong (1997; 2010), Brian Ellis (2001; 2002; 2009), John Heil (2003; 2012), and E. J. Lowe (1989; 2006) are almost purely *metaphysical*; while their works may include some brief discussion of epistemological background assumptions or the potential normative implications of certain claims, by and large there is little evidence of an intent to develop a comprehensive, interconnected philosophy incorporating the major sub-disciplines of the field. In this respect their contrast with mediaeval systems like Thomism and Scotism, or later systems like Kantianism or Marxism, is acute.

One can argue that the widespread abandonment of system construction is a positive good. Perhaps it reflects a more realistic assessment of just how difficult

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it is to get at the truth in any *single* area of debate, let alone the *many* areas touched upon by a system. Analytic philosophers are sometimes accused by our continental colleagues of having a tin ear to grand narratives, and of favouring the piddling logic-chopping of narrowly conceived problems. There is perhaps some justice to the accusation, but surely we analytic folk can plead mitigating circumstances: it can be exceedingly difficult to settle (even in one's own mind) on a plausible answer to even a thoroughly narrowed problem.

On the other hand, one can argue that there is an unavoidable internal impetus towards the development of more comprehensive systems, both in general and within philosophical sub-disciplines (philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, etc.). Within metaphysics for instance, a particular argument for the presentist theory of time may be found to rely on a background assumption about the nature of substance, and when one attempts to justify that understanding of substance one ends up relying on an argument that in turn supposes a controversial point about universals, and pretty soon the brushstrokes of a metaphysical system are already in place whether one wants it or not. This can happen regardless of one's starting point: try to prove something in philosophy of art and you may find that your point relies on a background assumption about meta-ethics, or the nature of human perception, or the ontology of artefacts.

At any rate, those working in analytic philosophy of religion have tended to shy away from novel systems as much as anyone else. Naturally there are exceptions – Moreland & Craig (2006) for instance lay out a fairly detailed system incorporating metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and (of course) an account of religion. Still, it is more common in analytic philosophy of religion either to adopt an existing, historically rooted system (Thomism has become fairly popular in analytic circles) or simply to pursue individual issues independently of wider commitments.

Granted, one could argue that various philosophers of religion have formulated novel systems, in fact even if not in name or intent. Thus one could envision someone surveying the corpus of Plantinga or Swinburne or Hick (each covers an array of philosophical topics across different sub-disciplines and considers their relation to religion) and attempting to integrate their results into a unified system: a Plantingian system for instance could be fairly comprehensive. The telling point for present purposes is simply that these authors have not attempted explicitly to systematize their thought in quite this way, nor have their defenders. I am not claiming that analytic philosophers of religion lack the ingredients for system construction in their bodies of work. Rather, the fact that there has been hardly any explicit attempt at such system construction is symptomatic of the larger abandonment of system construction in analytic philosophy.

With those facts before us, the originality of J. L. Schellenberg's contribution should become all the more striking. For in a highly significant series of recent books (2005d; 2007b; 2009; 2013a) he has produced the discipline's first genuinely and unambiguously *systematic* non-theistic, non-naturalist philosophy of religion. That is, he has developed a comprehensive theory covering the nature of religion

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and how we ought to view core metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical propositions arising in a religious context. It is a system that affirms the truth of atheism while remaining open to the falsity of metaphysical naturalism; it affirms that we should remain sceptical concerning the truth of religious propositions, while at the same time it encourages us to live as if there were a transcendent, ultimate reality of surpassing value and soteriological import. He and his interlocutors have sometimes referred to his theory as *Sceptical Religion*, and I will do so here. (Note that Schellenberg uses 'Skeptical', but in keeping with the British orthography employed at *Religious Studies*, 'Sceptical' will be used in what follows.)

The remainder of this article is divided as follows: in the next section I provide an outline of Schellenberg's system, and then in the section titled 'A key argument for scepticism' I summarize part of his case for scepticism in the realm of religion. Then in the section titled 'The exoteric/esoteric distinction in world religions' I shift gears and briefly explicate that distinction. It is one that has received little if any attention in analytic philosophy of religion, but which is well-known among religious studies scholars. Finally in 'How the exoteric/esoteric divide may impact Schellenberg's system' I employ that distinction to draw out a potential complication for the pragmatic implications of Schellenberg's Sceptical Religion.

The core commitments of Sceptical Religion

That system is rich in philosophical content, and as with other rich systems an attempt to lay out its principal tenets in a couple of pages runs considerable risk of distortion and oversimplification. Hopefully most readers will already have some familiarity with Schellenberg's work, such that these risks will be lessened. But for those who lack such familiarity the attempt must still be made. So here are the central claims of Sceptical Religion (or at least what I take to be its central claims):

> *Proposition 1* Theism is demonstrably false, on account of devastating objections like the problem of divine hiddenness and certain versions of the problem of evil.[1]
>
> *Proposition 2* As currently formulated, metaphysical naturalism (roughly, the claim that the only kind of reality is the physical reality studied by scientists), while not demonstrably false, is seriously problematic and should not at this time be believed.[2]
>
> *Proposition 3* Religious propositions are best understood as those that in some way affirm or entail the truth of *ultimism* – the idea that there exists something *transcendent* (i.e. causally and explanatorily independent of the physical cosmos) and *ultimate* (i.e. unsurpassable) metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically.[3]
>
> *Proposition 4* Ultimism is distinct from theism insofar as it is more general. (I.e. theism entails ultimism but not vice versa, since theism adds to ultimism the

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claim that the triply ultimate entity has a variety of essential features like personhood, omniscience, omnipotence, the moral attribute of being loving, etc.)

Proposition 5 The epistemic requirements on justified belief are such that we should refrain from believing any religious proposition.[4]

Proposition 6 Since the proposition 'ultimism is true' is a religious proposition, we should not believe it.

Proposition 7 However, on a variety of pragmatic grounds we should adopt an imaginative form of non-doxastic faith in ultimism (i.e. while not believing in its truth, we should actively entertain the idea, live our lives as if it were true, and maintain that it would be a good thing if it were true).[5]

Proposition 8 While scepticism is the order of the day for now, philosophers of religion should continue actively working to discover whether or not ultimism is true while at the same time formulating and exploring a variety of more detailed, specific versions of ultimism (excluding theism). For although there is little hope of our establishing truths about these matters in our own lifetime, we can and should try to contribute to the long-term project (*very* long-term, perhaps extending hundreds of thousands of years into the future) of our species someday acquiring such knowledge.[6]

I believe those eight propositions form the core of Sceptical Religion. Obviously in presenting them as I have here, only the barest outline has been provided; as with any system the main philosophical meat comes from the arguments presented in justification of its propositions. I would like to turn now to Schellenberg's support for Proposition 5.

A key argument for scepticism

Schellenberg's case for the truth of Proposition 5 is wide-ranging, detailed, and cumulative. He provides multiple arguments designed to work in tandem. Here I want to focus on the main argument for scepticism developed in Schellenberg (2013a). One might formulate that argument in several different ways, but here is how I would put it:

Premise 1 Whenever our currently available evidence with respect to the truth of a proposition may (for all we know) fall far short of the total evidence, we should refrain from believing in the truth of that proposition.

Premise 2 Our currently available evidence with respect to the truth of any religious proposition may (for all we know) fall far short of the total evidence.

Conclusion Therefore we should refrain from believing in the truth of any religious proposition.

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Let's turn to the explication and justification of the premises. In premise 1 the notion of 'total evidence' is employed. Here is how Schellenberg (2013a, 45) defines it: 'By this I just mean everything in the world, whether accessible to us or not, that bears on whether some proposition is true.' For instance, our *currently available* evidence for past life on Mars would include all the relevant data collected and made public by NASA concerning traces of past water. The *total* evidence would include that plus whatever NASA may have missed (e.g. fossils of microbial life buried deep beneath the planet's surface).

Sticking with the NASA example for a moment, say that after a thorough and unbiased examination of the evidence collected so far, NASA announced that this evidence was inconclusive, but that regardless of this assessment they firmly believed in the reality of past life on Mars. (Read 'believe' here as Schellenberg understands it – belief as distinct from non-doxastic faith.) Most would agree that such a response would be unjustified, since the available evidence, besides being inadequate to prove the conclusion, also falls far short of the total evidence. There is simply too much we don't know about Mars. Until we are in a better epistemic situation with respect to the total evidence, we should refrain from either believing in past life on Mars or from disbelieving in it. The claim of premise 1 simply generalizes this point: we should refrain from believing propositions when our currently available evidence for their truth falls far short of the total evidence.

Premise 2 is liable to be the more controversial premise. Schellenberg provides a multi-pronged justification for it. First, we need to recognize that while certain sorts of belief are either naturally or rationally unavoidable,[7] for the most part our beliefs are adopted on the basis of acquired evidence. Some of those beliefs will be subject to more or less doubt, depending on features of the evidential situation. And when a belief has all of the following six features, it lacks justification and should not be believed:

(1) *Precision* The belief has clear content, it's not vague.
(2) *Detail* The belief is complex, involving multiple components.
(3) *Profundity* The belief 'involves its offering a deep understanding of how things are in the world, and one fairly comprehensive in scope' (Schellenberg (2013a), 49).
(4) *Attractiveness* The content of the belief is such that many will be inclined to accept it.
(5) *Ambitious* The subject matter in which the belief is bound up is difficult for us to delve into.
(6) *Controversial* The belief is such that 'different diligent inquirers find different and conflicting views on it persuasive' (*ibid.*, 50).

It is Schellenberg's contention that these six features, when jointly present, suffice to show that we are unjustified in supposing that we possess total

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evidence (or anything approaching total evidence) with respect to the truth of the relevant proposition. Hence, we should refrain from believing in the truth of that proposition. He further contends that religious propositions share these six features.

Second, we have good reason to think that our species is immature with respect to religion. We have only been reflecting on religious questions in anything like an organized way for a short time in our total history as a species (and a mere *speck* of time when considered from the timeline of life on earth). And much of the 'reflection' that has taken place has been conducted under conditions hardly conducive to reliable intellectual inquiry (e.g. religious persecution, lack of widespread education, general immorality, etc.).[8] Moreover, even if ultimism is true, there is reason to doubt whether our present badly limited intellectual/moral/spiritual capacities could admit any kind of conscious apprehension of it, let alone a sufficiently thorough apprehension to justify the precise, detailed, profound (etc.) religious doctrines built up around alleged experiences of Ultimate Reality.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we need to reflect on the potentially immense future of our species, and what that implies for our present evidential situation. Suppose, optimistically yet reasonably, that our species manages to avoid destroying itself with nuclear weapons in the next few hundred years. Suppose we continue as a species far into the future – hundreds of thousands of years, or even millions of years. With all the further knowledge we may acquire and further intellectual and moral evolution we may undergo (e.g. naturally evolved larger brains with far better cognitive capacities, or perhaps genetically engineered higher IQs and improved emotional stability), we should recognize that our distant progeny is liable to be in a far better evidential situation with respect to religious propositions than we are in now. And given that fact, we should be highly dubious of our current evidential situation with respect to religious propositions. As Schellenberg (*ibid.*, 47–48) puts it:

> As we internalize the deep future it's with the realization that there's just an incredible amount of time left for amazingly complex intellectual developments utterly contrary to present views to be achieved, even if progress is incremental or interrupted, and also that we haven't even used the very short time we've had especially well, and so may have missed a lot of things that might have caused views contrary to our own to be formed. A deep time perspective on inquiry, in which we trade our human timescales for those of the universe, should have a decided impact. In particular it's going to seem rather plausible that it might take a lot longer for human intelligence to get anywhere really interesting than we had thought . . . Notice that a different relation to time and a different history of intellectual effort and achievement than our own would yield a much weaker argument for evolutionary skepticism. If we were an old species, with not just 6,000 but 60,000 or 600,000 years of inquiry behind us, and if the record of that process of inquiry showed a long period of development and change in our thinking on relevant matters and then a slow levelling off and convergence of views, maintained over thousands of years despite the most careful scrutiny, things might be different.

Later on he states the core idea more succinctly (*ibid.*, 68):

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> For if it is epistemically possible that a view I now hold will turn out to be false in the deep future . . . I have no good reason to believe it will *not* turn out to be false – which is to say that I have no good reason now to believe it true.

Taking all those points together, there seems substantial support for premise 2 of the argument for scepticism. More could of course be said by way of explication and defence of this argument, but hopefully the preceding conveys the main line of reasoning.

The exoteric/esoteric distinction in world religions

Schellenberg has rightly noted that analytic philosophy of religion has, as a discipline, given disproportionate attention to two viewpoints: metaphysical naturalism and Judaeo-Christian theism.[9] While this is perhaps unsurprising, given that these tend to be the most popular candidates for belief among the educated westerners who predominate in the field, it has led to a certain myopia. Many interesting and important religious propositions rooted in other world religions or historical philosophies have been comparatively neglected. This is one reason why Schellenberg has persistently advocated sustained reflection on ultimism and the various specific versions of it that might be formulated (excluding theism).

Schellenberg is entirely correct in his criticism of the current state of analytic philosophy of religion, and one hopes that his suggested expansion of the field beyond its traditional concerns will in fact take place in the coming years. However, I would like to suggest that Schellenberg's own training and history in this academic environment may have introduced a minor blind spot in his system.

Among the topics neglected in analytic philosophy of religion, but which has received a good deal of discussion amongst religious studies scholars, is the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion. These terms have different meanings depending on context, but the meaning I am concerned with here is the following:

- an *exoteric* religion is one the doctrines and practices of which are made generally known to its adherents and to interested outside inquirers.
- an *esoteric* religion is one the doctrines and practices of which are to some degree kept hidden, reserved for a select group of adherents (and certainly kept from outside inquirers).

There are many examples, both historical and contemporary, of religions that fit one or another of these definitions. Roman Catholicism is exoteric, Gnosticism was esoteric; Sunni Islam is exoteric, the Druze faith is esoteric; Sikhism is exoteric, Freemasonry is esoteric; the Bahai faith is exoteric, ancient Greek mystery religions were esoteric, etc. Moreover, any survey of new religious movements will reveal a common tendency towards esotericism.[10] The classifications are not always so tidy, especially since some religions that generally fall under one category incorporate denominations or groups that fall under another – Orthodox Judaism, for

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instance, is seemingly a paradigm exoteric religion, yet certain Kabbalistic groups and traditions that (arguably) fall within it could properly be counted esoteric. The same might be said for Hinduism vis-à-vis many of the smaller movements incorporated within it, and likewise of some Taoist sects.

A great deal more could be said by way of further explicating the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion, and I hope to pursue the topic in future work.[11] But in the interests of space, hopefully this brief characterization and set of representative examples will suffice. In the next section I would like to consider how the recognition of this distinction might affect Schellenberg's system.

How the exoteric/esoteric divide may impact Schellenberg's system

When one recognizes just how common esoteric religions are now, and how common they have been throughout human history, this might initially seem to lend further support to the second premise of the sceptical argument laid out above. After all, if a great many religious propositions, and a good deal of relevant evidence surrounding them, have made their appearance via esoteric rather than exoteric religions, then this just shows that our current evidential situation is even more impoverished than we had realized – just think of how many interesting concepts and arguments and data from religious experiences have been rendered unavailable to us.

On the other hand, the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion also serves to underline a potential ambiguity in the argument. Just who is the 'we' and 'our' referenced in phrases like 'our currently available evidence'?[12] Schellenberg is supposing, I think, that the 'we' here refers to present humanity in general, such that 'our currently available evidence' refers roughly to the evidence accessible to the average, educated twenty-first-century adult. Returning to the NASA example: any literate person with an internet connection can learn a good deal about NASA's findings concerning evidence of past water on Mars, so that evidence should count among 'our currently available evidence'. By contrast, if the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) has top-secret files in some underground vault concerning indications of life on Mars (why think the CIA has all the good stuff?), none of which information has ever been released more broadly, then that should not count among 'our currently available evidence'. Clearly it would count as available evidence only on a much more restricted understanding of 'available'. It may be available to some privileged cognoscenti, but it's not available to *us*.

The reader sees where I am going with this: even if Schellenberg is correct in thinking that we (in his sense of 'we') should be sceptical of religious propositions, given our current evidential poverty, it may yet be the case that members of one or more esoteric religions or philosophical schools[13] have actually hit upon knowledge of some important religious truths, which truths they are (for one reason or another) eager to conceal from the rest of us. The very fact that the existence

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of esoteric religions worsens 'our' evidential situation should also lead us to question whether human religious ignorance is universal, or whether some may have escaped it.

Now, this should not be seen as an objection against Schellenberg's argument for scepticism. After all, admitting the possibility that certain groups may have hidden knowledge of religious matters hardly improves my own ('our' own) epistemic situation. Perhaps I should still remain dubious of all religious propositions put before me, for precisely the reasons Schellenberg has provided. So drawing attention to the exoteric/esoteric divide may have no effect on the soundness of his argument, and whether one should personally adopt a sceptical stance.

On the other hand, it could have an impact on Sceptical Religion more broadly, specifically on how we view Propositions 7 and 8. For if one combines with religious scepticism an *openness* to the idea that select groups of people may possess special religious knowledge denied the rest of us, then it may be that the pragmatic responses laid out in Propositions 7 and 8 are not the optimal responses to scepticism.

Thus one might argue with respect to Proposition 7 that because the knowledge (if any) achieved by esoteric groups may be incompatible with ultimism, faith in ultimism (even the sort of open-minded, provisional faith advocated by Schellenberg) may be pragmatically inadvisable insofar as it could impede one's beginning a pursuit of certain esoteric paths. Some esoteric traditions maintain beliefs that in one way or another appear incompatible with ultimism as understood by Schellenberg (laid out in Proposition 3 above). Think for instance of some of the Gnostic schools that affirmed a thoroughgoing dualism and were consequently incompatible with acceptance of the reality of something *both* metaphysically and axiologically ultimate. The reason is that their highest axiological principle was not seen as metaphysically ultimate, but rather as something which shared metaphysical status with a different entity, which second entity was considered pure evil (and thus far from being *axiologically* ultimate). Or think of some movements within Taoism; historically one of the early, major divisions between Taoists was over the question of whether the Tao is both metaphysically and axiologically ultimate, or only the former.[14] And other comparable departures from ultimism could be enumerated.

Schellenberg can reply by saying that for most adherents of such belief systems, an *implicit* commitment to ultimism remains insofar as attitudes appropriate to the ultimate are still displayed – for instance, perhaps those Gnostics who worshipped or displayed devotion to the good principle treated it as ultimate even if their formal doctrine taught otherwise. And if they didn't, if they really thought of it as a metaphysically non-ultimate principle and acted accordingly, then perhaps they were not really religious, properly speaking.[15] And indeed, given that Schellenberg maintains that 'religion' is best defined in terms of ultimism, that reply is correct, from within the framework of Sceptical Religion.

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Still, if what we are really seeking is the *truth about reality*, then anyone willing to entertain the idea that esoteric faiths should be taken seriously thereby has rational motivation for seeking truth independently of a commitment to ultimism, since such pursuit might well have a greater chance of being truth-conducive. In other words: esoteric faiths may not be religions (certainly on Schellenberg's definition, one could make a good case that neither the aforementioned versions of Gnosticism nor those of Taoism could properly count as religions and that at least a good many of their adherents could not properly count as religious), yet if they were to provide a path to the vitally important truths about reality, including perhaps a path to salvation, we would presumably have reason to seek them, regardless of their exclusion from the conceptual category of the religious.

Moreover, it should be noted that in some places Schellenberg makes clear that he is open to the idea of 'religion' (and the 'religious') being broader than that which entails ultimism, and even open to the idea that there might be conditions under which such broader notions could be worthy of philosophical scrutiny. (That last point is important insofar as his discussion of the nature of religion is aimed chiefly at supplying philosophers of religion with an understanding of it adequate for their research purposes.) Thus although his central understanding of the nature of religion is one that involves ultimism, he also writes of there being different 'tiers' of religions and religious adherence, with those involving a commitment to ultimism being of the first tier and those without a commitment to ultimism being of the second (Schellenberg (2005d), 34):

> Ultimizing religion might be expected to be of special interest to philosophers and religious practitioners . . . Because of the special character of philosophy we might think of religion that ultimizes as constituting a first tier of religious phenomena, of deepest interest for philosophers of religion and the first object of their consideration; and we might think of nonultimist forms of religion, if such there are, as a second tier, reserved for later exploration . . .

What I am suggesting here is that many esoteric traditions today may (for all we know) be non-ultimistic, and furthermore that a plausible case can be made that some prominent esoteric traditions (both historically and in the present day) are in fact non-ultimistic. I can grant that that may either disqualify them as religions or (as Schellenberg would seem to suggest in this last passage) may relegate them to second-tier status qua religions. Where I disagree with Schellenberg is on his claim that at least for now these 'second tier' traditions should be reserved for later exploration. In fact they warrant philosophical attention now, and they warrant it in part because their truth status might impact how we think about aspects of Sceptical Religion: namely the pragmatic aspects of it laid out in Propositions 7 and 8.

Now, one might reply that merely recognizing the possible truth of esoteric faiths, and the fact that some of them depart from ultimism, should not lead us to question Proposition 7. After all, we are liable to lead better, brighter, morally superior lives working on the assumption that the ultimate principle is triply

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ultimate rather than lacking in, say, soteriological ultimacy. So even if esoteric faiths and ultimism were on an *epistemic* par, *pragmatically* one would still be better off siding with ultimism.[16] However, the tradeoffs here are not so clear. Again, assume hypothetically that there is an ultimate principle which is soteriologically and axiologically ultimate but *not* metaphysically ultimate (in line with some forms of Gnosticism). And assume that some esoteric traditions have marked out a workable path to salvation that requires recognition of this fact. That would mean that Proposition 7, with its recommendation of a genuine lived commitment to ultimism, *could conflict with the achievement of truth about the nature of reality and conflict with the attainment of salvation*, since it would lead one to greater prima facie suspicion towards the relevant esoteric paths. So if one takes seriously the possibility that one or another esoteric tradition might be in possession of privileged truths (which attitude is entirely compatible with the truth of Proposition 5), one should not accept Proposition 7. (Note that Schellenberg (2009, 82–85) maintains that it is entirely possible to retain a strong faith in ultimism while remaining open-minded about its falsehood and considering non-ultimistic alternatives. This may be true when the alternative is naturalism (the chief alternative he has in mind there), but it is much more doubtful whether one could retain such a faith in ultimism while actively pursuing initiation into an esoteric tradition, with all that involves.)

Once one has this in mind as a serious possibility there is also reason to question Proposition 8. For rather than avidly seeking progress (however slow and halting) in analytic philosophy of religion, in hopes that we might make some tiny progress that will be of use to distant future generations (who are the only ones with any real chance of achieving religious knowledge), we should instead be exploring esoteric religious traditions – or, if the 'rather than' is too strong, 'in addition to'. After all, esoteric traditions at least provide some hope of actually achieving significant truth ourselves, rather than just leaving it for our distant progeny. And isn't that hope, however slim, more attractive on pragmatic grounds? The important point is simply that a recognition of the exoteric/esoteric divide in religion, and an open-mindedness concerning the latter, must alter one's overall perspective on the current epistemic situation of humanity with respect to religion, and correspondingly alter our practical reaction to that situation.

Schellenberg can reply by arguing that we have good reasons to rule out exceptions to the general reign of ignorance (Schellenberg (2013a), 67):

> On these grounds I propose that we are unjustified in believing that the human species or any of its members has already developed to the point where either the truth of some religious claim or the falsity of all religious claims (both actual and possible) could become available to our awareness. Such belief is just inappropriate to where we are in the temporal scheme of things. Of course we cannot say with any definiteness that the required development has not occurred, but we can't say it has either. There are simply too may glaring deficiencies in our relevant development so far and – given the depth and difficulty of matters involved – too many epistemically possible changes and intellectual enrichments in our future to make such a claim justified.

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So while he presumably wouldn't dismiss out of hand the truth-claims made by adherents of esoteric religions (or at least the ones they choose to share), he would suppose that in all likelihood they are just as liable to be caught up in our immaturity and resultant ignorance. As such, while an open-mindedness regarding esoteric religion could perhaps lead to the undermining or reformulation of Propositions 7 and 8, it is more reasonable to leave them as is.

This is a plausible line of reply, but not decisive. For it presupposes that all of us ('us' in the broad sense, incorporating all of humanity and thus any adherents of esoteric religions) share the same basic capacities with respect to accessing religious truth; i.e. we're all at the same stage of development, roughly speaking. This is an eminently sensible claim. But it's also a claim explicitly denied by various esoteric traditions, some of which maintain that through the use of hidden techniques of spiritual development an initiate can boost his or her spiritual capacities markedly – fast-tracking the sort of evolutionary process discussed by Schellenberg. This claim is sometimes combined with the idea (evident for instance in Plotinus' theory of the soul[17] and the orthodox Hindu doctrine of the atman[18]) that our everyday mode of consciousness isn't even the 'true' human being; rather, our deepest selves are in fact already transcendent and in some way in touch with higher realities, such that the trick is to bring one's lower consciousness into line with the higher. In other words, the Neoplatonist or Hindu (among others) might reply that in his case for scepticism Schellenberg is presupposing not merely uncertainty about such a view of human nature, but its falsehood. But surely, by Schellenberg's own lights, there is inadequate evidence to presuppose its falsehood. And thus, again, we're driven back to the idea that we should be open to the validity of esoteric religions, and open to the practical consequences of that fact conflicting with Propositions 7 and 8 of Sceptical Religion.

Schellenberg might also reply by noting that adherents of esoteric traditions do not seem any more enlightened or righteous or possessed of psychic powers than the rest of us. The fact seems to be rather that esoteric religions have made no more progress towards religious truth than their exoteric competitors. (For Schellenberg's use of this sort of point in a broader context, see his (2007b, 59–60.)

To which one might counter: what if that's what *they* want us to think? (I write this while peering fitfully through the shutters to check for suspicious black sedans.) In all seriousness though, one could argue that if esoteric traditions have actually made substantial progress in religious knowledge, they might also have good reasons to keep that fact to themselves and to carefully chosen new initiates. What sorts of reasons? Well, perhaps the secret meditative techniques or hidden rituals or knowledge etc. are actually spiritually harmful if taken up by the unprepared/uninitiated. Or perhaps a high level of attainment entails certain special powers which it would be imprudent to make widely available. Or perhaps they are simply being selfish, and the rest of us should try all the more to break in on their secrets. Who knows? The point is simply that there

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may be plausible explanations for why an esoteric tradition might conceal genuine religious insight from the rest of us.

Schellenberg might yet answer that he has implicitly already made room for a serious exploration of esoteric traditions within the ambit of Propositions 7 and 8. After all, Proposition 8 counsels a long-term, wide-ranging exploration of religious ideas, with relatively little ruled out *a priori*. Within the context of faith in ultimism, one can explore esoteric traditions just as much as exoteric. (My thanks to an anonymous referee for *Religious Studies* for pressing me on this point.)

This argument might be challenged by reiterating the point that some esoteric traditions are incompatible with ultimism; but as noted above, that in turn raises once again the larger questions about the definition of religion (and thus the truth of Proposition 3), which I do not wish to make my central focus in the discussion of Proposition 8. So let's assume for a moment that genuinely *religious* esoteric traditions are all compatible with ultimism. I believe the existence of such traditions should still lead us to doubt Proposition 8, for a reason stated by a referee for *Religious Studies*:

> Once 'we' know of esoteric religions, we should want them investigated before joining in Schellenberg's judgement as to the wisdom to doubt, especially given how much he emphasizes our religious immaturity. For esoteric religions claim that in their midst maturity has been attained. And Schellenberg says nothing about them. Schellenberg might argue that this exploration can be left for the ultimism-based religious life. But that seems to get things the wrong way round. The ultimism-based life presupposes that we are all immature and so presupposes that religious maturity claims are false, and this really should be shown, in relation to esoterica, before the justification for such a life is regarded as secure. But Schellenberg hasn't shown this.

As a counter to this sort of point, one might in turn reply along these lines, made by another referee:

> The author mistakenly thinks that esoteric religions are different from exoteric religions because they claim that they have achieved the kind of definitive findings and practices that prompt belief. But, this clearly is not the case. Practitioners of exoteric religions make the same sort of positive claims with respect to evidence for their religious claims, as do the practitioners of esoteric religions. Nor is the 'hiddenness' of the methods and practices of esoteric religions a relevant difference in their standing with respect to Schellenberg's hypothesis. If they are truly hidden from practitioners of exoteric religions, they cannot be practised or assessed by practitioners of exoteric religions. But the reasons for being sceptical about the bases of their esoteric claims apply to the practitioners whether hidden or not. Esoteric practitioners can deny this only by begging the question against Schellenberg or by showing why it is that the reasons for sceptical religion do not apply to them . . . To meet Schellenberg's challenge such esoteric practitioners need to show why it is that they are exempt from Proposition 5. If they are silent or do not permit outsiders to join them, then outsiders, whether practitioners of an exoteric religion or practitioners of Ultimism, have no way to assess their claims. The author does not attempt to lay out a case for why the practitioners of an esoteric religion are exempt from Proposition 5.

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But I think this misconstrues the use I am making of esoteric traditions in the current discussion. I fully grant that the doctrines and practices of esoteric religions that remain truly hidden (as opposed to the large amount of material that has leaked out into the public domain) cannot be assessed by outsiders. The only way they could be assessed by an outsider would be by the outsider first gaining access to them, presumably through initiation. And that is a step beyond what most people would be willing or able to do. But that fact precisely accords with my argument: 'we', the outsiders, cannot assess these traditions, and so cannot properly dismiss their claims to presently instantiated mature religious knowledge of the sort denied in Sceptical Religion. But can't we dismiss them in light of Proposition 5? I don't see how 'we' as outsiders can, given our lack of knowledge about what sorts of special or uniquely compelling evidences (experiential or otherwise) might be hoarded by these esoteric traditions – quite possibly none, but we as outsiders simply can't tell one way or the other. And since we can't, we should refrain from accepting Propositions 7 and 8. Of course, that's the lie of the land from our outsiders' point of view; the referee is certainly correct in saying that 'to meet Schellenberg's challenge such esoteric practitioners need to show why it is that they are exempt from Proposition 5'. But for better or worse these practitioners evince little interest in answering philosophical challenges, whether from Schellenberg or anyone else. That may be to their discredit, but it doesn't mean they're wrong. And as noted above, there may be an assortment of good reasons why practitioners of esoteric traditions would want to keep their hidden knowledge (and the hidden evidence backing it up) concealed from us proles.

The upshot of this section is that if we take seriously the possibility that one or more of the huge number of esoteric religious traditions past and present may harbour hidden truths not generally available (and thus not part of 'our' body of accumulated religious knowledge, in Schellenberg's sense of 'our'), then we should be more reluctant to accept ultimism (as per Proposition 7). In addition we should entertain the idea that the epistemic pessimism embodied in Sceptical Religion, according to which only our distant progeny will have any hope of attaining knowledge of ultimate religious truths (as per Proposition 8), is overly pessimistic. Perhaps there is in fact hope of attaining such truth for ourselves, such that we can expand our aims beyond making minor contributions to a process of gradual pursuit of religious knowledge over the course of thousands of succeeding generations. We might rationally have higher hopes.

Those higher hopes might one day be dashed if, after a good many of us pursued seriously a great range of esoteric paths for an extended period and found them all wanting, we then had solid reason to think that the claims of these traditions were fraudulent or otherwise baseless. But given the other commitments embodied in Sceptical Religion, in particular its rejection of theism and its scepticism towards metaphysical naturalism, such dismissal would seem difficult to justify at present, at least from Schellenberg's own perspective.

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By contrast, the committed naturalist can from her own perspective opt to dismiss esoteric religions as baseless (rightly or wrongly) because as a naturalist she denies the reality of the supernatural. And adherents of exoteric theistic religions – for instance Orthodox Christians like myself – have the option of rejecting esotericism because of our confidence that God has openly revealed Himself through the people of Israel and the Church, such that there is no need to pursue 'hidden' religious knowledge (and perhaps some spiritual danger in making the attempt). The workability of those two modes of rejection of course depends on the falsity of Propositions 1 or 2 (and by extension also Proposition 5) of Sceptical Religion. The workability of those modes of rejection therefore also depends on Schellenberg's many forceful and original arguments for atheism (and for the current dubiousness of metaphysical naturalism) being unsound. I will not venture to touch on those larger issues here.

Conclusion

To recap: after a short introduction I presented an outline of Schellenberg's system and explained one of his central arguments for scepticism. I then introduced the distinction between exoteric and esoteric religion, and employed that distinction to draw out a complication for his system, specifically for the pragmatic implications laid out in Propositions 7 and 8.[19]

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Notes

1. For more on the problem of divine hiddenness, see especially Schellenberg (1993; 2007b, 195–242; 2015b). For his work on the problem of evil see especially Schellenberg (2007b, 243–290). His work on hiddenness has received much critical attention, and he has been assiduous in replying. For a sampling of his responses to published critiques see Schellenberg (1996; 2005a; 2005b; 2005c; 2007a; 2008a; 2008b; 2013b).
2. For the critique of metaphysical naturalism see Schellenberg (2007b, 133–159) and (2013a, 58–64).
3. See Schellenberg (2005d, 1–38 and 77–79) for the nature of religion and religious propositions, and for the formulation of ultimism. See also Schellenberg (2013a, 93–100) for more on ultimism. It's worth noting that the precise notion of 'transcendence' he is working with – provided in detail in his (2005, 24–28) – is formulated in such a way as to be consistent with the truth of at least some versions of pantheism and panentheism, contrary to the critique of Rottschaefer (2016, 484–485). Note too the 'best understood' – as we'll see below in the section titled 'How the exoteric/esoteric divide may impact Schellenberg's system', while Schellenberg's favoured definition of 'religion' (particularly for purposes of engaging in the philosophy of religion) involves ultimism, his view on this is nuanced and he is open to some variation on this central meaning.
4. The case for this is laid out most thoroughly in Schellenberg (2007b), with some of the key arguments presented in more concise form in Schellenberg (2013a, 41–70). Note an implication of Schellenberg's understanding of 'religious proposition': a proposition affirming atheism is not a religious proposition, but rather an *irreligious* one. On irreligious propositions see Schellenberg (2013a, 58). There is thus no inconsistency in his saying that we should believe in atheism and that we should be sceptical of the truth of all religious propositions: 'atheism is true' is not, on his definition, a religious proposition.

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5. The pragmatic case for faith in ultimism is laid out most thoroughly in Schellenberg (2009), with some of the key arguments presented in more concise form in Schellenberg (2013a, 106–115 and 137–156). For more on the nature of faith, and in particular Schellenberg's key claim that faith in the truth of a proposition does not entail belief in the truth of that proposition, see Schellenberg (2005d, 106–166) and (2013a, 100–106).
6. This idea is developed most fully in Schellenberg (2013a). For more on the reorientation of analytic philosophy of religion, and the need to broaden inquiry well beyond the standard theism vs. naturalism dialectic, see also Schellenberg (2015a; 2015c).
7. I.e., either human nature is such that we find ourselves unable to believe them (like global scepticism) or reason demands that we affirm them (like basic truths of logic). For Schellenberg's critique of global scepticism see Schellenberg (2007b, 171–173) and (2013a, 36–41).
8. For a thorough development of this point see Schellenberg (2007b, 69–90).
9. See for instance Schellenberg (2007b, 88–90), (2015a) and (2015c).
10. Consult for instance Partridge & Melton (2004). Some of the same groups covered in that work are also treated in Bogdan & Djurdjevic (2014), as well as Partridge (2015), with these latter anthologies placing their esoteric aspects front and centre. I suspect that one reason why analytic philosophy of religion has failed to discuss the esoteric/exoteric divide is that this is symptomatic of a larger failure to engage seriously with ideas coming out of new religious movements. With some exceptions – notably Luck's (2012) anthology – little work has been done here.
11. I have defined an esoteric religion as one 'the doctrines and practices of which are to some degree kept hidden, reserved for a select group of adherents (and certainly kept from outside inquirers)'. This is of course multiply ambiguous. Consider for instance the following questions that could be put to it: (1) Just how 'select' must this group of adherents be? A religion in which only 10 per cent of adherents know the full teachings might seem a plausible candidate, but what about a religion in which 50 per cent of adherents are exposed to the full range of teachings? Think for instance of religions in which all male adherents receive the full teachings but certain things are kept hidden from women. Are these esoteric? What about a religion in which some doctrines and practices are initially kept hidden from new adherents, but in which all will gradually be revealed to those who advance successfully through levels of initiation over time? (Think again of Freemasonry, or of Scientology.) Or consider an additional numerical ambiguity: rather than the number of *adherents* at issue, think of the number of *doctrines and practices*. Is a religion esoteric if it keeps 5 per cent of its doctrines and practices hidden from some adherents while revealing the other 95 per cent? Or must the proportion of hiddenness be larger? (2) Does the degree of importance accorded to the hidden doctrines and practices matter? Normally one assumes that something is hidden because it is of great significance and/or danger; but one can imagine cases in which knowledge is for some reason kept hidden while at the same time regarded as being of comparatively lesser import (e.g., not necessary for salvation/enlightenment). Would such a religion count as esoteric? (3) What if a religion keeps certain doctrines from the laity, reserving them for the clergy (in cases where the 'laity vs. clergy' distinction makes sense), but where nothing is kept hidden from the clergy and admission to clerical status is in principle open to all? Does it *ipso facto* count as esoteric? Or what if a religion reserves certain teachings for the educated and keeps them from the illiterate? (4) I have formulated esotericism in terms of both hidden doctrines and practices. This raises a host of questions about the nature of, and relationship between, doctrines and practices, and correspondingly raises questions about my linkage of them in this definition. What if a religion makes its doctrines publicly available to all, but reserves certain practices for a select group of adherents? Is it esoteric? Or how about a religion that teaches all its adherents about its full range of doctrines and practices, but where some of the latter are *conducted* 'behind closed doors' with only a select group of adherents? In other words, does the 'hiding' of a practice consist in denying adherents knowledge of its occurrence, or might it consist merely in denying them open access to its actual occurrence? (5) What if the doctrines and practices of a religion are made available in principle to all adherents, but the practices are conducted in such a way as to render their meaning beyond the comprehension of nearly all adherents? I think for instance of the intentional use of dead languages in public worship. That is not normally thought of as rendering a religion esoteric (we hardly think of pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism as esoteric), but what about cases in which the public use of a little-known dead language actually serves the *intentional* concealment of religious teachings?

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12. I should note again that the actual formulation of the argument in premise/conclusion form is my own, based on Schellenberg (2013a). But I would maintain that the potential ambiguity is present in the original.
13. I add the latter because a good deal of later Neoplatonism was heavily mixed up with mystery religions, such that the distinctions begin to blur. Moreover much of the broad tradition (or set of traditions) of what would eventually become known as 'western esotericism' is heavily influenced by Neoplatonism. For an accessible entry point on this, see Goodrick-Clarke (2008).
14. For discussion see Wong (1997, 27–28).
15. On this point, according to which one can still consider old Greek and Norse paganisms (for instance) as religions even though doctrinally they seem to have denied that their objects of worship were metaphysically ultimate, see Schellenberg (2005d, 18–22). What of those who may have claimed to recognize the reality of Zeus or Odin while at the same time refraining from devotion to them (perhaps on account of their apparent metaphysical finitude or moral laxity)? On Schellenberg's preferred understanding of the nature of religion, these 'believers' would not properly count as adherents of these religions at all; they fail to display a genuinely religious attitude, which attitude entails a tendency to 'ultimize' the transmundane realities described by the system, to treat them as ultimate metaphysically, axiologically, and soteriologically.
16. My thanks to a referee for pressing me on this point.
17. For an accessible summary see Remes (2008, 112–118).
18. See for instance the summary in Smart (1998, 49).
19. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to two anonymous referees for *Religious Studies* for their many insightful comments and criticisms. The final product is much improved on account of their valuable input.

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