

## THE WHY AND THE HOW OF RENEWAL IN PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

J. L. SCHELLENBERG, MOUNT SAINT VINCENT UNIVERSITY

AND

PAUL DRAPER, PURDUE UNIVERSITY

**Abstract:** In this paper, we aim to get clear about why renewal is needed in philosophy of religion and how to achieve it. We begin with a fundamental distinction between someone's perspective *in* the field and the perspective *of* the field, arguing that any philosopher of religion is responsible to both. Then we identify eight problems that should prevent the status quo in philosophy from appearing acceptable to anyone who takes the perspective of the field, as well as seven practical suggestions which, if implemented, would help to solve these problems. The problems include such things as tribalism, ignorance about religion, and viewing issues exclusively in terms of what is religiously familiar; the mitigations such things as allowing non-Christians to join the Society of Christian Philosophers, broadening the education of philosophers of religion, and paying more attention to the deep history of religion.

Recently, we co-edited a volume of essays (Draper & Schellenberg 2017) dedicated to the proposition that our field, the philosophy of religion, is not all that it could be. The new set of essays we're joining here shows that this sentiment is, at the least, not going away. That's encouraging, but how can we get beyond sentiment? In this our own essay we hope to do so by focusing very precisely and persuasively on problems and solutions: on *why* our field needs renewal and *how* to achieve it. More specifically, we hope to get every reader to recognize and accept at least one problem from the range of problems in the field as it exists today that we propose to identify, and to select for special thought and supportive effort at least one solution from the range of solutions we'll be promoting. Let's adjust that slightly: one *extra* problem and one *extra* solution — for we're going to start by setting the right mood with some thoughts about a very basic problem/solution pair that we should all be able to recognize/support.

### I. IN AND OF

This problem/solution pair involves a distinction between perspectives. An analogy to U.S. politics will help to explain the distinction we have in mind. Although Democratic and Republican politicians may hold to their positions fiercely and with conviction, few (one would hope) are so naive as to think that *all* politics in America should be Democratic or that *all* should be Republican. They can see the dangers of a one-party system in a democracy. And at times — even if too rarely — they are able to detach from their own parochial perspective and take, and act from, the perspective of American politics in general. That's because it's *their* perspective too. For example, even though Republicans supported the policies of former President Trump because, well, he's a Republican and did things Republicans want to see done, when Trump's behaviour tore holes in the fabric of the nation and the holes got big enough, some Republicans were willing to take a stand against him out of a broader allegiance to the good of the country.

Similarly, we can make a distinction between someone's perspective *in* our field of inquiry, the philosophy of religion, and the perspective *of* the field, and see how any of us, any philosopher of religion, is responsible to both. Your perspective in the field, if you have one, may, for example, be a theistic or specifically Christian perspective. Or maybe, though this is less likely, it's a naturalist perspective. Even less likely, it might be that of an atheist who is not a naturalist. Whatever your perspective in the field, it

likely provides the vantage point from which you develop and defend various philosophical theses. That's fine (for now), but the perspective of the field is important too, and different. To take and act from this perspective, as you should be ready to do from time to time, means *thinking about and explicitly favouring what's good for the field as a whole and also thinking about and explicitly opposing what's not good*.

The problem — the one we said everyone should be able to recognize (while being certain that not everyone will) — is that in the philosophy of religion today, as in most other fields, there is a severe imbalance between how much attention people are giving to their perspective in the field and how much attention they're giving to the perspective of the field. To avoid keeping you in suspense: there's a great deal more of the former than there is of the latter. Of course, there was no real suspense. Everyone knows that Christian philosophers, naturalists, and atheists of all stripes, as well as pragmatists, Wittgensteinians, evolutionists, and feminists, to name a few, give virtually all their attention to developing, refining, and defending against all comers their perspective *in* the field, rarely giving any thought at all to whether what's needed for the field as a whole to prosper — to shine as the sun alongside the philosophy of science, and the philosophy of art, and all the other philosophy-ofs — is in place.

Here one can see why it's not enough for philosophers of religion to respond to calls for renewal, as they sometimes do, by saying that everyone has their interests in philosophy and they are simply following their own; why criticize? That's to take only one perspective into account — your perspective *in* the field. Every philosopher of religion is also responsible to the perspective of the field. So suppose that, as we'll be arguing later, the field is suffering from a lack of attention to 'religion per se' (as opposed to specific religions) and you see that it is. To act from a sense of the second responsibility would then mean loudly advocating more attention to the *philosophy* of religion per se, and being sensitive yourself to how the latter may rightly impact your work. Notice that promoting the work you see needs to be done for the good of the field as a whole doesn't imply doing it or even being willing to do it yourself. Let many flowers grow. But the emphasis has to be on 'many' and on real enthusiasm for the growth of every one.

Suppose, then, that we see our basic problem: the problem of balancing in and of. What's the solution? Well, clearly, the solution will at least start with each of us urging ourselves to pay more attention to what the field as a whole might need and how to supply it. Since our readers are, we know, a conscientious crew, it follows that they should all by now be plenty motivated to learn from, as well as to act on what is learned from, the remaining sections of this essay!

## II. WHY

In the present section we will identify fairly swiftly, one after another, a host of problems we think should prevent the status quo in the philosophy of religion from seeming acceptable to anyone who takes the perspective of the field. Thus, we will answer the question *why* the philosophy of religion needs renewal. These problems are often related to one another and overlapping in interesting ways that invite more discussion than we have time for here. Some problems are less deep and less far-reaching than others — which may be all to the good, given our desire to motivate people to help solve them, and to have them succeed. Since philosophers are a fractious lot, harder to herd than cats (which we think is often a good thing!), it seems unlikely that any of you will recognize *all* of these purported problems as genuine on reflection. But our hope is that everyone will be able to recognize the genuineness of *at least one*: readers are invited to think of what we offer here as a big disjunction and — motivated by a sense of responsibility to the perspective of the field — to look for at least one disjunct they can accept as true.

We begin with four very deep problems, which we call tribalism, familiarism, partitionism, and recentism. Then we discuss an additional four problems that seem to us to be more tractable.

### II.1. Tribalism

The claim that tribalism or partisanship is a problem in contemporary philosophy of religion is, we have discovered, contentious for two reasons. Some deny that tribalism exists. Others, more plausibly, deny that it is a problem.

It must exist, however, because many philosophers of religion are deeply religious and it is well established that religious groups exert enormous influence on their members (Draper and Nichols 2013). The idea that philosophers, because of their training, can effectively overcome such influence when they investigate core religious beliefs is not plausible. Further, non-believers appear to be no less tribal as a group when it comes to inquiry about religion than believers are. One reason for this may be that religion is often associated with certain despised political beliefs. A second possible reason is that many non-believers had a ‘nasty break-up’ with a religion to which they formerly belonged. Objectivity about one’s religion, like objectivity about one’s spouse, is difficult enough. Objectivity about an ex-religion or an ex-spouse is in many cases nearly impossible.

But is such partisanship a problem? Some claim that it is not or at least that it is not any more of a problem in philosophy of religion than in other areas of philosophy. Again, however, this is implausible, for two reasons. First, while subjective Bayesians, for example, may be very passionate about their views and may be influenced by other Bayesians with whom they associate, the influence of such philosophical groups on their members in no way compares in strength to the sort of group influence found in religion. Second, while it is sometimes claimed that one-sided inquiry in a field by individual inquirers is not a problem as long as someone in the field one-sidedly defends the other side, this claim fails to take into account that the vast majority of philosophers of religion are Christian theists, so nothing remotely like an effective adversarial system exists in the field. Indeed, the resulting bias in philosophy of religion as a whole is obvious to many scholars familiar with the literature in the field. And even if the demographics were more balanced, one-sided inquiry would still be a problem, because it fails to provide justification for individual inquirers. This is the paradox of apologetics. When it comes to controversial issues that cannot be settled definitively, it is impossible to obtain justification for a position by seeking it directly. Instead, one must seek the truth by seeking evidence both for and against the position. Only then is justification possible as a side effect of balanced inquiry.

## II.2. Familiarism

The unfamiliar term ‘familiarism’ is here used as a label for the tendency to think about topics in philosophy of religion exclusively or largely in terms of the religious tradition with which one is most familiar. Readers who deny that tribalism is a problem in philosophy of religion should notice that familiarism could easily exist even if tribalism were not among its causes. Sometimes this familiarity with a particular religious tradition and the related tendency to avoid venturing far from home causally depend on a philosopher’s belonging to the religion in question, but this won’t always be the case. Even non-Christian philosophers, for example, may be religious homebodies, thinking largely in terms of Christianity since, having been brought up in or at least near it, this is the religion they know best.

Familiarism is a problem for at least three reasons. First, it poses the danger of a false sense of expertise: having much experience of a religion, one may assume that one knows *a lot* about it when in fact a religious studies scholar might easily poke holes in one’s understanding of, say, how the tradition’s scriptural texts came together and what interpretations of the nature of God they will bear. Hence, even the familiarist’s work on her own tradition may be less than stellar. A second reason is that, since familiarism is widespread and the religion philosophers are most familiar with is usually the same one, namely Christianity, one religion ends up getting all or most of the attention in philosophy of religion, and others get short shrift. This reason for concern would exist even if all work by every familiarist on her own tradition’s ideas *were* stellar. A third reason to see familiarism as a problem is that for a philosopher of religion who thinks largely in terms of the single religion with which she or he is most familiar, that religion’s ideas will naturally loom large in a manner easily leading to false generalizations — for example, a Christian or other theist may behave as though just *any* idea of a divine reality will conform to the notion of a person, or at least to that of a being distinct from ourselves. Now a susceptibility to mistaken generalizations of this sort might be circumvented by, say, doing analytic theology and purporting to do nothing more. But insofar as she continues to identify as a philosopher of *religion*, a familiarist faces this danger.

### II.3. Partitionism

Both of the problems discussed so far involve a broader tendency yet unmentioned that is itself problematic and deserving of independent attention. This problem is the tendency, in philosophy of religion, to divide religion into its parts and focus only on one or another part, such as Christianity or Buddhism. Call this tendency ‘partitionism.’ Even those philosophers of religion who do not evince tribalism or familiarism may be influenced by and come to exhibit partitionism. Seeing all the work being done on Christian ideas, they may, as they begin their own work in the field, assume that only *particular* religions are to be engaged. Ironically, even those who wish to renew the field may exhibit partitionism in their very renewal efforts: seeing the focus on Christian ideas, they may advocate attention to Muslim ideas or Buddhist ideas or Taoist ideas, lauding the expansion of what is predominantly the philosophy of the Christian religion into the philosophy of multiple particular religions.

Why is partitionism a problem? Certainly it is part of our field’s work to, say, analyze the fundamental concepts of Judaism or identify and evaluate Buddhist answers to philosophical questions about the nature of the self. In all of this, it is of course crucial that the philosopher of religion engage with a particular religion in a way that is both empathetic and impartial (the nonexistence of a ‘view from nowhere’ should not be used as an excuse to engage in partisan apologetics, whether religious or anti-religious). But engaging with religious particulars is not inappropriate, so the answer to our question is not ‘because philosophers of religion should never focus on particular religions.’ No, partitionism is a problem because it leaves a vast tract of work proper to our field unattended. Work on particular religions is indeed *part* of what the field is responsible for, but it is only part, since the philosophy of religion also includes philosophical work on religion *per se*.

By attending to religion *per se*, philosophy of religion would seek to analyze the concept of religion or, if analysis is misguided, to stipulate a definition of ‘religion’ that works well for scholarly or at least philosophical purposes. It would consider whether religion can be non-doxastic or fictionalist or even naturalistic. It would aim to determine how religion is related to a variety of other things, including science, philosophy, theology, morality, law, art, altruism, violence, social justice, and oppression. In addition, it would address issues as diverse as the proper place of religion in political debate, how religion might make progress, and whether all or most religions share a common propositional core, pursue any common goals, or respond to common forms of mystical or numinous experience. Finally, it would seek to assess the philosophical significance both of the diversity of religions and of scientific and historical work on the origins or development of religion. Partitionism, by preventing or limiting our attention to such issues, prevents or limits the attainment by our field of its true potential. It makes the field much less rich, much less socially relevant, and in every sense much smaller than it otherwise could be. That must be seen as a problem by anyone who takes the perspective of the field.

### II.4. Recentism

The label offered here is meant to pick out a tendency to think about topics in philosophy of religion, including both topics in philosophical theology and topics in the philosophy of religion *per se*, entirely in terms dictated by extant religions and their relatively shallow histories. This problem, the problem of recentism, is a problem not so much of research goals as of our frame of reference in philosophy of religion. And just as philosophers of religion unaffected by tribalism or familiarism may be influenced by partitionism, so even those unaffected by any of those problems may be influenced by recentism. Maybe you sniff at the thought that you might be partisan or a religious homebody. Perhaps you have even published articles criticizing arguments in support of your religious views and have done serious work on topics in the philosophy of religion *per se*. Still, you could be vulnerable to mistaken generalizations that parallel the mistaken generalizations of familiarists. Thinking, for example, about religion *per se* entirely or largely in terms of religions that still exist and happenings in the few thousand years in which they have dominated Earthly religiousness, you, like lots of other people, may be led to think that *all* religion or religion *by definition* shares the characteristics of recent religion.

Perhaps, for example, you will think that religion by definition involves belief in realities transcendent of nature, or necessarily includes the concept of ultimacy. If so (at least if your definition is not just a stipulative definition of the sort mentioned before), you will have an unduly cramped view of religion, one unable to accommodate religious possibilities that go back a lot further than a few thousand years — possibilities we may notice only if we're willing to think all the way back to the beginning of human religion 50,000 or more years ago.<sup>1</sup> For although the earliest religious ideas may have been about something *more* existing beyond the familiar world of fires and spears and wheels — beyond the *mundane* which even today one encounters by doing such things as eating and sleeping and brushing teeth and going to work — they were not about things 'beyond nature.' (After modern science tamed the familiar world and called it nature, this 'more' generally came to be viewed as something beyond nature, but when religion began, there was no science.)

This point has some important consequences for us today. Today, people who are asked whether they hold conventional religious beliefs will often reply: "No, but there must be *something*." In the Netherlands, this minimalist belief in 'something' has been given a name: *ietsisme* — 'somethingism.' And advocates of ietsism are called ietsers. If philosophers of religion were less influenced by recentism, they might be more willing to take ietsism on board as a genuine form of religion that harks back to the religion of a *much* earlier time. More generally, it might seem perfectly natural to regard as a religious reality such things as the most profound type of personal psychic integration or the deepest form of aesthetic insight or the fundamental truth about the nature of things, whatever it may be (even if it should remain forever mysterious) — trans-mundane realities all. As you'll probably have noticed, if recentism is banished from philosophy of religion and this is our future, then religiousness will one day be deemed perfectly compatible with naturalistic belief, as of course traditional forms of religion, focused on such things as the omni-God idea, clearly are not. Moreover, many different forms of religion may then be seen as compatible with one another, as, again, most traditional forms of religion are not. But in philosophy of religion as we see it today, recentism reigns. That is a problem.

### II.5. *Inattention to foundational issues*

Perhaps some of the problems discussed so far would have been identified early on and be less severe today had philosophers of religion of the last 50 years given more attention to the foundations of their field, including attention to the topics of meta-philosophy of religion, with its questions about the parameters of the field, such as its proper aims. A concern for foundations would, however, arguably go beyond meta-philosophy of religion. Thinking about the nature of religion or about how to analyze its most general concepts or about the range of possible responses to religious propositions — all of which foundational work in philosophy of religion would properly include — does not appear to fall into the category of meta-philosophical thinking, strictly speaking. In any case, there is a considerable amount of work here that has special importance at the beginning of the development of a field (though it should

<sup>1</sup> The common reference to a time 50,000 years before the present is due to the fact that about then much relevant physical evidence suddenly becomes available. For this reason, among others, some scholars have been inclined to think of earlier hints of religiousness as amounting to proto-religion. See Matt J. Rossano, "The Religious Mind and the Evolution of Religion," *Review of General Psychology* 10 (2006), 350. Moreover, religion has been believed to be bound up with other important and culturally relevant events, perhaps including the advent of language, occurring about 50,000 years ago. See, for example, John E. Pfeiffer, *The Creative Explosion: An Inquiry into the Origins of Art and Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) and Richard G. Klein, *The Human Career: Human Biological and Cultural Origins*, 2d ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999). But our use of 'at least' and 'about' is important here. There is considerable controversy about when and how religion evolved. (A nice survey of much of this appears in Rossano.) And the idea of a 'human revolution' dating to about 50,000 years ago has recently been challenged, with its component events either pushed back several tens of thousands of years or viewed as occurring more gradually or both. See Paul Mellars, Katie Boyle, Ofer Bar-Yosef, and Chris Stringer, eds. *Rethinking the Human Revolution: New Behavioural and Biological Perspectives on the Origin and Dispersal of Modern Humans* (Cambridge: The McDonald Institute for Archeological Research, 2007). It's noteworthy that the major late work on the evolution of religion produced by Robert Bellah takes these reassessments seriously and works with them. See Robert N. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011).

continue indefinitely and continually be updated) but that has been very widely neglected or ignored by philosophers of religion. Its importance, again, can be seen in relation to the previous problems.

### II.6. Ignorance about religion

About thirty years ago, one of us heard someone jokingly define a ‘philosopher of science’ as an epistemologist who reads *Scientific American*. It is much harder nowadays to find a grain of truth behind this joke because philosophers of science know more in general about science than they used to and because many know a great deal about one particular science. One thing that helped to strengthen the field in this regard was the establishment of a number of very strong history and philosophy of science programs. As matters currently stand, many philosophers of religion have relatively little expertise concerning religion beyond the fact that they were raised in some faith tradition, *which doesn’t even imply that they know much of what there is to know about their own religion*. This is not a problem for topics in philosophy of religion that demand only philosophical expertise (e.g., modal ontological arguments), but it is a problem for other topics, and it helps to explain the relatively narrow focus of the field previously noted.

Here again we have a problem entangled with others but helpfully considered in its own right. Surely if you’re willing to call yourself a philosopher of religion, or if that is the case and you are also a humble and conscientious member of the profession, you ought to seek a fairly wide knowledge of human religion and of what your colleagues are doing — for who knows how all of this may impact your own work? Only if what you’re doing is really something else, say, analytic theology, and no more than that, would you have a reason to be unconcerned about the corresponding forms of ignorance. But many philosophers of religion nonetheless suffer from such ignorance, as indicated by their own pro forma apologies in book prefaces and sometimes also by the remainder of their books. Seeing this, one can see as well some of the other problems above that are arguably *bound up* with the problem of ignorance, even if they were not perfectly clear before. By *addressing* this problem, one would indirectly address the others.

### II.7. Too few non-Christians working in the field

As already suggested, the field today is dominated by Christian philosophers. The problem, of course, is not that there are too many Christians working in the field. (The more the merrier, we say.) The problem is that there are too few non-Christians. Reasons for valuing the input of a larger number of non-Christians, and so the problem represented by their absence, should be evident given the foregoing. For one thing, we have a serious imbalance in the literature. (Anyone should admit that this is a problem even if they think partisanship is normal and healthy.) So why aren’t non-Christians rushing in to fill the void? Perhaps in part because of the mistaken sense among many non-Christian philosophers that philosophy of religion is inherently a religious undertaking or, if not that, an arena where their own insights are not likely to be taken seriously or given the attention they deserve. This problem, too, is entangled with others we have distinguished in such a way that by working on it we indirectly work on them, and vice versa.

### II.8. Too few philosophers willing to describe their philosophical work on religion as philosophy of religion

Given the status quo in philosophy of religion, as reflected above, the reputation of the field in the larger philosophical world is being ever more deeply damaged, and quite naturally fewer philosophers wish to be *primarily* associated with it. They would rather identify themselves as specialists in epistemology or philosophy of science or ethics or philosophy of art, even if they also do philosophy of religion. Not focusing all or most of their energies on philosophy of religion, and perhaps de-emphasizing work of the latter sort that they are doing, the field loses their best efforts and their work often suffers from a woeful ignorance of the relevant literature in the field. Indeed, things have got to the point where people can be doing what properly would count as philosophy of religion without even recognizing it, and certainly without noting it as such at all. An interesting example is afforded by Brian Leiter, who has an important and widely discussed book on whether and why the state should tolerate religion,<sup>2</sup> a book that counts

2 See Leiter (2012).

as philosophy of religion if anything does, but who avoids speaking of himself as doing philosophy of religion. On Twitter, for example, he refers to himself as doing “moral, legal and political philosophy.” Whatever one may think of Leiter’s work, this is a shame, and illustrative of a *problem* bound up with the status quo in philosophy of religion.

### III. HOW

In this section we will identify fairly swiftly, one after another, a variety of solutions we think would, if implemented in the field as depicted in the previous section, serve to markedly improve things. Thus, we will answer the question *how* the status quo in the philosophy of religion can be changed, and for the better. Some of these solutions will be less difficult to realize than others. This means that even if you’re not *deeply* motivated to act from concern for the field as a whole, you should still fairly easily be able to find some way to help out. It also means that we — all the contributors and as many of the readers of these papers as possible — will sometimes need to act collectively, setting aside fractiousness for the good of our field. In general, readers might again think of what we offer here as a big disjunction and, if motivated by a sense of their responsibility to the perspective of the field, look for at least one disjunct they can accept and also support as true going forward. A last opening point: these solutions are not, in every case, going to map neatly onto a single corresponding problem. Exactly how they relate to the problems set out in the previous section is itself a matter for further reflection. But our proposal is that if *all* of these solutions were implemented, all or most of those problems would go away.

#### *III.1. Eliminating the religious test that currently restricts the SCP’s membership*

Perhaps no development in the past half a century has made a bigger impact on the philosophy of religion, at least in the U.S., than the creation of the Society of Christian Philosophers. While originally conceived as a group to provide support for philosophers who are also Christians, regardless of their area of expertise, it has become de facto the most powerful professional organization, at least in the U.S., for the field of philosophy of religion. As its name suggests, only Christians (or those who are willing to claim to be Christians) are eligible for membership. A positive initial change would be to eliminate this religious test by allowing those who support and welcome Christians in philosophy, even if they are not themselves Christians, to join the SCP. Some members of the organization might object to such a change, but we doubt that many will. The ethos of the organization has never been to exclude non-Christians from its meetings, or to fight some culture war. We believe that this minor change would do much to reaffirm the SCP’s history of inclusiveness and to show concern for the field of philosophy of religion as a whole. Such a message would, we think, be a powerful one.

#### *III.2. A commitment among philosophers of religion to balanced inquiry*

Our next suggested solution — a commitment to balanced inquiry — is one to which everyone can contribute individually if they so choose. Ideally, of course, the goal would be for our field to become the first area of philosophy to wholeheartedly embrace such an idea. Philosophers in general, to their credit, possess what Harvey Siegel (2009) calls ‘an evidential style of belief,’ which means they possess the disposition to seek and assess reasons and evidence and to believe on that basis. Indeed, philosophers seem to have an unusually passionate love affair with reasons. They seek reasons for beliefs that few think need reasons, and in the rare cases in which they advocate believing something without reasons, they offer extensive reasons to believe that no reasons to believe are needed. Also, to their credit, philosophers possess logical acumen: they possess the ability to accurately assess the quality of reasons and evidence. Indeed, since logic is a sub-discipline of philosophy and the careful interpretation, analysis, and evaluation of arguments is a striking feature of philosophical inquiry, it is arguable that no other discipline can compete with philosophy when it comes to logical acumen.

Having said all this, however, philosophers seem to be rather deficient, at least compared to natural scientists, when it comes to fair-mindedness. While scientists conduct experiments designed, at least

potentially, to refute their beloved hypotheses, philosophers typically act like quasi-lawyers, searching only for arguments that support their position and for objections to arguments that appear to support competing positions. Further, the positions philosophers defend so vigorously are not ones that they originally arrived at as a result of balanced philosophical inquiry. Indeed, in many cases those positions were not generated by philosophical inquiry at all. Instead, they are often accidents of birth or graduate training. Ideally, philosophers should act more like quasi-scientists, testing hypotheses by arguments they construct solely for the purpose of such testing. This, however, would require a significant cultural shift in the discipline.

The realization of this solution will depend in part on individual philosophers of religion making a serious effort to spend some of their time constructing arguments and developing positions that contribute to the development, understanding, or defense of a worldview that those philosophers do not themselves hold (Oppy 2017). This is not to say that these philosophers have to believe that all of those arguments or positions are sound or true. Again, the goal of such activity would be to test, not to convince, and the arguments in question may be ‘arguments’ in little more than the logician’s sense (sets of statements, one of which is designated as the conclusion). Expecting such change may seem unrealistic, but as more philosophers become aware that the sort of one-sided inquiry that is the norm in their discipline typically provides only the illusion of justification for their philosophical, religious, political, and ethical beliefs, a commitment to balanced inquiry or at least some significant movement in that direction may very well occur. After all, as an ideal, inquiry that seeks to challenge and not just defend basic presuppositions is far from foreign to philosophers in the Socratic tradition. It is hardly shocking, for example, that Mark Johnston (2019, 49) defines ‘the philosopher’s creed’ in the following way.

[The philosopher’s creed] is this: one of the highest purposes ever conceived for one’s embodiment, and hence for one’s existence, is to manifest the quality of one’s will in its theoretical employment, then by way of the search for refutations of one’s cherished views to come to deepen that will’s orientation toward the truth, and eventually to approach the condition of wisdom in which one’s willing in its theoretical employment, that is, one’s judgment, is just the relevant circumstantial expression of truth.

### III.3. *More clearly distinguishing philosophy-to-religion (P-to-R) aims from religion-to-philosophy (R-to-P) aims*

What we are here calling a P-to-R aim is an aim that would have us bring philosophical work, say, in ethics, metaphysics, or epistemology to bear in the understanding and assessment of religion. Here the direction of effort and influence goes from philosophy to religion. An R-to-P aim, by contrast, is one that would have us consider — as it were reciprocally — whether there is anything religion might contribute that would permit advances in ethics, metaphysics, or epistemology. Here the direction of effort and influence goes from religion to philosophy. Both give every appearance of being legitimate and indeed central aims of the field that need compromise nothing, philosophically speaking.

Aims of both sorts are implicit in work of the philosophy of religion today. For example, theories of metaphysics are used to analyze the religious doctrine of God’s timelessness (P-to-R) and arguments for the existence of God seek to establish a conclusion that would be of great metaphysical importance (R-to-P). But it would help a lot to make the distinction between these two sorts of aim explicit and news it abroad. By doing so, we would be doing and broadcasting important foundational work. This, among other things, might help everyone get clearer about how narrow contemporary work in philosophy of religion is and how philosophically important and interesting is the work that remains.

Let’s consider these things a bit more closely. The important contributions of Christian philosophers appear to be partly in the P-to-R domain and partly in the R-to-P domain, and in both domains, naturally enough, are concentrated in the area of broadly orthodox Christian religiousness. With their concern to show that nothing in philosophy impugns the rationality of Christian believers, these philosophers display the P-to-R aim, and where — as in the work of Swinburne — an attempt is made to show that certain Christian claims are probably *true* and to work out their ethical or other philosophical consequences, we have the R-to-P aim as well. Though it may seem that the work inspired by Plantinga and Wolterstorff

which attempts to determine the philosophical consequences of Christian doctrines should count as R-to-P work, in fact it does not, for this work rarely gets beyond the hypothetical — *if* the Christian God exists or *if* we are created by God for such and such purposes, then the epistemological or ethical (or other philosophical) consequences are such and such. No attempt is made to establish the antecedents of these conditionals and thus no attempt is made to establish those consequences.<sup>3</sup>

So both the P-to-R and the R-to-P contributions of Christian philosophers, though very worthwhile, turn out to be quite limited in scope, leaving much work to be done on both fronts. The P-to-R aim, fairly obviously, must also be applied both to the various non-Christian religions and to religion per se. Even in relation to Christianity there is more to be done on this front. Just for example: we are only starting to see discussion of the merits of a Christian *fictionalism* that draws on what we have learned about fictionalisms in other areas of philosophy. And the R-to-P aim, too, requires much more attention to determine what many other particular religions might contribute to philosophical understanding and also what investigation within the context of religion per se might show that is metaphysically or epistemologically or ethically or otherwise philosophically enlightening. For example, might some broad new form of realist but non-doxastic religious faith have important ethical consequences?

#### *III.4. More professional interaction between philosophers of religion and scholars in religious studies*

Familiarity with the academic study of religion including theories of religion would help philosophers of religion better understand both their own religion if they have one as well as other world religions. It would also be likely to increase their ability and no doubt their willingness to take on more of the various issues concerning religion per se that were mentioned above. Of course, an alternative proposal would be to let philosophers of religion with doctorates in Religious Studies handle all of the issues that require broad knowledge about religion, but that proposal ignores the fact that broad and deep training in philosophy makes one much better able to address all philosophical issues about religion (McKim 2017). This training is crucial because, as even a passing familiarity with work in philosophy of religion reveals, such work quickly spills out into literally every other area of philosophy.

#### *III.5. Devices for highlighting topics in the philosophy of religion per se*

Topics in the philosophy of religion per se, as noted earlier, include the definition of ‘religion,’ whether non-doxastic, fictionalist, and naturalistic forms of religion are possible; relationships between religion and philosophy, science, morality, law, art, violence, and oppression; the proper place of religion in political debate; how religion might make progress; whether all or most religions share a common propositional core, pursue any common goals, or respond to common forms of mystical or numinous experience; and the philosophical significance both of the diversity of religions and of scientific and historical work on the origins or development of religion. For these topics to play a bigger role in the work of the field, as we have seen they should, it may be necessary to deliberately target them in some way — to find devices that might enable them to ‘show up’ more visibly. One possibility would be conferences on these topics. A couple of dozen conferences, easily, would be well fed just by the list above! Special issues of journals — such as this one — could also be used, as could a website or blog devoted to ‘neglected topics in philosophy of religion.’ If enough such efforts were made, the visibility of these topics would sharply increase, as would the volume of writing on them.

#### *III.6. More attention to the deep history of religion*

Exploration by philosophers of religion of the deep or ‘big’ history of religion would mitigate the familiarism and recentism discussed earlier. Also, while this topic is historical instead of philosophical, its careful study is crucial *preparation* for some of the philosophical work that philosophers of religion want to see done. (There is an analogy here to the place of historical work on science in the philosophy of science; more on this later.) Such study might, for example, lead to better work on the nature of religion. To

3 See Schellenberg (2019).

know what religion *is*, we need to know what religion *was*. Likewise for the topic of religious progress. To see what religion *can be* — how we might reasonably expect or wish human beings to come to grips with religion (perhaps in the context of ethics) in the future of cultural evolution — it will help to see what it *has been*. And we need some sense of *all* that it has been. One thing such a sense provides is the awareness that human religion has been institutionalized for only the most recent bit of its history. Attention to religion as a *personal* condition (note that this is not to say individual; we may speak intelligibly of the personal religion of a community) may accordingly receive more of the attention *it* deserves, in the context of a larger pool of recognized instantiations.

### III.7. Broadening the education of philosophers of religion

Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to solve problems associated with the status quo in philosophy of religion — one that might absorb some other solutions, such as the one just discussed — would have us implement a shift in the very identity of the field: a shift from philosophy of religion to *history and philosophy of religion* (HPR) analogous to the shift we've seen, in recent decades, from philosophy of science to history and philosophy of science (HPS).<sup>4</sup>

Though it may at one time have been different, any university that today set itself up as studying the history of religion, evolutionary or otherwise, but offered courses only on the history of Christianity would be laughed out of town. So *today* a history of religion emphasis, explicitly linked in our universities to philosophy of religion, could *stretch* our field and help it live up to its proper mandate, which is general too but which the circumstances of its own history militate against. If we made this happen, new norms and conventions would be established favouring philosophical work on religion that is as wide as its history. Also, inquiry would be much more balanced. Why? Because the issues for, say, Christian thinkers and traditional atheists, who in this scenario more regularly encounter a complex set of alternatives, would seem less artificially simple, and because it would seem less obvious that our inquiry (or religious inquiry more generally) has achieved maturity. It would be good to make the move to HPR anyway, but the present dominance of Christian philosophy of religion clearly adds to its attraction. If successful, such a move would draw attention to the importance of other work in a uniquely powerful way, and it could powerfully motivate younger philosophers coming into the field to actually do such work, whether or not they happen to be Christians.

What sort of work? We imagine work being done, whether by historians of religion attracted to it or by philosophers or by both, on such matters as the following: religion in the Paleolithic and its relations to our definitions of religion and our beliefs about how religion can evolve in the future; the extent to which religion historically has appealed to transcendence not just transmundanity, which is compatible with naturalism; the forms that religious experience has actually taken around the world and whether they match our categories; the extent to which religiousness has involved or does involve real *certainty* or even *belief*, as it is often assumed it must do. As some of these examples already suggest, in the arguments of philosophers of religion, just as in the arguments of philosophers of science, one finds *factual presuppositions* that would benefit from historical probing and discussion. A more specific example of this might be the idea of nonresistant nonbelief, which presupposes that many people have indeed been, and in fact are, caused to fall into nonbelief by something other than resistance of God. Or perhaps we should mention Wittgensteinian anti-realism, which is often presented as true of actual historical religious individuals and communities. HPR, if implemented, could be a powerful remedy indeed for what ails us.

A shift to HPR may, however, prove difficult or impossible. Other more modest changes to how philosophers of religion are trained might be easier to implement. For example, graduate certificate programs in religious studies could be established at universities that have large numbers of graduate students interested in philosophy of religion. These programs would help future philosophers of religion

<sup>4</sup> This is not an entirely new idea: the religious studies scholar Bryan Rennie has recently suggested such an expansion and is — so far as we know — the only one so far to put something about it in writing (Rennie 2010). But our way of working with the idea is our own.

become more familiar with the academic study of religion and not just by becoming more familiar with the history of religion. They might also encourage future philosophers of religion to address relatively neglected issues in the philosophy of religion per se.

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In a review of the book we co-edited, mentioned at the beginning of this essay, Adam Green (2018) says, “The editors and authors of this volume think that philosophy of religion is in a coal pit that Christian analytic philosophers have been merrily digging for us with confessional work better suited to theology.” We want to emphasize that neither the editors of that book nor most of its authors (a number of whom are Christian analytic philosophers) actually believe this. We welcome the contributions of Christian philosophers to the field and believe those contributions have been of great benefit to the philosophy of religion. But this is compatible with believing that the field could be much improved, and we hope that everyone currently working in the field can recognize this. What we have said here reflects our own attempt to take and act on what we earlier called the perspective of the field, which has left us convinced that much of its potential has not yet been realized. We call on all those who accept the importance of that perspective and any part of what we have said to join us.

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