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# TOWARD A PRAGMATIC CONCEPTION OF RELIGIOUS FAITH<sup>1</sup>

Joshua L. Golding

One issue in the debate about faith concerns the stance a religious person is committed to take on "God exists." I argue that this stance is best understood as an assumption that God exists for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God. The notion of an "assumption for practical purpose" is distinguished from notions such as "belief" and "hope." This stance is contrasted with others found in discussions of faith, and its ramifications for the problem of whether it is rational to have faith are discussed.

## *Introduction*

One major issue at stake in the debate about the nature of religious faith is the stance a religious person is committed to taking on the proposition "God exists," *given* the fact that he is religious. Although there are other legitimate starting points for debating the nature of religious faith, a focus on this particular issue is constructive for the following reasons. Firstly, the stance which a religious person is supposed to take on the proposition "God exists" will presumably have serious practical consequences for the way that person lives. In order to understand the nature of these consequences, one must understand that stance itself, and the manner in which that stance is rooted in the religious life. Secondly, it is this stance which philosophers often seem to be concerned with when they raise the question of whether it is (or can be) rational to have faith. Philosophers are particularly concerned with what is required of the religious person with respect to the proposition "God exists," since, from certain perspectives at least, this is a rather problematic proposition. Moreover, the question of whether it is (or can be) rational to have faith is of special interest precisely because we want to know whether it is (or can be) rational *to be religious*. After all, if faith were not in some way a necessary part of the religious life, we would not be so interested in determining whether it is (or can be) rational. For these reasons, then, it is constructive to focus the debate about religious faith on the question, What stance is a religious person committed to take on the proposition "God exists"?

The present paper aims to provide an answer to this question. It does not aim to provide a *full* answer to the question, What is religious faith? For faith



may involve more than some stance on the proposition "God exists." However, to the extent that faith does involve some such stance, this paper aims to provide a *partial* answer to the question, What is religious faith?

Now it is obvious that the nature of this stance can be settled only in the context of some conception of what it is to be a religious person. Accordingly, this paper begins with an attempt to work out such a conception. The bulk of this paper then expounds and defends the view that a religious person is committed to making a certain sort of "assumption for practical purpose" that God exists. The notion of an "assumption for practical purpose" is often used in ordinary speech, and occurs in philosophical discussions as well, particularly in contexts where a claim is made to the effect that some such "assumption for practical purpose" is rationally justified.<sup>2</sup> Doubtless there are several senses this notion can take, yet it is rarely explicated with precision. Hence, it will be necessary to work out the notion of an "assumption for practical purpose" in some detail, and to contrast it with other neighborhood notions such as "belief" and "hope." I shall then formulate a general condition under which it is *pragmatically rational* for a person to make such an assumption, which will facilitate the argument that a religious person is committed to taking precisely this sort of stance on the proposition "God exists." For the sake of clarification, I shall then contrast this view with other accounts of religious faith expounded in recent literature. Finally, I shall briefly discuss the implications of this view for the problem of whether it is (or can be) rational to have religious faith.

### 1. *The Religious Person*

Quite obviously, it is possible to propose different and perhaps even mutually incompatible conceptions of what it is to be a religious person. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to demand that any such proposal meet the following criteria. Firstly, it must characterize a great bulk of people who are designated as "religious" in ordinary speech, and it must fail to characterize a great bulk of people who are not so designated. Secondly, the proposal should be fruitful in giving us some handle on normative questions as to whether it is good or bad, rational or irrational to be religious.

I propose the following. *A person is religious if and only if he pursues the goal of having a good relationship with God.* The remainder of this section is devoted to elaboration and defense of this proposal.

First, some elaboration. There are three elements here: the notion of pursuing a goal, the notion of God, and the notion of a good relationship with God. To begin with, let us remark briefly on the latter two. First, the term "God" here denotes some possible being (a being that may or may not exist) who is in some sense radically supreme. Precisely what this supremacy amounts to is left open here. Some may conceive of this being as having

intelligence and will, while others may conceive of this being as an impersonal force or spirit. Similarly, the notion of a good relationship with God is left open. Different religious persons will have different conceptions of what makes for a supreme being as well as of what makes for a good relationship with God. Finally, we may note that the notion of God as a supreme being does not *prima facie* pose any philosophical difficulty, nor does the notion of a good relationship with God. Now depending on how these notions are developed in detail, problems may arise concerning their logical coherency. However, it is not our business here to consider such developed notions, nor such problems as they may pose.

What requires more elaboration here is the notion of *pursuing a goal*, in this case the goal of having a good relationship with God. The following rough analysis will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the pursuit of *any* goal; for the sake of brevity let's confine our discussion to the religious case. Firstly, a person may pursue the goal of having a good relationship with God only if he has some *conception* of what that goal is like. This means, of course, that he must have some conception of God and of what makes for a good relationship with God. Secondly, a person may pursue that goal only if he *desires* to have a good relationship with God. This desire may be "impure" or "pure," that is, it may or may not be a desire that is in turn motivated by a desire for something ulterior, such as, the desire to maintain family tradition. Or, it may be a mixture of both. In any case, this desire alone is not sufficient for *pursuing* a good relationship with God; another condition is that one *acts* on that desire by doing (or refraining from) those actions which one believes are more (rather than less) likely to result in one's having that relationship. Now the *extent* to which one does (or refrains from) those actions may vary from "always" to "sometimes" to "once in a while"; this will determine the *extent* to which one pursues a good relationship with God. Finally, implicit in "acting on the desire" for a good relationship with God is yet another condition, namely, that in the first place one *believes* that some actions are more (rather than less) likely to result in one's having that relationship. If one believes that no matter what one does (or refrains from), one is just as likely to succeed in having that relationship, one cannot properly be said to "act on a desire" to have that relationship. Precisely what it means to "act on a desire" is a tricky question, but for our purposes we need not carry the analysis further. In sum, we may say that a person pursues the goal of having a good relationship with God if and only if:

- a) he has some conception of God and of what makes for a good relationship with God,
- b) he desires to have that relationship,
- c) he believes that some actions are more (rather than less) likely to result in his having that relationship, and,

- d) he acts on his desire to have that relationship by (to some extent) doing (or refraining from) those actions.

Now there is an important distinction to be made between two classes of people who may be said to pursue this goal. Firstly, there are those who believe they already have a good relationship with God and are trying to maintain or perhaps improve that relationship. Secondly, there are those who do not believe they have that relationship, but who are trying to attain it in the first place. Of course, the boundary of this distinction is not so sharp: a person may not be sure whether his relationship with God is good. Moreover, the same person may drift from one of these classes to the other.

So much for elaboration of the proposal that a person is religious if and only if he pursues the goal of having a good relationship with God. I submit that this proposal meets the above criteria for an adequate conception of what it is to be a religious person. Firstly, it characterizes a great bulk of people who are designated "religious" in ordinary speech, and does not characterize a great bulk of people who are not so designated. Of course, it would be preposterous to claim that it fits every occasion on which the phrase "religious person" is used. Most notably, although many would describe polytheists and Zen Buddhists as "religious," neither group can be said to "pursue the goal of having a good relationship with God." But the proposal covers not only "monotheists" such as Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but indeed anyone who pursues a good relationship with a being whom he or she considers radically supreme. Secondly, this proposal is fruitful in giving us a handle on normative questions about the religious life. We can now ask, for example, whether the conception in (a), the desire in (b), the belief in (c), and the policy in (d) are, respectively, coherent or incoherent, good or bad, true or false, rational or irrational. In what follows, we shall adopt this proposal in order to work out what stance a religious person is committed to take on the proposition "God exists."

## 2. *Must the Religious Person Believe That God Exists?*

It is clear that whether or not God exists, there certainly are religious persons. It is equally clear that no religious person can succeed in his goal of having a good relationship with God if God does not exist. Whether a religious person is committed to *believe* that God exists is a matter to which we now turn our attention. Recall that there are two classes of religious persons. Firstly, there are those who believe they have a good relationship with God and are trying to maintain or perhaps improve that relationship. Secondly, there are those who do not believe they have that relationship, but are trying to attain it in the first place. Now it is patent that the first class of persons are committed to believing that God exists, for it would be irrational or incoherent to believe that one has a good relationship with God without

believing that God exists. In general, if one believes that one has a relationship with X, one is committed to believing that X exists. It may be said that one may believe that one has a relationship with a fictive entity (e.g., “being on Batman’s side”) without believing that that entity (e.g., Batman) exists. However, a relationship with what one believes is a fictive entity is itself believed to be fictive; it is a relationship which one does not really believe one has. The sort of religious person with which we are concerned here does not believe that he has a *fictive* relationship with God; he believes that he has a *real* relationship with God. So he is committed to the belief that God exists.

Now consider the second class of religious persons, namely, those who do not believe they have a good relationship with God, but are trying to attain it in the first place. Of course, such persons *may* believe that God exists. But they are not *committed* to the belief that God exists. Quite often, we desire and pursue goals for which we do not believe that conditions are such that we will succeed. For example, we pursue such goals as winning a lottery, or curing a deathly ill patient. And there is nothing inherently irrational about our doing so. Furthermore, there is nothing inherently irrational about a person who pursues the goal of having some relationship with X even whilst not having the belief that X exists. For example, consider a scientist who pursues the goal of communicating with extra-terrestrial life. Following our analysis in the previous section of what it is to pursue a goal, such a scientist

- a') has a conception of extra-terrestrial life and of what it is to communicate with extra-terrestrial life,
- b') desires to communicate with extra-terrestrial life,
- c') believes that some actions are more (rather than less) likely to result in his communicating with extra-terrestrial life, and,
- d') he acts on his desire by (to some extent) doing (or refraining from) those actions.

It would be perfectly plausible for such a scientist not to have the belief that there exists extra-terrestrial life. In fact, in the extreme case such a scientist might even believe that it is extremely unlikely that there exists such life; still there is nothing inherently irrational about this scientist. Similarly, it is not inherently irrational for a person to pursue a good relationship with God, even whilst not having the belief that God exists, or for that matter, even whilst having the belief that it is extremely unlikely that God exists.

However, there does seem to be something irrational about pursuing a goal which one does not believe there is at least some chance (however small) of attaining. And indeed, given the analysis sketched previously of what it is involved in pursuing a goal, we can pinpoint the irrationality. Recall that in order to pursue a goal, one must believe that some actions are more (rather than less) likely to result in one’s attaining that goal. But if one believes this, one is rationally committed to believe that there is at least some chance

(however small) that one will attain the goal. And it follows that one is rationally committed to believe that there is some chance (however small) that there exists whatever is necessary for obtaining the goal. Thus the scientist in the example above must at least believe that there is some chance (however small) that extra-terrestrial life exists. Similarly, all religious persons are rationally committed to the belief that *there is some chance (however small) that God exists*.

Precisely what it means to believe that *there is some chance that p* is a matter of philosophical controversy, and there is no room here to enter this debate. Suffice it to say that the belief that *there is some chance that God exists* is quite different from the belief that *God exists*. In normal usage, the statement "John believes P" implies that "John is more confident of P than not-P." But the statement "John believes there is some chance that P" does *not* imply that "John is more confident of P than not-P." Thus, a person who believes that *God exists* is more confident of *God exists* than of *God does not exist*. However, a person who believes *there is some chance that God exists* may in fact be more confident of *God does not exist* than *God exists*.

We may sum up the conclusions of this section as follows. Those religious persons who believe that they have a good relationship with God are rationally committed to believe that God exists, and *a fortiori* they are committed to believe that there is at least some chance that God exists. Those religious persons who do not believe that they have a good relationship with God are not committed to believe that God exists. But, all religious persons are committed to believe that there is at least some chance (however small) that God exists.

At this point, one might be tempted to conclude that the stance which a religious person is committed to take on the proposition "God exists" has been resolved: a religious person is committed to believe that there is at least some chance (however small) that God exists. However, this would be quite odd—if only for the fact that many (and perhaps most) people who are *not* religious believe that there is some small chance that God exists! Indeed, in the remaining sections we shall see that there is a much stronger stance which the religious person must take on the proposition "God exists."

### 3. *The Notion of an "Assumption for Practical Purpose"*

The view I propose to articulate and defend is that a religious person is committed to "act on the assumption" or "assume for practical purpose" that God exists. Now obviously there are different ways of explicating what is an "assumption for practical purpose." In this section I present one way of doing so.

To begin with, two general comments are in order. Firstly, the notion of an "assumption that P for practical purpose" (where P is some proposition) is not restricted to the religious dimension. There are many sorts of propositions

which we can assume for practical purpose. For example, one might assume for practical purpose that it will not rain tomorrow, that the future will be like the past, or that nature is uniform. This *kind* of assumption is obviously not peculiar to religion.

Secondly, it is obvious that an “assumption that P for practical purpose” makes reference to some goal or goals in virtue of which the assumption is made by some person. A point that is less obvious but equally important is that different persons may assume the very same proposition P for the purpose of pursuing different goals; indeed, even the very same person may assume P for the purpose of pursuing different goals. We must also distinguish between an assumption that is made by someone for the purpose of pursuing a single goal or set of goals on the one hand, and an assumption that someone makes, as the saying goes, for “all practical purposes,” or, as we may say, for the purpose of pursuing all of his goals. Hence, in place of speaking of an “assumption for practical purpose that P” it is more explicit (and less misleading) to distinguish an “assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing goal G”—where G is some specified goal or set of goals, from an “assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing all of one’s goals.” Clearly, though, an analysis of the latter will depend on an analysis of the former.

Having made these preliminary points, we may now proceed to explicate the notion of an “assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing goal G.” Of course, there are various ways of doing this. The particular sort of assumption I have in mind may also be dubbed an “action-guiding” assumption. The necessary and sufficient conditions for a person’s making such an assumption are as follows:

Given that person N pursues goal G, N makes an *action-guiding assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing G* if and only if insofar as N pursues G he tries to do those things which are, if P is true, more (rather than less) likely to result in his attaining G.<sup>3</sup>

This somewhat cumbersome definition is best grasped by means of example. Suppose that Dr. Jones pursues the goal of curing a patient of a tumor, and that several medical options are available, such as, chemical treatments, surgical procedures, and dietary regimens. Suppose also that Jones believes that if the tumor is benign, chemical treatments are more (rather than less) likely to result in the patient’s cure (i.e., the patient is more likely to be cured if he is chemically treated than if he is not chemically treated). Furthermore, Jones believes that surgical procedures are somewhat dangerous, and are unnecessary if the tumor is benign. However, Jones also believes that if the tumor is malignant, chemical treatments will be completely ineffectual, and in this case surgical procedures are more (rather than less) likely to result in the patient’s cure (i.e., the patient is more likely to be cured if surgery is done than if surgery is not done). Now, we may say that Jones makes an action-



guiding assumption that "the tumor is benign" for the purpose of trying to cure the patient if and only if, insofar as he pursues this goal, he tries to do those things which are, if the tumor is benign, more (rather than less) likely to cure the patient. In our case, this would involve his employing the chemical treatments and not the surgical procedures. But it may involve more than that. For example, depending on other particular facts about the patient and the nature of the tumor, Jones may also conclude that if the tumor is benign, certain dietary regimens are more (rather than less) likely to cure the patient. The particular actions which are dictated by Jones' action-guiding assumption that the tumor is benign will depend on the particular circumstances of the case.

In effect, there is both a "cognitive" and a "practical" component involved in an action-guiding assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing G. A person who makes such an assumption engages in a research program designed to *figure out* what things promote (i.e., render it more likely that he will attain) goal G if proposition P is true. Secondly, based on his background beliefs as well as the information gleaned from this research, he tries to *do* those things that promote his attaining G if P is true.<sup>4</sup>

So much for clarification of the necessary and sufficient conditions for making what I have called an "action-guiding" assumption. This appears to be one of the ways in which the phrase "assumption for practical purpose" is used. No doubt there are other uses as well, and it would be nice to spell them out. Here we shall concentrate further on this particular use. It is important to contrast an "action-guiding assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing G" with the *hope that P* and the *belief that P*, as well as with some other neighboring notions. We begin with the notion of "hope that P." Roughly speaking, a person who "hopes that P" desires or wants it to be the case that P, but does not know that P and does not know that not-P. It is easy to see that an "action-guiding assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing G" differs from a "hope that P." To begin with, a person who hopes that P need not be pursuing a goal for which he guides his actions on the assumption that P. For example, I may hope that someday I will own a million dollars but not pursue any goal on the assumption that I will own a million dollars. Nor does it follow from the fact that one assumes that P for the purpose of pursuing some goal G that one also hopes that P. For example, in the case described earlier, Dr. Jones may assume that "the tumor is malignant" for the purpose of curing his patient, without *hoping* that the tumor is malignant. In short, hopes need not be action guiding, and action-guiding assumptions need not constitute things hoped for.

Another notion worth considering here is that of "acting to pursue some goal G *in the hope that P*." This notion may seem close to the notion of an action-guiding assumption, but our previous example (concerning Dr. Jones) also shows that one can be involved in doing the latter without doing the former.

Similarly, one can act to pursue some goal *G* in the hope that *P* without guiding one's actions on the assumption that *P*. For example, Jones may pursue the goal of curing his patient in the hope that the tumor is benign, even though he makes an action-guiding assumption that the tumor is malignant.

Next, let us consider the difference between an *action-guiding assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing G* and a *belief that P*. Certainly it is quite compatible for someone both to believe that *P* and to make an action-guiding assumption that *P* for the purpose of pursuing some goal *G*. However, the one does not require or entail the other. Consider once again the example mentioned above. Even though Jones may not believe that the tumor is malignant, he may still decide to make the action-guiding assumption that it is malignant for the purpose of curing his patient. Indeed, he may doubt very much that the tumor is malignant, and still assume so for that specific goal.

Conversely, a person may believe that *P*, without making an action-guiding assumption that *P* for the purpose of pursuing *G*. This may happen simply because the person happens not to pursue *G*, or because although he pursues *G*, he deems the truth or falsity of *P* as irrelevant to the pursuit of *G*. In neither case has the person made an action guiding assumption that *P*. In sum, one may believe that *P* without assuming it for some specific goal *G*, and, conversely, one may assume that *P* for some goal *G* without believing that *P*.

Moreover, the notion of an action-guiding assumption that *P* for the purpose of pursuing *G* is not to be confused with the notion of "believing that there is some chance that *P*." Firstly, given two individuals who believe there is the exact same chance that *P*, one may assume *P* for some goal *G* and one may not. This may happen because the latter happens not to pursue *G*, or because although he pursues *G* he regards the truth or falsity of *P* as irrelevant to the pursuit of goal *G*. Moreover, the very same individual who believes there is some chance that *P* may assume *P* for one of his goals but not for another.<sup>5</sup>

Let us consider next the contrast between the notion of an action-guiding assumption that *P* for the purpose of pursuing goal *G* and the notion of "acting to pursue goal *G* in the belief that *P*." Obviously the two differ at least to the extent that, as we have already seen, the notion of an action-guiding assumption that *P* differs from the notion of a belief that *P*. But, it also seems that someone who "pursues goal *G* in the belief that *P*" is someone who pursues *G* on the action-guiding assumption that *P* (although not necessarily *vice versa*). This leads us to pose the following question. Where the goal is identical, to what extent would the *actions* involved in "acting in the belief that *P*" and "acting on an assumption that *P*" differ? Compare, for example, a defense strategist who attempts to construct a secure defense policy merely on the *assumption* that the Russians are cheating on the latest arms-treaty, with another strategist—exactly alike in all other respects, but—who makes the same attempt not only on the assumption but also in the *belief* that the

Russians are cheating. Our question is, insofar as they pursue the stated goal, would their actions differ? It is tempting to say that, in any realistic case, their actions would not differ at all.

It is worthwhile in this context to comment on the rather common phrase, "acting as if one believes." In the case just described, it seems reasonable to say that the first strategist is "acting as if he believes" that the Russians are cheating. This is an accurate turn of phrase here, as long as it is kept in mind that it is only with respect to a limited range of his behavior that he "acts as if he believes" that the Russians are cheating. That is, he "acts as if he believes" insofar as he pursues the goal of constructing a secure defense policy. He need not "act as if he believes" with respect to his other goals (such as, the goal of forming warm personal ties with Russian diplomats).

Moreover, in spite of the above example, it is emphatically *not* always the case that a person who pursues G in the belief that P and a person who merely assumes that P for the purpose of pursuing G act in the same way, *even* with respect to actions that are oriented toward G. This may occur in cases where the fact that a person believes P is itself relevant to determining how that person pursues G. Let us return to our example concerning the doctor and patient. Imagine that although Dr. Jones is a skilled surgeon and usually does his own operations, he gets too nervous to operate if he believes that a patient's life depends on successful surgery, and he refers any such cases to another surgeon. Suppose also that Dr. Jones believes that the life of any patient with a malignant tumor depends on successful surgery. Under these circumstances, there will be an important difference between the case where Dr. Jones pursues the goal of curing his patient in the *belief* that the tumor is malignant, and the case where he pursues this same goal only on the *assumption* that the tumor is malignant. In the former case, he will refer the patient elsewhere for operation; in the latter case, he will be confident enough to operate. And in the latter case, it would be quite mistaken to say that Dr. Jones is "acting as if he believes" that the tumor is malignant; if he believed the tumor were malignant, he wouldn't operate! Hence, there are some cases where a person who pursues G *in the belief* that P acts differently from a person who pursues G merely *on the action-guiding assumption* that P—*even* with respect to those actions that are oriented toward G. And in such cases it is wrong to describe the latter as "acting as if he believes" that P.

We may summarize the discussion of the last several pages as follows. The notion of an action-guiding assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing some goal G is different from any of the following:

- a) hoping that P
- b) acting to pursue G in the hope that P
- c) believing that P
- d) assuming that P for the purpose of pursuing *all* goals

- e) believing that there is some chance that P
- f) acting to pursue G in the belief that P

In addition, we have found that in some cases, a person who makes an action-guiding assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing G need not act in the same way (to attain goal G) as a person who pursues the very same goal G *in the belief* that P. These conclusions will be important later, when we turn to the topic of religious faith.

Before doing so, it is necessary to formulate a principle which describes one condition under which it is *pragmatically rational* to make an action-guiding assumption. I call it the *Principle of Rational Assumption* (or *PRA*). I shall first state the principle, then give two examples of its application, and then attempt to defend it.

*PRA*: Given a person N who pursues goal G and believes that he will attain G only if P is true, it is *pragmatically rational* for person N to make an action-guiding assumption that P for the purpose of pursuing G.

An example of the application of *PRA* is as follows. Suppose that Dr. Jones pursues the goal of curing his patient of a tumor, *and* that he believes he will succeed only if the tumor is benign. *PRA* dictates that under these circumstances, it is pragmatically rational for Jones to make an action-guiding assumption that the tumor is benign for the purpose of trying to cure his patient. Thus if Jones believes that, if the tumor is benign, he is more likely to cure his patient by chemical treatments than by surgery, *PRA* dictates that it is pragmatically rational for him to use the treatments rather than the surgery. Another example is as follows. Suppose that Smith pursues the goal of winning the next election against the incumbent, *and* that Smith believes he will win only if there is currently widespread dissatisfaction with the incumbent. *PRA* dictates that under such circumstances, it is pragmatically rational for Smith to make an action-guiding assumption that there is widespread dissatisfaction with the incumbent for the purpose of pursuing the goal of winning the election. For example, Smith may believe that if there is widespread dissatisfaction with the incumbent, it is more likely that Smith will win if he espouses radically new policies than if he does not do so. If so, *PRA* says that, insofar as Smith pursues the goal of winning the election, the pragmatically rational thing for him to do is to espouse radically new policies.

From these examples it is easy to see that *PRA* is, at the very least, intuitively plausible. Jones believes he will cure the patient only if the tumor is benign. So (given his other beliefs) there is no point in his doing the surgery, and his only sensible strategy is to use chemical treatments. True, Jones believes that if the tumor is malignant the chemical treatments are unlikely to help; but Jones believes that if the tumor is malignant he will not cure the patient anyhow. Similarly, Smith believes that he will win only if there is

widespread dissatisfaction with the incumbent. In trying to win the election, he does well to guide his actions on the assumption that there is such dissatisfaction. In general, then, *PRA* seems valid.

A more rigorous defense of *PRA* requires us first to comment on the notion of "pragmatic rationality." It would take us far afield to dissect this notion. However, it seems plausible to say that given a person *N* who pursues goal *G*, it is *pragmatically rational* for person *N* to try to do action *A* if it follows from some of *N*'s beliefs that of all his available options, it is most likely that he will attain *G* if he does action *A*. To take a simple example, suppose *N* has the goal of getting to Chicago by train, and that *N* believes that of two available trains, it is more likely that train One is going to Chicago than train Two. It follows from *N*'s beliefs that of all his available options, he is most likely to attain his goal if he takes train One. We may say, then, that given *N*'s goal of getting to Chicago, it is pragmatically rational for him to try to take train One. Now I caution the reader that we have defined a course of action as "pragmatically rational" in such a way that it does not matter whether *N*'s goal is good or bad, rational or irrational (if goals can be evaluated in this way). Nor does it matter whether *N*'s relevant belief is true or false, rational or irrational. For example, suppose that *N* pursues the goal of traveling backward in time, and that he (irrationally) believes it is more likely that he will do so if he fasts for three days. Our definition yields that it is pragmatically rational for *N* to fast for three days. One might balk at this result, since from an "objective" point of view, it is *not* rational for *N* to fast for three days. However, this does not mean that our notion of pragmatic rationality is in itself "subjective." It is neither subjective nor objective. The matter may be put as follows. If *N*'s goal and the relevant belief are objectively rational, then the course of action will be objectively pragmatically rational. And if *N*'s goal or his relevant belief is not objectively rational, then the course of action will be only subjectively pragmatically rational.

To return to *PRA*. Given this conception of "pragmatic rationality" we can now see that *PRA* is valid. If a person *N* pursues goal *G* and believes he will attain *G* only if *P* is true, it follows from *N*'s beliefs that he is more likely to attain *G* if he makes an action-guiding assumption that *P* than if he does not. Using our earlier example, given Dr. Jones' goal of curing his patient, and his belief that he will cure the patient only if the tumor is benign, it follows from Dr. Jones' beliefs that he is more likely to cure the patient if he does those things which are, if the tumor is benign, more (rather than less) likely to result in his curing the patient. Hence it is pragmatically rational (in the sense defined above) for Jones to guide his actions on the assumption that the tumor is benign. Thus, in general, *PRA* is a valid principle.

#### 4. *The Religious Person's Stance on "God Exists"*

Let us turn, at last, to religious faith. At the outset of this paper we said that one question at stake in the debate about faith is, What stance is a religious person committed to taking on the proposition "God exists"—*given* the fact that he is religious? We may now supply a rigorous answer to this question. A religious person is committed to making an action-guiding assumption that "God exists" for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God. He is "committed" to taking this stance in the sense that it is pragmatically rational for him to do so. The proof of this is as follows. Recall our conception of a religious person as someone who pursues the goal of having a good relationship with God. Now such a person believes he will succeed in having a good relationship with God only if God exists. Hence, by *PRA* it follows that it is pragmatically rational for a religious person to make an action-guiding assumption that God exists for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God. Now it would be improper to say that faith *consists in* this assumption, since faith may involve more than the religious person's stance on "God exists." However, to the extent that faith consists partly in that stance, we may say that faith consists partly in an action-guiding assumption that God exists for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God.

What is involved in having this sort of faith? To begin with, as with any action-guiding assumption, there are two components involved, namely, a cognitive and a practical aspect. The cognitive aspect consists in trying to figure out what actions are, if God exists, more (rather than less) likely to result in one's having a good relationship with God. The practical aspect involves trying to carry out those actions.

Now the precise nature of the actions dictated by this sort of faith will depend first and foremost on the religious person's conception of God. It is not our task here to account for how one arrives at a conception of God, much less to defend one conception in particular. But, for the sake of example, let us consider what actions would be dictated on a Biblical conception, where God assists those who pursue a good relationship with him, and indeed the success of the religious person's quest is dependent on God's assistance. On this conception of God, faith requires that the religious person conduct his pursuit on the assumption that indeed God will assist him. Moreover, on a Biblical conception, God responds at least on some occasions to petitionary prayer. Thus faith requires that the religious person at least on some occasions pray to God for assistance in his pursuit of God. Finally, on this conception, God turns away from those who do what is evil, so faith requires that the religious person avoid doing evil.

But the actions required by this sort of faith will depend not only on one's

conception of God but also on one's personal experience, as well as one's historical and cultural background. On the present view, faith requires a religious person to interpret events in his own life, in the life of his community, and in the world at large in the context of the assumption that God exists, strictly for the purpose of reckoning how he should react to these events in order to promote his goal. For example, suppose a person has an extraordinary or even ordinary experience, in which it seems to him either very strongly or very faintly that God is in some way revealing himself. Or, to take another example, suppose a person witnesses unusual events (of the miraculous sort such as those described in the Bible or of the more mundane sort such as medically inexplicable recovery from a fatal disease) that seem to point toward the hand of God. Or, consider a person who only *hears of* or *reads about* accounts of such religious experience or unusual events. On the present view, faith requires a religious person to interpret these events on the assumption that God exists, for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God. A person in any of the above situations may conclude that, if God exists, God is communicating some message or directive to him. (Precisely what that message or directive might be will again depend on the particular circumstances.) And, should the person conclude that if God exists, some specific message or directive has been communicated, faith will also require that he try to incorporate that message or fulfill that directive in his pursuit of a good relationship with God.

This pragmatic conception of religious faith is rooted in the Bible. The Hebrew term usually translated as "faith" is *emunah*, which often connotes trust, reliance, or dependence.<sup>6</sup> Now there is no intention here to insist that the above is an *analysis* of the Biblical *emunah*. However, it is clear that a person who has *emunah* in God is a person who trusts in God, in (at least) the sense that he is willing to act in ways that count on God's existence. In particular, he is willing to pursue a good relationship with God, on the assumption that God exists. Thus, a person who has *emunah* in God must (at least) have the sort of pragmatic faith worked out above. Whether this is all that Biblical *emunah* amounts to is a question we cannot explore here.

### 5. Other Conceptions of Religious Faith

The view presented in this paper is that faith consists at least partly in an action-guiding assumption that God exists for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God. This leaves open that faith may involve other things as well. Nevertheless, it is instructive to contrast the present view (partial though it may be) with other conceptions of faith articulated in recent literature.

John Hick has viewed faith as an interpretive framework within which the religious person experiences or apprehends God.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, Hick intends that someone who has "faith" in his sense *believes* that God exists.<sup>8</sup> Now on our

account, faith does involve interpreting one's experience in terms of the assumption that God exists, but strictly as a means to figuring out how to go about achieving a good relationship with God. Although there is an element which our conception of faith shares with Hick's, absent from ours is the notion that the function of faith is specifically to *experience* God. Moreover, as we have already seen, a person can make an action-guiding assumption that P for the purpose of some goal G without having the *belief* that P. Hence a person who assumes that God exists for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God, does not necessarily have faith in Hick's sense. Finally, it is not at all clear that someone who has faith in Hick's sense must pursue the goal of relating well to God, much less guide his actions toward that goal on the assumption that God exists. Thus, someone who has faith in Hick's sense does not necessarily have faith in the sense advocated in this paper.

In his book *Faith and Reason*, R. G. Swinburne describes three views of religious faith, *viz.*, the Thomist, the Lutheran and the Pragmatist.<sup>9</sup> The last comes closest to the view of faith advocated here, but, as we shall see shortly, Swinburne formulates it in such a way that there remains an important difference. Now on both the Thomist and the Lutheran views, faith involves the belief that God exists, which, once again, is not necessarily required by the view of faith advocated here. However, what Swinburne calls the Pragmatist view of faith does *not* require the belief that God exists. Rather it requires acting on the assumption that God exists. But what is involved in acting on the assumption that God exists? "To do this," writes Swinburne, "is to do those actions you would do if you did believe [in God]."<sup>10</sup> Now this Pragmatist account of faith is indeed similar to the one advocated here, in that neither require belief that God exists. Nevertheless, there remains an important difference between the accounts.

To begin with, on Swinburne's Pragmatist view of faith, it is not clear precisely for the sake of what goal the assumption that God exists is made. As we saw above, action-guiding assumptions are always made for the sake of some goal or other, or for the sake of all of one's goals. It is likely that Swinburne means to say that (on the Pragmatist view) the assumption that God exists is made for the sake of *all* of one's goals, since, as he says with no restriction, a person who has such faith "acts as if he believes." However, on the view advocated in this paper, faith involves assuming that God exists *strictly* for the purpose of pursuing the goal of attaining a good relationship with God. Well, perhaps Swinburne also intends that somehow (on the Pragmatist view) the application of assumption is restricted to the pursuit of a religious goal. If so, it is still incorrect or at best misleading to describe a person who makes this assumption as "acting as if he believes that God exists." For, as we saw above, it is quite mistaken to think that a person who



assumes that P for the purpose of pursuing goal G need behave “as if he believes” that P, *even with respect to those actions which he takes as means to G*. The reason for this is that even if a person assumes that P for the purpose of pursuing G, the very fact that he does not believe P may make a difference as to what he does to attempt to achieve G! Consider the following example. Imagine two persons (call them “A” and “B”) who pursue the goal of relating well to God, and who are alike in all respects, except for the fact that whereas A believes that God exists, B does not. Suppose further that both make action-guiding assumptions that God exists for the purpose of pursuing the goal of relating well to God. Now A may very well come to the conclusion that one appropriate means to his relating well to God is his *verbally affirming the existence of God each day*. But we can easily imagine that B concludes that in spite of the fact that he pursues the very same goal of relating well to God, and in spite of the fact that he has made an action-guiding assumption that God exists, it is *not* appropriate for him to verbally affirm God’s existence, precisely because (he concludes) that these activities are appropriate as means to the religious goal only if one actually *believes* that God exists. Indeed, we can plausibly imagine that A might agree that *for B* the verbal affirmation of God’s existence is inappropriate as a means to B’s relating well to God. Thus, it would be quite incorrect to describe B as “acting as if he believes that God exists.” Whereas Swinburne’s Pragmatist view of faith urges us to blur this crucial distinction, the account given in this paper preserves a sharp line between “assuming that God exists for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God” and “acting as if one believes that God exists.”

Another philosopher who has proposed a view about the nature of religious faith is Louis Pojman, in his book *Religious Belief and the Will*. Pojman concerns himself with the question of what sort of propositional attitude is “adequate for religious faith,”<sup>11</sup> or, as he sometimes says, “adequate for the essential benefits of religion.”<sup>12</sup> Pojman begins by criticizing the more traditional view that belief that God exists is necessary for religious faith, mainly on the grounds that a person can “act on” a proposition without believing it. Now the position of this paper is in agreement with Pojman’s view that the belief that God exists is not required for living a religious life. But I believe that Pojman’s discussion suffers because he does not offer a rigorous account of what it is to be religious nor what it is to “act on” a proposition. Indeed, instead of drawing the natural conclusion that faith consists (at least partly) in some form of “acting on” the proposition God exists, Pojman seeks some further propositional attitude which will somehow guarantee that a person acts on that assumption. He suggests that faith consists in the “hope” that God exists. This does not seem to suit Pojman’s purpose, since, as we saw earlier, having hope that P does not entail that one makes an action-guiding

assumption that P. In any case, we may conclude this section by remarking that whereas Pojman's account of faith insists that "hope" that God exists is required for faith, the account offered in this paper does not.<sup>13</sup>

### 6. Concluding Remarks

Finally, some brief remarks on the implications of the present view of faith for the traditional problem of whether it is (or can be) rational to have faith. First I must emphasize that these remarks are tentatively put forward, since all I have done in this paper is offer an account of the stance a religious person must take with respect to God's existence, and religious faith may arguably involve more than this.

Having said this, we may remark (recalling the result of section 2) that on the present account, it is irrational to have faith without believing that there is some chance (however small) that God exists. Hence the rationality of faith does not require the rationality of the belief that God exists, but rather the rationality of the belief that there is some chance (however small) that God exists. On the other hand, faith does not *consist* in either of these beliefs, since it involves the assumption that God exists for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God. Hence one cannot show that it is rational to have faith *merely* by showing that it is rational to believe that God exists or that there is some chance that God exists. Finally, we have seen that *given* the goal of the religious person, and *given* his belief that he will attain that goal only if God exists, it is pragmatically rational for that person to make the action-guiding assumption. But (recalling a distinction made in section 3) this leaves open whether it is *objectively* pragmatically rational to have faith. Now clearly *the belief* of the religious person that he will attain the goal only if God exists is objectively rational. Thus one could show that his action-guiding assumption is *objectively* pragmatically rational, if one could show that it is objectively pragmatically rational to pursue the religious goal. It would then follow that faith is, at least in part, objectively pragmatically rational to have. Needless to say, the question of whether it is (or can be) objectively pragmatically rational to pursue the religious goal still remains to be explored.

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### NOTES

1. I wish to thank Professors Philip Quinn and William Alston for constructive criticism of an earlier version of this paper.

2. For example, Kant attempts to justify what he calls "postulates of practical reason" in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Book II, chapter II: secs. IV-VI. Also, in *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), B. C. van Fraassen argues that we are justified

in "accepting" (but not believing) scientific theories. Finally, James C. S. Wernham has reconstructed James' "Will to Believe" as an attempt to justify not the *belief* but rather the "gamble" that God exists. See *James' Will to Believe Doctrine: A Heretical View* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987). Each of these philosophers employs some (not necessarily the same) notion of an assumption for practical purpose.

3. For the purpose of this definition, the phrase "...he tries to do..." should be interpreted *de dicto* rather than *de re*. Alternatively, the definition may be expanded to read "...he tries to do those things such that he believes that, if P is true, they are more (rather than less) likely to result in his attaining G."

4. It is necessary to insert the phrase "...insofar as N pursues G..." in the *definiens* of an action-guiding assumption since N may try to promote *other* goals, and, what promotes goal G may not promote some other goal; moreover, what promotes G *if P is true* may not promote another goal. For example, Dr. Jones may believe that if the tumor is benign, his patient is more likely to be cured if he is put on a liquid diet for a year. However, putting the patient on such a diet may conflict with Jones' other goal of not causing his patient unnecessary pain. But we would not want to say that Jones has failed to assume that "the tumor is benign" for the purpose of curing his patient just if he fails to order the liquid diet. Here, he neglects to order the liquid diet because he has other goals aside from curing the patient. Thus our definition has built in the restriction that it concerns what N does "insofar as he pursues G."

5. It is not clear to me whether a person can make an action-guiding assumption that P without believing that there is some chance (however small) that P. However, it would seem irrational to do so.

6. See, e.g., *Genesis*, 16:7; *Numbers* 20:12.

7. John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), chapter 5. See also Hick, "Seeing-As and Religious Experience," in *Philosophy of Religion*, Proceedings of the 8th International Wittgenstein Symposium, August 1983, Part 2, edited by Wolfgang L. Gombocz (Vienna: Holder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1984).

8. See *Faith and Knowledge*, chapter 9.

9. Swinburne, *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), chapter 4.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

11. Pojman, *Religious Belief and the Will* (London; New York: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1986), p. 212.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

13. It is possible for a person to make an action-guiding assumption that God exists for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God, without hoping that God exists. Consider a person who is religious solely in order to maintain a family tradition. Such a person may not hope that God exists; he may even hope that God doesn't exist. Now it is true that this person's religious motivation is completely "impure" in the sense described in section 1. But this does not prevent him from making an action-guiding assumption that God exists for the purpose of pursuing a good relationship with God.