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On the Nature and Rationality of Agnostic Religion

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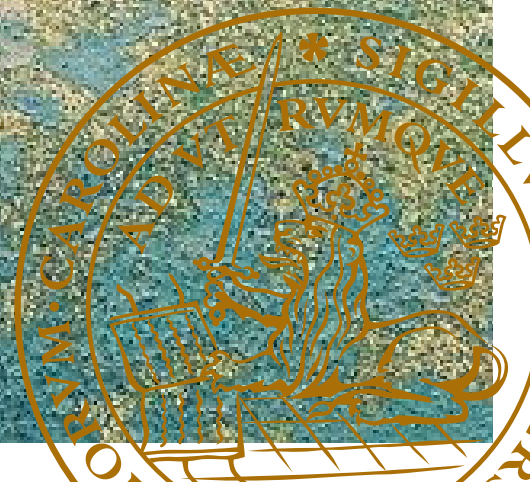
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Beyond Belief

On the Nature and Rationality of Agnostic Religion

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DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY | FACULTY OF HUMANITIES | LUND UNIVERSITY





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Carl-Johan Palmqvist



LUND
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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract <p>It is standardly assumed that a religious commitment needs to be based upon religious belief, if it is to be rationally acceptable. In this thesis, that assumption is rejected. I argue for the feasibility of belief-less religion, with a focus on the approach commonly known as "non-doxasticism". According to non-doxasticism, a religious life might be properly based on some cognitive attitude weaker than belief, like hope, acceptance or belief-less assumption. It provides a way of being religious open exclusively to the agnostic.</p> <p>This thesis consists of an introductory essay and five independent papers. The aim of the introductory essay is to provide a general background and set the stage for the discussion in the papers. Its first major part is about the rationality of religious belief. I assess three major ways of providing rational justification for religious belief: natural theology (with a special eye towards the contemporary argument from the fine-tuning of the universe), the reformed epistemology of A. Plantinga and W. Alston, and voluntarism as advocated by B. Pascal and W. James. I highlight some of the most serious problems associated with these approaches, and argue that these problems are enough to warrant an exploration of belief-less alternatives. The second major part of the introductory essay introduces belief-less religion and its two main forms: fictionalism and non-doxasticism. Both approaches are presented in some detail, including important accounts and current developments. While I would not deny that both approaches can be defended as intellectually feasible and rationally acceptable ways of being religious, I also explain why I think non-doxasticism is to be preferred over fictionalism.</p> <p>Paper I and II concerns the account of non-doxastic religion offered by J. L. Schellenberg. Paper I raises some problems for Schellenberg's analysis of propositional faith, and presents a way of handling these problems by making faith occasional. Paper II argues that non-doxasticism should be focused on traditional religion rather than Schellenberg's simple ultimism. Paper III and IV concerns non-doxasticism on a more general level. Paper III argues for the superiority of non-doxasticism over fictionalism. It contains the argument for exclusive availability, according to which only non-doxasticism (and not fictionalism) is rationally available to the pro-religious agnostic. Paper IV explores the notion of rational, non-doxastic faith, and argues for three desiderata any such faith must meet. Unlike the other papers, Paper V is primarily connected to the first part of the introductory essay, and it concerns the scope and limit of natural theology. It is tentatively argued that perfect being theism lies outside the scope of natural theology, and that its most prominent arguments at best support some kind of deism.</p>		
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Beyond Belief

On the Nature and Rationality of Agnostic Religion

Carl-Johan Palmqvist



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To Emma-Karin

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	11
List of Papers	13
1. Introduction	15
2. On the Rationality of Religious Beliefs	19
2.1 Natural Theology.....	20
2.1.1 The Argument From Fine-Tuning	22
2.1.2 The Insufficiency Problem	25
2.2 Reformed Epistemology.....	29
2.2.1 Plantinga’s <i>Sensus Divinitatis</i>	30
2.2.2 Alston’s Doxastic Practice of Mystical Perception	32
2.3 Voluntarism.....	36
2.3.1 Pascal’s Wager	36
2.3.2 James’s <i>The Will to Believe</i>	39
3. An Introduction to Belief-Less Religion	43
3.1 Religious Fictionalism.....	45
3.1.2 The Current Debate on Fictionalism	47
3.1.3 Why Not Fictionalism?.....	49
3.2 Non-Doxastic Religion.....	51
3.2.1 The Common Core	54
3.2.2 Some Important Accounts	56
3.2.3 Current Trends in the Literature on Non-Doxasticism	65
4. Summary of the Papers	69
5. Concluding Remarks	73
References	77
Appendix: Papers I-V	83

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Finally, and most of all, I want to thank my wonderful wife Emma-Karin Palmqvist and our two exceptional sons Konrad and Theodor. Your importance to me is beyond words. I love you all very much.

Borås, September 2020

List of Papers

- I. **“Faith and hope in situations of epistemic uncertainty”**
Carl-Johan Palmqvist
Originally published in *Religious Studies* 2019, 55(3): 319-335.

- II. **“The proper object of non-doxastic religion: why traditional religion should be preferred over Schellenberg’s simple ultimism”**
Carl-Johan Palmqvist
Originally published in *Religious Studies* 2019, 55(4): 559-574

- III. **“Forms of belief-less religion: why non-doxasticism makes fictionalism redundant for the pro-religious agnostic”**
Carl-Johan Palmqvist
Originally published in *Religious Studies* 2019, Early view, 1-17.

- IV. **“Desiderata for rational, non-doxastic faith”**
Carl-Johan Palmqvist
Accepted and soon to be published in *Sophia*

- V. **“Deism Revisited: on following the evidence in natural theology”**
Carl-Johan Palmqvist
Submitted manuscript

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1. Introduction

From times immemorial up until at least the middle ages belief in a divine realm populated by gods, spirits and other supramundane entities was as natural and uncomplicated as any other belief. Religious belief was virtually impossible to avoid, and the ancient mind doubted the existence of the divine no more than it doubted any other basic proposition about the world (Taylor 2007).¹ Today, we have moved far from these ancient times, and so have our belief-systems. Already in the mid-19th century John Stuart Mill noted, in the Eurocentric way typical of his time, that genuine belief in religious propositions had become increasingly hard to come by:

To find people who believe their religion as a person believes that fire will burn his hand when thrust into it, we must seek them in those Oriental countries where Europeans do not yet predominate, or in the European world when it was still universally Catholic. (Mill 2016: 80)

I am not enough of a religious sociologist to know whether Mill's claim about "oriental" religion (by which he presumably meant Buddhism and Hinduism as well as Islam) still has some truth to it, or if it was true even in Mill's own day. Perhaps history is now the only place where strong and uncomplicated religious belief can be found. What is important for present purposes is that religion is still being pursued also in the West, even though the state of its belief-foundation seems to have deteriorated for centuries. While this might seem strange, and perhaps even hypocritical to some, it is important to note that belief is not the only positive cognitive attitude one might have towards religious propositions. Working with a distinction between belief and acceptance, William Alston has claimed that:

It is my distinct impression that a significant portion of contemporary sincere, committed, devout Christians are accepters rather than believers. (Alston 1996: 18)

¹ According to Taylor, the loss of this unchallenged and axiomatic status for religious belief is the defining mark of secularisation (Taylor 2007: 3).

To bolster his claim, Alston cites several examples of religious philosophers expressing their faith in other terms than belief.² This quote from Jeff Jordan I find particularly clear:

My faith is perhaps best described as a hope rather than as a belief... I hope that the Christian message is true, and I try to act in the light of that hope. While I assent to the propositions of Christianity, I think it is best to describe my faith as hope rather than as a belief because I do not think I have rationally decisive evidence for the truth of Christian claims. (Jordan 1994: 134)

This doctoral thesis is about the kind of religiosity expressed by Jordan, a belief-less approach to religion commonly known as religious non-doxasticism. The main difference between non-doxasticism and traditional, belief-based religion lies in the different ways by which the subject relates to religious propositions (here understood in a narrow sense³ as propositions affirming the existence of a transcendent reality⁴). The non-doxasticist does not believe but bases her religiosity on an epistemically weaker cognitive attitude, like hope, acceptance, belief-less assumption, or the like. On most accounts, these attitudes are incompatible with both belief and disbelief, which is why non-doxasticism is standardly conceived as a way to be religious open only to the true agnostic.

As suggested by the subtitle, my primary concern in this thesis is the nature and rationality of religious non-doxasticism. I am aware of no general arguments against non-doxasticism, but that does not automatically imply that its rationality and feasibility is guaranteed. Many specific accounts of non-doxasticism can be revealed to be problematic when under closer scrutiny, often by violating the demands of reason. Consequently, it matters greatly how one spells out the details when moving from the general view to a specific account. An important part of my work is concentrated on trying to find an account of non-doxasticism able to accommodate for the demands of reason, as well as other important desiderata. The overarching aim is to work towards finding the most preferable and advantageous version of non-doxastic religion possible. The bulk of this work is carried out in paper I-IV. In paper I and II, it is conducted through a critical and constructive assessment of the prominent account of non-doxasticism offered by J. L. Schellenberg. In paper III and IV, I discuss non-doxasticism on a more general level.

When I started working with non-doxasticism, I was fascinated by the possibility of a positive religious engagement consistent with agnosticism.

² Obviously, such a sample might seem biased, but at the same time, we should expect philosophers to be competent to draw the necessary distinctions between belief and other attitudes in a way most people are not.

³ Understood in a wider sense, the set of religious propositions include many statements of a more mundane character, like "Sister Lucy, remember to polish the crucifix before Father George arrives". Clearly, such propositions are not of interest for present purposes.

⁴ I understand "transcendent reality" in a broad sense, as a term for any kind of sacred reality which exists beyond the merely empirical realm (rather than in the narrow sense which contrasts a "transcendent" view of God against an "immanent").

However, I thought of it as a very special kind of religiosity, a possibility almost exclusively for sophisticated agnostics like Jordan. Now, I am of a different view. I am now quite convinced that agnosticism is the appropriate stance to take towards religious matters, given the current evidence. And if agnosticism is the stance to take towards religious matters, non-doxasticism should not be viewed as a peculiar way of engaging with religion for the elect few, but rather as the best way possible (granting that belief-based religion would be better, were it rationally permissible). However, it is far beyond the scope of this thesis to back up the case for agnosticism in a satisfying way,⁵ and I will rest content with demonstrating some of the many problems associated with belief-based religion. This is my aim in the first major part of this introductory essay (a topic to which also paper V ties in).

The second major part of this essay concerns belief-less religion. The aim of this part is to introduce the philosophical field to which papers I-IV belong. While the focus is on non-doxasticism, I also present the alternate approach of religious fictionalism, and I offer some arguments on why we should prefer non-doxasticism over fictionalism (this is also the topic of paper III).

This (1) introduction is followed by the first of the two major parts. (2) “On the rationality of religious belief” concerns the question whether it can be rational to believe in the existence of God. I survey three major ways of arguing for the rationality of theistic belief: (2.1) the venerable project of natural theology, (2.2) “Reformed epistemology” with its emphasis on externalist justification, and finally (2.3) the voluntarist approach as advocated by Blaise Pascal and William James. As stated, the aim of this part is to make explicit the many problems associated with belief as a basis for religious commitment.

(3) “An introduction to belief-less religion” constitutes the second major part of this essay. This background chapter provides an overview of belief-less religion, and its two major approaches: religious fictionalism and non-doxasticism. I first (3.1) present religious fictionalism, a most radical form of belief-less religion which treats religion as fiction. I also explain why I think non-doxasticism should be preferred over fictionalism. The (3.2) presentation of non-doxasticism is more in-depth, relating several different accounts as well as some current developments in the field.

The two main parts are followed by (4) a brief presentation of the papers and the introductory essay is ended with (5) some concluding remarks. The concluding remarks sums up the discussion of both the essay itself and the papers.

⁵ For the most thorough case for general religious agnosticism of which I am aware, see Schellenberg (2007; 2019b). Schellenberg’s broad case for agnosticism is predicated on the view that considering the deep evolutionary future that might lie ahead of us, we should be intellectually humble and not make overly certain claims about the areas of reality to which we have little or no cognitive access.

2. On the Rationality of Religious Beliefs

Can it be rational to hold religious beliefs, when these beliefs are understood as affirming the existence of a transcendent, supernatural reality? Or, to put the question as it is usually put in Western culture, can it be rational to believe in God? This is the question I will assess in this part of the introductory essay. First, however, to avoid confusion, it is important to specify what we mean with the question whether it can be rational to believe in God. The question is ambiguous between several different readings since both “rational” and “believe in God” can be read in different ways.

The term “rationality” is ambiguous between several different readings,⁶ and correspondingly there also exist many different theories of rationality offering quite diverse analyses.⁷ I do not want to tie down to any specific theory concerning rationality. For present purposes, the basic idea that rationality amounts to something like doing one’s best with what one has is sufficient.⁸

It is common to distinguish between practical rationality, which concerns what is the most beneficial thing to do, and epistemic rationality, which concerns what is the most plausible thing to believe. These types of rationality are sensitive to different kinds of reason: practical rationality depends on practical reasons, while epistemic rationality depends on epistemic reasons. Epistemic reasons are standardly thought of as evidence, and the view that epistemic rationality is a matter of basing one’s beliefs on one’s evidence is commonly known as evidentialism. In what follows, if not otherwise explicitly stated, the focus will be on epistemic rationality. Likewise, if not otherwise explicitly stated, epistemic rationality will be understood in evidentialist terms.

When it comes to belief, it is entirely possible that epistemic and practical rationality point in different directions. For example, if you are a priest you will have plenty of practical reasons to believe in God (you might want to keep your job,

⁶ When trying to disambiguate the term, Alvin Plantinga lists no less than five different meanings, ranging from deontological duty to not being insane (Plantinga 1993: 132-138).

⁷ For an introduction, see Stenmark 1995.

⁸ Even though most theories go way beyond this basic idea, I am aware of no theory of rationality which does not imply it. Because even if it might sometimes be rational not to do one’s best at a specific task, that is only so because not doing one’s best is the best thing to do all things considered.

for example), making it practically rational for you to believe. You may at the same time have good epistemic reasons not to believe in God (to make things simple, let us say you have become convinced beyond doubt by the argument from evil), making it epistemically rational not to believe.⁹ It is generally agreed that only epistemic considerations are valid grounds for belief, and that a priest believing in God only to keep his job is somehow blameworthy.

“Can it be rational to believe in God?” might be understood as the question whether it can be rational to have faith in God or trust God. This is not the reading we are after. The question we are after is the question whether it can be rational to hold the propositional belief that God exists. While the former question involves both practical and epistemic rationality, this latter question is a matter of epistemic rationality only. It is also commonly assumed to be the more basic question. As pointed out by Alvin Plantinga, it seems reasonable to assume that we need an affirmative answer on this latter question for an affirmative answer on the former to be possible – you cannot rationally trust God if you do not rationally believe that God exists (Plantinga 1983: 18).¹⁰

Some further clarifications might also be in order. It is trivial that belief in God can be rational for an individual who lives in a religious society and who is ignorant concerning any criticism or arguments against her religious view. When asking whether it is rational to believe in God, we are primarily asking whether belief in God can be rational for a contemporary person who is philosophically adept and scientifically well-informed, and who is “neutral” with no prior leanings towards either religious belief or disbelief.

2.1 Natural Theology

Natural theology is one of the oldest branches of philosophy, having been practiced in the West in its current form since at least the high middle ages. It is concerned with philosophically investigating religious matters using human reason and public evidence only:

Natural theology is the practice of philosophically reflecting on the existence and nature of God independent of real or apparent divine revelation or scripture. Traditionally, natural theology involves weighing arguments for and against God’s existence, and it is contrasted with *revealed theology*, which

⁹ For a more thorough discussion on epistemic and practical rationality and reasons for belief, see Sobel (2004: 499-501) or Schellenberg (2005: 206-220)

¹⁰ This claim is not entirely uncontroversial when it comes to philosophy of religion (it is denied by philosophers like Swinburne (2005: 147-150) and McKaughan (2016: 73-74)), but if we turn to the discussion of trust in mainstream philosophy, there seems to be more of a consensus that trust needs to be doxastic (i.e. belief-based) to be rational (as expressed in Simpson 2018: 447). For a more thorough discussion, see paper IV.

may be carried out within the context of ostensible revelation or scripture.
(Taliaferro 2009: 1, italics in original)

Unlike revealed theology, which also accepts special religious evidence (most notably from revelation), natural theology is about exploring what *natural* public evidence there is for and against the existence of God, and about providing arguments based on such evidence. While revealed theology standardly appeals only to those already accepting basic religious propositions, natural theology requires no such prior commitments. Since an obvious first step when trying to answer a question like “is it rational to believe that God exists?” is to try to get clear on what evidence there is, and on what the main arguments are, the discipline of natural theology provides a suitable starting point for any such inquiry.

Natural theology is standardly focused on one specific theory of divinity called perfect being theism. According to this view God is understood as being omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good. Since this is arguably the orthodox view in most theistic religion, this focus is somewhat understandable. After all, when we ask whether God exists this is commonly the understanding of God we presuppose. However, this strong focus on perfect being theism is ultimately regrettable since other theories of the divine standardly gets neglected. This is unfortunate, since these other theories are often better supported by the evidence than perfect being theism (or so I will argue in paper V). However, for the sake of discussion, I will keep with the traditional focus on perfect being theism in this essay. This means that my conclusions in this section are also mostly limited to arguments concerning the existence of God *as traditionally conceived*.

Natural theology is a sprawling discipline. The arguments for and against the existence of God are numerous, and the major ones (like the teleological argument or the argument from evil) each come with a literature of its own.¹¹ It is far beyond the scope of this text to address everything that is of relevance here, and so I will be content to present what I perceive to be the most promising argument in natural theology today: the fine-tuning argument for¹² the existence of God.¹³ Unlike most other arguments in the field, this one builds heavily on present-day cosmology and it is presumably the most well-discussed in contemporary literature. While this one-argument-sample might not be enough to demonstrate the diversity of natural-

¹¹ For the broadest perspective, the anthology edited by Re Manning (2013) discuss natural theology from both a historical, theological and philosophical point of view. For an important anthology containing contemporary versions of no less than ten different arguments, see Craig & Moreland (2009). For a critical assessment of the arguments in their more traditional forms, see Sobel (2004).

¹² To be sure, natural theology also contains several arguments against the existence of God, like the argument from evil (for an introduction, see Howard-Snyder (1996)) or the argument from divine hiddenness (Schellenberg 1993). However, since I find the whole approach of natural theology problematic, I have chosen to focus my criticism on the difficulties of formulating the pro-arguments.

¹³ For an accessible introduction to both design-arguments in general and the fine-tuning argument in particular, see Sober (2019).

theological reasoning, it is enough to demonstrate some major general problems such reasoning faces. I am here referring to the many difficulties involved in formulating probability arguments of the kind natural theologians are usually interested in, as well as the notorious “insufficiency” or “gap” problem which means that natural theologians never reach all the way to the perfect being theism they seek.

2.1.1 The Argument From Fine-Tuning

The argument from the apparent fine-tuning of the universe is a contemporary version of the traditional teleological argument. While the traditional teleological argument argues for the existence of God from the apparently purposive ordering of the universe, the fine-tuning argument is based on the discoveries by modern astrophysics that a life-permitting universe is a highly unlikely result of a Big Bang. In other words, our universe seems fine-tuned for life:

A series of breakthroughs in physics and observational astronomy led to the development of the Big Bang model and the discovery that the Universe is highly structured, with precisely defined parameters such as age, mass, entropy (degree of disorder), curvature, temperature, density and rate of expansion... The specificity of the Universe prompted theoretical exploration of how the Universe would have been if the values of its parameters had been different. This led to the discovery of numerous “anthropic coincidences” and supported the claim that the Universe is fine-tuned for life – that is, that the values of the parameters are such that, if they differed even slightly, life of any sort could not possibly have arisen in the Universe. (Manson 2003: 4)¹⁴

The main idea of the fine-tuning argument is that these “anthropic coincidences” (henceforth AC) constitute evidence for the existence of God. While the traditional teleological argument has most often been an argument from analogy, arguing that the purposiveness of the natural world is in an important way analogous to the purposiveness of human artefacts, the fine-tuning argument is commonly cast as a probability argument.

Even though it seems intuitive to regard AC as evidence for the existence of God, reworking this intuition into a functioning argument is not without its difficulties. Ideally, we would like a strong probability argument with the capability to establish that the existence of God is more likely than not given AC, all things considered. One of the most important attempts at such an argument is due to Richard Swinburne (2004).¹⁵

¹⁴ For a more detailed presentation of the fine-tuning data, see Collins (2009: 211-222) and Swinburne (2004: 172-188).

¹⁵ It should be noted that Swinburne (2004) adopts a cumulative approach to natural theology, trying to weigh all the different arguments together, so the fine-tuning data is only part of the evidence for the existence of God he works with.

Swinburne's argument for the existence of God is formulated using Bayes' theorem. According to Bayes' theorem, the probability (P) of a hypothesis (h) given the evidence (e), is a function of the probability of the evidence given the hypothesis, multiplied with the probability of the hypothesis, divided with the probability of the evidence. That is: $P(h/e) = (P(e/h)*P(h))/P(e)$ (Swinburne, 2004: 66-72).

While it might seem uncontroversial to claim that the probability of AC given the existence of God ($P(e/h)$) is high, and that the probability of AC itself ($P(e)$) is low, the main problem with using Bayes' theorem in this context is that we must also get specific on $P(h)$, the prior probability of the existence of God. According to subjective Bayesianism, which is the standard view, such probabilities are an entirely subjective matter (Iranzo 2008: 95). But Swinburne is after an argument which in no way depends upon prior knowledge or subjective probability assignments. He argues that for a theory of everything such as theism, background knowledge is irrelevant and prior probabilities should be a matter of *a priori* considerations only:

As we deal with theories of larger and larger scope, there will be less and less background knowledge with which these theories have to fit. More and more of the observational evidence falls into the category of data that the theory needs to explain, rather than data it takes for granted in explaining other things... A 'Theory of Everything' will have no contingent background evidence by which to determine prior probability. Prior probability must then be determined by purely *a priori* considerations. (Swinburne 2004: 59-60, italics in original)

Such *a priori* considerations concern a theory's intrinsic probability; it is a matter of how probable the hypothesis is in itself. Swinburne argues that for theories of everything, intrinsic probability is primarily a matter of simplicity (Swinburne 2004: 53-61). He then proceeds to show that theism is indeed a very simple theory (Swinburne 2004: 96-109).

There is much one can object to in Swinburne's attempt to calculate the prior probability of theism. Is it really the case that background knowledge is irrelevant? Are there no other theoretical virtues than simplicity that should be considered? And most of all, is the hypothesis that God exists really a simple theory? Is not an omniscient mind which is in constant cognitive contact with everything one of the most complex things imaginable?¹⁶ Swinburne's position is controversial to say the least, and other philosophers developing the argument have adopted other methods with the explicit goal of avoiding prior probabilities.

One such philosopher is Robin Collins. His influential version of the fine-tuning argument does not build upon Bayes' theorem, but only on the much simpler Likelihood Principle.

¹⁶ The suggestion that an omniscient mind is maximally complex is due to Fawkes and Smythe (1996). For another criticism of Swinburne's attempt to prove the simplicity of theism, see Gwiazda (2009).

The core fine-tuning argument relies on a standard Principle of Confirmation theory, the so-called *Likelihood Principle*. This principle can be stated as follows. Let h_1 and h_2 be two competing hypotheses. According to the Likelihood Principle, an observation e counts as evidence in favor of hypothesis h_1 over h_2 if the observation is more probable under h_1 than h_2 . Put symbolically, e counts in favor of h_1 over h_2 if $P(e|h_1) > P(e|h_2)$, where $P(e|h_1)$ and $P(e|h_2)$ represent the *conditional probability* of e on h_1 and h_2 , respectively. (Collins 2009: 205)

Unlike Bayes' theorem, the Likelihood Principle is comparative, and its main use is to show which of two competing hypotheses the evidence favours. In Collin's argument, the likelihood of theism given AC is compared to the likelihood of naturalism given AC. The drawback of the method is that it does not show which of the two theories is the most plausible all things considered.¹⁷ But that is a price Collins is willing to pay in order to avoid calculating the prior probability of theism:

We shall claim that the evidence of fine-tuning significantly supports T [The Theistic hypothesis] over NSU [The naturalistic single universe hypothesis]; this, however, neither shows that, everything considered, T is probably true, nor that it is the most plausible explanation of the universe, nor even that it is more probable than NSU. In order to show that any hypothesis is more likely to be true using a likelihood approach, we would have to assess the prior epistemic probability of the hypothesis, something I shall not attempt to do for T. (Collins 2009: 208)

However, one might wonder if the price is not too high? Even if Collin's argument is successful, it will never tell us whether or not we should believe in God on the basis of AC. At most, it will tell us that AC gives us reason to prefer theism over naturalism, but that seems like an almost trivial conclusion, not taking us very far from the intuition with which we began.

Furthermore, this type of likelihood argument comes close to presenting a false dichotomy, since there might well be other relevant hypotheses getting more support from the fine-tuning data than theism and naturalism. For example, one might think that an omnipotent designer would have made a universe more robustly fine-tuned for life, so that life would emerge everywhere.¹⁸ If this is correct, it could be argued that we should in fact prefer a designer-hypotheses which does not postulate an omnipotent designer. And of course, Collins argument says nothing about the main rival to the designer hypothesis, which is the multiverse theory. While I do not want to deny that likelihood arguments can be formally successful,

¹⁷ Of course, one could make a likelihood argument comparing theism and naturalism on the sum of the total evidence. However, such an argument would not only be practically unfeasible, it would also lose the strong intuitive pull towards theism an argument concerning only AC has.

¹⁸ This is one of several objections against an omnipotent designer delivered by Narveson (2003: 98-99).

the limitations inherent to the approach makes even a successful argument of this type largely irrelevant when the question is what to believe.

As I hope is clear, the problems associated with both strong probability arguments (like Swinburne's Bayesian argument) and weak ones (like Collin's likelihood argument) are general. They afflict all evidentially based probability arguments concerning the existence of God. Of course, there are ways of formulating the arguments from natural theology which do not depend on probability. The traditional teleological argument is commonly structured as an argument from analogy. In this version of the argument, the seemingly purposive order of the universe is compared to the purposiveness of human artefacts. However, whether one thinks this is a strong analogy or a very weak one tends to vary with how willing one is to perceive the universe as something literally ordered, and other intuition-based arguments tend to encounter similar problems. Therefore, moving away from probability arguments to more directly intuition-based ones does not alter the conclusion that these arguments at best support religious belief only for those who already have a strong leaning against theism.

We have been forced to conclude that for the arguments for the existence of God to produce rational belief, the subject needs to already find the existence of God somewhat plausible. Since the point of our investigation is to assess whether the arguments from natural theology can make it rational to believe in God on the basis of natural evidence alone, the fact that these arguments seem to depend on prior inclinations for their success is not a very uplifting result. Because if the subject already has some leaning for or against the existence of God *before* encountering the arguments of natural theology, where does this leaning come from? It certainly cannot be based on natural evidence and argument. Therefore, it is hard to see how it can be rational in the sense we are currently investigating.

Our question is whether the arguments in natural theology can support belief in the existence of God for a subject without any prior leanings to accept or reject theism. Given the problems of formulating probability arguments to that effect, there are reasons to doubt the feasibility of such a project. However, the problems concerning the formulation of probability arguments are not the only ones plaguing natural theology. I will now turn to what I take to be the major difficulty for theistic natural theology, the insufficiency problem (which is more thoroughly explored in paper V).

2.1.2 The Insufficiency Problem

Consider again the teleological argument from fine-tuning. What is it that the evidence can be said to confirm? The existence of God? No, if the universe is fine-tuned or designed, this only suggests a designer. Postulating the traditional God of perfect being theism in fact goes way beyond what is suggested by the evidence. This objection has been with us since at least the Enlightenment, when it was championed by philosophers like Hume (2006: 35-38) and Kant (1998: 627) in

opposition to natural theology. Here follows Kant's criticism of the traditional teleological argument:

The proof could at most establish a highest architect of the world, who would always be limited by the suitability of the material on which he works, but not a creator of the world, to whose idea everything is subject, which is far from sufficient for the great aim that one has in view, namely the proving of an all-sufficient original being. (Kant 1998: 627)

The main point of the insufficiency problem is that even if the arguments of natural theology are successful up to the point when they encounter the problem, the arguments do not support belief in the God of traditional theism, but only in some lesser entity. Plantinga has forcefully demonstrated the great discrepancy between what the fine-tuning argument can at best confirm, and the theism many of its proponents wish to argue for. According to Plantinga, theism includes the following proposition (a) to (f), of which (a) only is supported by the evidence:

- a, the universe is designed.
- b, the universe is designed by exactly one person.
- c, the universe was created ex nihilo.
- d, the universe was created by the person who designed it.
- e, the creator of the universe is omniscient, omnipotent and perfectly god.
- f, the creator of the universe is an eternal spirit, without body, and in no way dependent upon physical objects. (Plantinga 1990: 109)

The insufficiency problem would perhaps not have been as problematic had it been possible to infer (b) to (f) from (a). However, that is not the case since (a) is consistent with the negation of (b) to (f). This means that the fine-tuning argument in fact supports any designer theory we can come up with to the same extent it supports theism.¹⁹

The insufficiency problem generalizes to most arguments in natural theology. For example, it hits the cosmological argument as hard as it hits the teleological. Like the teleological argument, the cosmological argument comes in many forms. Some argue for the existence of a first cause, other for the need of postulating an ultimate metaphysical ground for everything.²⁰ However, regardless of what kind of first cause or metaphysical ground the argument aims at, the point remains that

¹⁹ When considering the question if our world is really how we would expect a universe fine-tuned by an omnipotent and perfectly good being to turn out, it might perhaps even be said that a hypothesis featuring some non-theistic designer is to be preferred.

²⁰ It is common to distinguish between three main types of the argument: the Thomistic (which argues for a metaphysical ground which exists of necessity), the Leibnizian (which argues from the principle of sufficient reason) and the *kalam* versions, which argues for a first cause in time. For more on this distinction, see Pruss (2009: 25) or Craig & Sinclair (2009: 101).

postulating it is not the same thing as postulating the God of perfect-being theism, and there is no easy way to bridge the gap from the former to the latter.²¹

It is not uncommon that proponents of perfect being theism try to downplay the significance of the insufficiency problem. Consider, for example, the following remarks by Charles Taliaferro, containing no less than five such attempts.

Does this objection give pause to Christian theists? This is far from obvious. [1] If the teleological argument would generate what Kant thinks it would, this result would suffice to cause many naturalists to undergo a severe philosophical heart attack. But more importantly, [2] any evidence for theism in general will increase the plausibility of Christian theism/.../Also, [3] Christian philosophers have developed cumulative arguments for their position (Swinburne 2004) as well as [4] introduced other strategies (arguments from religious experience, reformed epistemology) that would enable the acceptance of revelation claims in the absence of natural theology. [5] The finding of natural theology that there may be some transcendent, teleological force would not give one the God of the New Testament, but perhaps it does not have to. (Taliaferro 2013, p. 392, I have numbered the different responses 1-5)

Taliaferro's remarks are directed at Kant's original objection, and they are all unsuccessful. Response [1] is irrelevant. Even if a successful designer-argument would be utterly disturbing from a naturalistic point of view, that does nothing to help bridge the chasm between the designer and God. [2] mistakenly assumes that an argument suffering from the insufficiency problem at least supports some kind of theism. Plantinga's list should make clear that this is not the case. [3] mistakenly assumes that the insufficiency problem diminishes if we increase the number of arguments. However, if the problem is general for all arguments for the existence of God, it cannot be circumvented by using the cumulative approach. "If one leaky bucket cannot hold water there is no reason to think that ten can", as Anthony Flew put it (Flew 1966, p. 167).²² [4] is irrelevant, since the strategies mentioned do nothing to help theism overcome the insufficiency problem. [5] is plainly wrong. It seems to presuppose that a successful designer argument would establish a transcendent designer, but as shown by Plantinga's list of things such an argument fails to establish, this is not the case control (for a more detailed treatment of Taliaferro, see paper V).

How serious is the insufficiency problem? Historically, philosophers working in natural theology have assumed that one must restrict one's view of God to what can be inferred using only reason and evidence. For philosophers like Hume,

²¹ However, proponents of the cosmological argument seem to work more on the problem than many other natural theologians. For example, see Craig & Sinclair (2009: 191-192) or Swinburne (2004: 149-152).

²² If one is to circumvent a weakness in an argument by adding a second argument, it cannot have the same weakness. Ten buckets with different malfunctions might well hold some water, but they cannot all be leaky in the same way.

this was the main question for natural theology, at least explicitly: “The question is not concerning the BEING, but the NATURE of GOD” (Hume, 2006: 13). On this approach, the insufficiency problem is big enough to prevent perfect being theism from being a viable position in natural theology, since the upshot of the problem is that one cannot reach the idea of an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good being given the constraints of the enterprise.

However, most contemporary natural theologians seem content to import perfect being theism from revealed theology. If this approach is accepted, the problem becomes less severe. For example, likelihood arguments like the one proposed by Collins will be largely unaffected, since even if theism goes way beyond what the evidence supports, it will still be the case that the fine-tuning data supports theism over naturalism. But should we accept this approach? On one hand, a philosophical investigation of perfect being theism can surely be motivated by the view’s popularity and historical importance. On the other hand, should we not be hesitant to accept as the default theory in a field, a view which goes far beyond what can reasonably be verified?

I have pointed to two major problems with natural theology, the problem of formulating theistic probability arguments in a satisfying way and the insufficiency problem, which should make us hesitant to view the arguments in question as arguments for the existence of God. These problems demonstrate the serious challenges facing anyone who tries to base rational religious belief on reason and public evidence. While I do not want to claim that these problems are insurmountable, I am aware of no obvious solutions, and I think they are strong enough to warrant an exploration of alternate approaches.

There are other reasons as well to question the enterprise of natural theology. For example, it rests upon a very literal understanding of religious language. God’s existence and attributes are understood in a very direct manner, as a specific hypothesis which stands in such a relation to the world, that phenomena like cosmic fine-tuning or pointless suffering can be used as evidence to confirm or disconfirm it. However, using ordinary language to describe transcendent reality is problematic, and it is often claimed that religious language is either analogical (a tradition going back at least to Aquinas) or largely metaphorical, as well as irreducible to ordinary language. Not to mention the apophatic view that only negative language can be used to describe God (we can only say what God is not). Since it is unclear whether it is at all possible to translate religious language into statements with empirical consequences on these views, it is likewise unclear whether natural theology is possible on a non-literal understanding of religious language.

Furthermore, even if we grant, for the sake of discussion, that the arguments of natural theology can lead to rational belief in the existence of God, only a small minority of all who believe in the existence of God are acquainted with the field. Most believers have no greater familiarity with the common arguments for the existence of God, and they obviously do not base their beliefs on these arguments,

or on any similar considerations to the same effect. So if natural theology provides the norm for rational belief, that is, if it is true that rational religious belief needs to be based upon reason and public evidence as suggested in the field, there will be very few rational believers. Of course, one could argue that ordinary believers might believe on the authority of the natural theologians. While I will leave open the question whether such authority-based belief is epistemically rational, I do want to point out that in reality, the number of people who believe in God on the basis of the authority of natural theologians might be even smaller than the number who believe at the basis of the natural theological arguments themselves.

This is not a conclusive objection against natural theology. Obviously, it could be the case that religious belief is standardly irrational, with the natural theologians being the exception (a view somewhat echoing the medieval standpoint that natural theology can let us see by reason what we otherwise have to take on faith). But if we are unhappy with this result, we might want to question the underlying assumptions of natural theology. Especially, we might want to question the assumption of evidentialism, that rational belief needs to be based on the available evidence. It was on this assumption we turned to natural theology to answer the question whether belief in the existence of God can be rational. But perhaps we were wrong to do so.

2.2 Reformed Epistemology

Reformed epistemology is a contemporary movement within the epistemology of religion, which has been highly influential over the last fifty years or so. Several of its key members, like Alvin Plantinga and William Alston, are prominent epistemologists, well-known for their defence of externalist theories of justification (theories according to which a subject might be justified in a belief, even if what justifies the belief is not cognitively available on introspection).²³

In Reformed epistemology, important insights from externalist epistemology are combined with traditional Calvinist claims regarding faith and reason (thereby the name “Reformed epistemology”). The result is a position which rejects evidentialism, especially in its traditional foundationalist form. Consequently, it also rejects natural theology, and the whole enterprise of showing that belief in the existence of God can be rationally based upon public evidence.²⁴ Instead, Reformed epistemology holds that belief in God can be “properly basic”, in no need of evidential justification. All that is needed is that the belief is sufficiently grounded

²³ See for example Plantinga (1993) and Alston (2001).

²⁴ It should be noted that what is rejected is the *need* for natural theology as a basis for rational religiosity. It does not necessarily follow that one must also reject the *possibility* of natural theology. Plantinga (2018) is in fact quite positive over the prospects of providing good arguments for the existence of God.

(like when our perceptual beliefs, which are also properly basic, are grounded in perceptual experience) and that there are no relevant defeaters (i.e. other beliefs which make us reject the ones that are properly basic) (Plantinga 1983).

Clearly, what is rationally acceptable belief on this picture differs greatly from what counts as rational belief according to the evidentialism presupposed by natural theology.²⁵ On evidentialism, you need evidence for your belief to be rational. The externalist theories of epistemic justification central to Reformed epistemology are more relaxed in comparison. According to this “justified until proven guilty”-approach, as long as a belief is properly basic and defeaters are lacking, it counts as rationally acceptable. Can religious belief be rational in this regard? To get clearer on that question, we need to look closer at the theories purported by Plantinga and Alston.

2.2.1 Plantinga’s *Sensus Divinitatis*

According to Plantinga’s famous externalist theory of epistemic justification, a belief is justified, or warranted²⁶ as Plantinga prefers to call it, if it is the result of a properly functioning cognitive process aimed at belief-formation.

A belief B has warrant for an agent S if and only if the relevant segments of S’s cognitive design plan (the segments involved in the production of B) are functioning properly in a cognitive environment, sufficiently similar to that for which they were designed, *and* the modules of the design plan governing the production of B are (1) aimed at truth, and (2) such that there is a high objective probability that a belief formed in accordance with those modules (in that sort of cognitive environment) is true. (Plantinga 1993: 3, italics in original)

When it comes to religious belief, Plantinga builds on Aquinas and Calvin, and claims that there is (or at least might be) a special *sensus divinitatis*, a religious sense aimed at producing beliefs about God. This “God-sense” does not work in isolation, but together with our other faculties, to produce theistic belief. For example, when viewing a beautiful sunrise, the *sensus divinitatis* might produce in us beliefs about the glory of God, creator of all things. (Plantinga 2000: 170-173).

According to Plantinga, beliefs produced by the *sensus* are properly basic, they are not inferred from the experiences they accompany, but rather occasioned or grounded by them. Since the *sensus* meets the requirement of being a properly functioning part of the subject’s cognitive design plan, the beliefs it produces are

²⁵ Given the presumption, of course, that rational belief and justified belief still amounts to roughly the same thing after the transition from evidentialism to the epistemic theories at work in Reformed epistemology. At least Plantinga seems to suppose that the notions are closely related, see Plantinga (2000: ch. 4).

²⁶ The term “warrant” is introduced by Plantinga, as a substitute for justification, in order to work around the Gettier problem. According to Plantinga (1993), warrant in general is whatever distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief.

warranted (Plantinga 2000: 175-179). However, as basic beliefs they can be rejected if the subject acquires some relevant defeater, for example if she starts believing some version of the argument from evil to be sound (Plantinga 2000: 357-358).

But why is it that many people do not believe in God, if we have such a thing as the *sensus*? On Plantinga's account, this is explained by original sin. Original sin damages and distorts human beings in several ways, both affectively and cognitively. Doing so, it prevents the *sensus* from functioning properly, and "the most important cognitive consequence of sin, therefore, is failure to know God" (Plantinga 2000: 206-216, quote 216).

I think it is important to see that Plantinga's theory primarily defends the justification of non-evidential religious belief for those who already have such beliefs. It is a defence of the view that people can be fully in their right to believe in God without being able to muster a strong intellectual defence for their view.

This means that when we ask if it is rational to believe in God and do so from a position that is "neutral" or agnostic, Plantinga will presumably answer that since we lack belief, it is not. Since religious belief is the product of the *sensus* and ours obviously is not working as it should, there is really nothing we can do to attain belief, let alone rational belief.

A further interesting question is whether, from our "neutral" perspective, the religious beliefs of the believers should be deemed rational or not? According to Plantinga, religious beliefs are presumably properly basic if true (and there are such things as a *sensus* and a God who can produce the beliefs), but *not* if they are false. If they are false (and there is no God and no *sensus*) it is hard to see how these beliefs could be properly basic (Plantinga 2000: 186-190). If not properly basic, these beliefs do not achieve the "justified until proven guilty"-status of properly basic beliefs. Therefore, it seems that from our "neutral" perspective which does not assume the existence of God, we should view religious belief as presumably non-basic, and therefore irrational if held without evidence.²⁷ That belief in God is rational only if you believe in God might seem like a strange result,²⁸ but Plantinga seems more than willing to bite the bullet in this regard.

If there is no such person as God, it is probably not the case that the process that produces theistic belief produces true belief in most of the near possible worlds. Therefore, it is unlikely that belief in God is produced by a process that is functioning properly... if theistic belief is false, it probably has no

²⁷ It should be noted that this is not a judgement made on the assumption of evidentialism. Instead, it is based on an externalist assessment of the reliability of the process leading to theistic belief. The believer will standardly view lack of theistic belief as irrational in the same way.

²⁸ However, Plantinga's view is not the only externalist theory of justification to imply that rationality is a matter of being right about the world. For example, the "Knowledge First" approach advocated by Timothy Williamson amongst others, is often understood to come with the same implications. While Williamson himself has come to embrace these conclusions almost as wholeheartedly as Plantinga (Williamson forthcoming: 23), other philosophers working in the same vein have chosen an alternate approach, rejecting any strong tie between justification and rationality (Littlejohn forthcoming: 21).

warrant... On the other hand, if theistic belief is *true*, then it seems likely that it *does* have warrant...the natural thing to think is that he [God] created us in such a way that we would come to hold such true beliefs as that there is such a person as God. (Plantinga 2000: 188-189)

He even finds the whole thing explanatory:

And here we see the ontological or metaphysical or ultimately religious roots of the question as to the rationality or warrant or lack thereof for belief in God. (Plantinga 2000: 190)

Unsurprisingly, Plantinga's view is not without its critics. Among them is Swinburne, who has criticised Plantinga for not taking evidentialist rationality into account:

Despite what Plantinga seems to say, there is a clear and all-important question about whether a belief is rational (or justified) which has nothing to do with whether it is justified by the believer's own lights or with whether it is produced by 'properly functioning' processes. In a strong internalist sense, a belief of a person S is rational if it is rendered (evidentially) probable by S's evidence. (Swinburne 2001: 207)

As noted by Swinburne, on Plantinga's view evidential arguments only play the role of defeaters, and even major atheist arguments like the argument from evil are only capable of undermining "weak" religious belief (Swinburne 2001: 5). The conflict between Swinburne and Plantinga ultimately concerns the importance of arguments and natural evidence for rational religious beliefs. While this is surely an important question, by now it seems obvious that Plantinga's approach is at least as unsatisfying as Swinburne's. A theory making religious belief rational only for the believer is not what we are looking for. Therefore, we now turn to the position advocated by Alston, where religious belief is still properly basic, but where the claims of rationality should be acceptable by all.

2.2.2 Alston's Doxastic Practice of Mystical Perception

Like Plantinga's proper-function theory, Alston's view builds on externalism regarding justification, and is closely related to reliabilism. It rests on the assumption that our ways of forming beliefs can be divided into several doxastic practices, like the practice of forming belief from sense-perception, of forming belief from memory, or of forming belief from rational considerations, to mention a few important instances. True to Reformed epistemology's rejection of classic foundationalism, Alston views these practices as irreducibly plural.

On Alston's account, a doxastic practice consists of two parts. The first part is a mechanism for belief-formation, that is, a mechanism which given some cognitive input delivers beliefs as an output:

I think of a doxastic practice as the exercise of a system or constellation of belief-forming habits or mechanisms, each realizing a function that yields belief with a certain kind of content from inputs of a certain type. (Alston 1991: 155)

The second part is a system of overrides, which is identical to the subject's background beliefs regarding relevant subject matters. The system of overrides is important, since a belief formed by the out-mechanism is only justified *prima facie* and needs to be consistent with background beliefs. If inconsistent, it is defeated.

The doxastic practice at the centre of Alston's attention is the practice of forming Christian beliefs based upon religious experience, or, to use Alston's favoured term, based on mystical perception.²⁹ Its input is mystical perception, and its output religious belief. The system of overrides is constituted by Christian theology. By defending the rationality of using and trusting this doxastic practice, Alston offers a truly intriguing defence of the rationality of religious belief.³⁰

The claim that one can rationally engage in the doxastic practice of mystical perception rests on two basic assumptions. The first is that there are no non-circular ways of proving the reliability of any doxastic practice. The second is that the rational thing to do in a situation such as ours, where we cannot conclusively affirm the reliability of our doxastic practices, is to continue using them:

Given that we will inevitably run into epistemic circularity at some point(s) in any attempt to provide direct arguments for the reliability of one or another doxastic practice, we should draw the conclusion that there is no appeal beyond the practices we find firmly established, psychologically and socially... Hence, what alternative is there to employing the practices we find ourselves using, to which we find ourselves firmly committed, and which we could abandon only with extreme difficulty? (Alston 1991: 149-150)

Alston himself thinks it is a matter of practical rationality to go with the practices we are already using. However, if we adhere to the broad view that epistemic rationality amounts to doing the best one can with what one has, epistemically speaking, I think it can be plausibly interpreted as a matter of such rationality as well. Be that as it may, it seems clear that on Alston's view, in contrast to Plantinga's, being engaged in a theistic belief-forming practice is rational even if considered from outside that practice.

It is also important to note that Alston offers several further criteria a doxastic practice must meet if one is to be rational in continuing to employ it. The practice must be socially and historically well-established, it must offer significant self-support, and it must be free of massive internal or external inconsistency (that is,

²⁹ It is far from uncontroversial to cast mystical experience as a form of perception. For a critical assessment of Alston's view, see Papas (1994).

³⁰ For Alston's full account of this practice, see Alston (1991: ch. 5). For his account of religious experience of the relevant kind, see Alston (1991: ch. 1).

the beliefs formed by the practice must not be massively inconsistent, and there must not be massive inconsistency when the beliefs are compared to the output of other practices). The only condition Alston finds problematic with respect to mystical perception is the external inconsistency since there are competing mystical traditions in the different world religions. However, as long as none of these traditions seem preferable compared to the others, Alston concludes that one can rationally continue employing one's own practice. Given, of course, that it satisfies every other criterion (Alston 1991: 270-278).³¹

Interestingly, it seems that the problem of religious diversity partly forces Alston to take a position close to Plantinga's, where it is mainly those already engaged in a religious belief-forming practice who are rational in continuing that practice. It is far from obvious that it would be rational for an agnostic to start practicing one of the many different practices of mystical perception. However, as it stands, Alston's account is flawed in at least three major ways. First, we have good reasons to reject the criterion of being historically and socially well-established. Secondly, Alston's case for the significant self-support of mystical perception is highly questionable. Thirdly, and this is the most fundamental problem, Alston's position depends on the controversial assumption that every major religion has its own practice of mystical perception. I will now spell out these objections in detail.

The idea that a doxastic practice needs to be socially and historically well-established seems overly conservative. It seems to imply that embarking on new and bold epistemic endeavours is basically an irrational thing to do. However, many of our doxastic practices are historical inventions, being the result of the pioneering activity of prominent founding figures. Think for example of the scientific doxastic practice. According to Alston's standards, early modern scientists like Copernicus or Galileo must be considered largely irrational. The point generalizes to the practice of Christian mystical perception. Early Christians too must have been irrational when trusting their mystical perception. For example, on Alston's view, since Christianity was neither socially nor historically well-established at the time, Paul should not have formed any beliefs from his profound mystical experience on the road to Damascus.

The idea of significant self-support is reasonable enough. Surely, it speaks for the reliability of ordinary sense-perception that we are able to navigate the external world, and surely it speaks for the reliability of our memory-practice that we are able to reconnect with people from our past or find things where we remember putting them. However, the self-support Alston mentions in relation to mystical perception is of a rather different kind:

This significant self-support amounts to ways in which the promises God is represented by the practice as making are fulfilled when the stipulated

³¹ Obviously, this "solution" has not been without its critics. For example, see Pasnau (1993).

conditions are met, fulfilled in growth of sanctity, in serenity, peace, joy, fortitude, love and other "fruits of the spirit". (Alston 1991: 276)

Alston's idea is that God is represented by the practice as promising "fruits of the spirit" to the practitioner, and when the practitioner receives these "fruits", it should count as significant self-support in a way analogous to how our ability to navigate the world supports sense-perception. However, I do not think that very many religious experiences are of God promising "fruits of the spirit". For those few who actually have such experiences, the "fruits" might function as self-support as Alston claims. For everyone else engaged in the practice, the connection between formed beliefs and the alleged self-support will be indirect at best, as the "promises" will only figure in the system of overrides. Also, it seems highly plausible to suggest that these "fruits of the spirit" could have natural causes, as it is often suggested that religion can have these effects even if its central beliefs are false.³² This further weakens the analogy with sense-perception, since there are no straight-forward alternative explanations to the fact that we are able to navigate the world. That a "promise" which is only theoretically associated with mystical experience is "fulfilled" in a way that can easily be explained even if we reject the practice as unreliable is not a very good form of self-support.

The main problem with Alston's account is its suggestion that we should treat mystical perception in different religions as different doxastic practices. Alston suggests an individuation of religious practice based upon the theological system of overrides rather than the belief-forming mechanisms. However, since we must suppose these theological belief-systems to be formed by the output of the belief-forming mechanisms (Alston gives us no other source for religious belief), it seems to me that there is no other ground for the individuation than the inconsistency itself. This is clearly an unacceptable way of individuating doxastic practices. Massive internal inconsistency is supposed to be a sign that the practice in question is unreliable. One cannot simply divide an inconsistent practice into several competing but internally consistent practices and claim that the resulting beliefs can be rationally held. Therefore, mystical perception, as a doxastic practice, should be deemed unreliable.³³

³² This is a basic assumption in religious fictionalism, see Eshleman (2005: 188) or Le Poidevin (1996: 111-112).

³³ However, there have been some intriguing suggestions as to how mystical perception could be reworked into a rationally acceptable, unified practice. Philip Quinn (1995) has suggested that instead of traditional theological systems, mystical perception should have a system of overrides which allows for the truth of all religions. His suggestion is that the Kantian philosophy of religion formulated by John Hick in his famous "An Interpretation of Religion" (1989) could constitute such a system. Another, even more radical solution has been advocated by Robert Adams (1994), who has suggested that mystical perception could be practiced without any metaphysical system. I think another plausible strategy to meet the diversity problem is to move from belief-based religion to non-doxasticism. However, I am not sure such a move would save the doxastic practice approach advocated by Alston.

With Reformed epistemology comes the promise of making religious belief rational, by rejecting the constraints of evidentialism in favour of externalist, process-oriented theories of justification. However, we have seen that on Plantinga's account, belief in God can only be assumed to be properly basic if God exists. From a "neutral" or unbelieving point of view, belief in God remains irrational. Alston's account comes with greater promises, since it purports to show how the doxastic practice of Christian mystical perception can be rational all things considered. However, his treatment of the diversity problem is seriously flawed, undermining the whole project.

2.3 Voluntarism

Religious belief that is rational as in being epistemically justified has proven hard to come by. Ideally, we would have wanted to base such belief on evidence, but the insufficiency problem and the problems associated with formulating theistic probability arguments makes the evidentialist route hard to follow. Alas, the route suggested by Reformed epistemology, which eschew evidentialism in favour of externalist theories of justification has not proven much better. At best it can allow for religious beliefs to appear justified for those already possessing them, while they still must be deemed unjustified from a more "neutral" or agnostic perspective. At this point we might wonder if there is any way for religious belief to be rational even though it lacks epistemic justification. Perhaps we were too quick to dismiss practical rationality?

2.3.1 Pascal's Wager

The obvious place to start a discussion on the practical rationality of theistic belief is the famous "wager" presented by seventeenth century decision-theoretical pioneer Blaise Pascal.³⁴ According to Pascal, considerations of practical rationality should make one willing to "bet" on the existence of God. Here follow some key passages from Pascal's text, aimed at capturing the gist of his argument:

"God is, or He is not." But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here... Yes; but you must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked. Which will you choose then? Let us see... there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; where-ever the

³⁴ Pascal's *Pensées* contains three different versions of the wager. I will limit myself to discussing the third version, which is the one commonly singled out for discussion. For a presentation of the three wagers, see Hájek (2017).

infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all. (Pascal 1958: 66-67)

Note that Pascal begins with the claim that reason cannot decide the question whether God exists or not. In other words, he presumes that reason-based investigations concerning the existence of God end in agnosticism. As I hope is clear by now, this is a claim I very much endorse.

Pascal goes on to tell us that taking the wager is obligatory. You must either believe in God or not. What is this supposed to mean? Did he not just claim that agnosticism is the proper response to the question whether God exists? But if so, how can it be obligatory to believe or disbelieve? To understand this turn, it is important to see that there has been a slight change of perspective. What Pascal emphasizes now is that belief, in a sense, is binary. Either you believe in God or you do not. It is an on-off, all or nothing view of religious belief, building on the traditional Christian view that salvific faith is constituted by or at least requires belief in God. From this perspective, sitting on the fence and postponing judgement in practice amounts to the same thing as disbelief because it has the same practical consequences. When the question of interest is whether you have the belief required for salvation, atheism and agnosticism might well be treated as one and the same.

Since a choice is demanded, but epistemic rationality cannot tell us what to believe, Pascal turns to practical rationality. He makes a decision-theoretical estimation of what we stand to gain by believing in God, and what we might lose if we do not. His basic idea is that since we might gain something of infinite value if God exists, and since whatever we might lose if we bet on God and God does not exist holds only a limited, finite value, it is always rational to bet on God.³⁵

Pascal's wager is one of the most discussed arguments for the existence of God. Many objections have been raised, including the many-gods-objection, which basically criticizes Pascal for wrongly claiming that there is only one religious option to consider (Mackie 1982: 203). Clearly, the choice becomes far less easy if there are several religious options and only one of them is true. Other objections have centred upon the underlying calculations and decision-theoretical issues. For present purposes, however, the most important objection to Pascal's wager is that belief is not a voluntary state of mind. We simply cannot choose what to believe. As colourfully put by Schellenberg:³⁶

All instances of belief are in an important sense involuntary. Beliefs are a bit like depression, coming over you or happening to you under certain circumstances, instead of being something that you do...If you doubt what I

³⁵ The passage I have quoted contrasts with another passage, where Pascal rather claims that we have nothing to lose by betting on God. Since it can be argued that one is wasting one's life by betting on God if God does not exist, this other passage seems highly problematic. It also strikes me as philosophically less intriguing than the infinite value approach.

³⁶ While doxastic voluntarism was once a common view, it is now almost universally rejected. For another forceful rejection, see Alston (1989).

say, you can experiment by trying to overcome your doubt and choosing to really believe what I've said, just like that. (Schellenberg 2013: 40)

It must be noted that Pascal too rejected doxastic voluntarism in this strong sense. However, there is also a weaker or indirect sense of doxastic voluntarism, which only claims that one might actively influence one's beliefs by taking the right course of action. On standard interpretation, weak doxastic voluntarism means that one can acquire a desired belief by amassing just the right evidence, and perhaps also by taking precaution not to receive any counterevidence. This strategy seems highly objectionable on epistemic grounds. If one starts choosing which evidence to acknowledge based on what one wants to believe, one will surely end up biasing one's investigation, and a belief which is the product of an intentionally biased investigation can never be rationally legitimate. It might also be questioned if this strategy actually work, since you will presumably know that you have biased your investigation, thereby giving you a strong overriding reason to doubt its result.

However, the weak doxastic voluntarism advocated by Pascal is not about amassing the right evidence, but about living a life based on the assumption that what we want to believe is true:

'I am forced to wager... and am so made that I cannot believe. What, then, would you have me do?'... Convince yourself, not by increase of proof... Learn of those who have been bound like you, and who now stake all their possessions. These are people who know the way which you would follow, and who are cured of an ill of which you would be cured. Follow the way by which they began; by acting as if they believed, taking the holy water, having masses said, etc. Even this will naturally make you believe. (Pascal 1958: 68)

Pascal's answer to the involuntariness objection is that one should start living a religious life, partaking in the mass etc., in the hope of bringing about the right beliefs about God eventually. Unfortunately, this "fake it until you make it" approach to religious belief seems even more objectionable from an epistemic point of view than the ordinary, self-biasing reading of weak voluntarism. That one should come to believe p regardless of the evidence, simply by acting as if p is true, surely seems like a case of wishful thinking turning into wishful believing.

However, there is another reading available, which makes the weaker doxastic voluntarism invoked by Pascal considerably more reasonable. Building on an idea originally from James (2014: 19), Schellenberg has suggested that there might be propositions whose truth you can only learn by having (non-doxastic) faith and, most importantly, living as if they were true:

There are propositions – call them 'epistemically faith-contingent propositions' – that are true but the discovery of whose evidence is contingent on having faith that they are true and living thereby. Take, for example, the proposition that your new acquaintance is trustworthy. It may only be by

actually having faith that he is and acting thereupon – that is, by trusting him – that you will get the evidence that proves it. (Schellenberg 2009: 221)

The idea of “epistemically faith-contingent propositions” is intriguing, and it surely seems that a reading of Pascal which presupposes that this is the reason one should take the mass etc., even though one does not believe, is the most charitable. One should take the mass to put oneself into a position where important truths might be learned. It is also worth noticing that on this interpretation, the point of the wager itself can hardly be to create belief, but rather to persuade the agnostic to put herself in this position where belief becomes possible.³⁷

Here, it is important to stress that “faith-contingent propositions” can only work as envisioned as long as agnosticism remains, and it only constitutes an epistemic possibility that they might lead to belief. If *S* believes wholeheartedly that she will gain belief *p* by living as if *p* is true, this belief is in fact already sufficient reason to believe *p* right now. If *S* disbelieves that she will gain belief *p* by living as if *p* is true, she will presumably lack motivation to try to live “as if” *p* is true. However, if she is uncertain, and it remains an epistemic possibility to her that she might gain belief *p* by living as if *p* is true, only then will she have the right motivation to try to live “as if” *p* is true while at the same time lacking sufficient reason to believe *p* right away.

One must also notice that what we are left with here is an argument for belief-less religion (to which we will soon turn), on the grounds that such an engagement with religion might, in due time, produce belief. It is an unusual argument, since belief-less religion is standardly taken to imply that the subject’s epistemic attitudes (like disbelief or viewing religion *A* as an epistemic possibility) remain fixed. However, since proponents of belief-less religion commonly acknowledge that belief-based religion would have been better, had it been available, I do not think it is an argument many would reject. Also, the requirement of agnosticism fits well with non-doxasticism (more on this later).

Before turning to discuss belief-less religion, we must also take a look at another prominent voluntarist: William James.

2.3.2 James’s *The Will to Believe*

The view put forth by James in the famous essay *The Will to Believe* from 1897 in many ways echoes the position advocated by Pascal more than two-hundred years before. However, while Pascal is mainly interested in providing the practical reasons we need to believe in God (or at least strive to believe in God), James is primarily occupied with the question when it is rationally acceptable to believe even though

³⁷ Obviously, I would not claim that this is the correct reading of Pascal. I only claim that it is an interesting reading which makes Pascal relevant even though doxastic voluntarism is standardly rejected, and a reading which makes the wager even more relevant on a non-doxastic approach.

the evidence is insufficient. His basic claim is that we can permissibly believe by an act of will, for “passional reasons”, when two conditions are met:

Our passional nature not only may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is [1] *a genuine option* that [2] *cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds*. (James 2014: 13, my italics and numbering of the conditions)

The second of these conditions might seem straight forward enough. James makes it clear that it is only when a matter cannot be decided on intellectual grounds that one might “choose” what to believe. It is the same assumption of initial agnosticism as we find in Pascal’s statement that “reason can decide nothing here”.³⁸ But what about the first condition? What does James mean by a genuine option? On this point, James is uncharacteristically clear:

Options might be of several kinds. They may be – 1, *living or dead*; 2, *forced or avoidable*; 3, *momentous or trivial*; and for our purposes we may call an option a *genuine* option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind. (James 2014: 9, italics in original)

A genuine option is an option (that is, a choice between two or more hypotheses) which is living, momentous and forced. But what does that mean?

That an option is living means that it is a choice between living hypotheses, that is, hypotheses which the subject considers live or real possibilities, as opposed to mere logical possibilities. At the risk of oversimplification, a live possibility is an epistemic possibility which you actually regard as a possible candidate for truth. Obviously, as made clear by James, which possibilities are live ultimately depends on the person considering them “deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker” (James 2014: 9).³⁹

That an option is momentous means that it has a great deal of impact on your life. What you choose is not a trivial matter (James’s late nineteenth century example concerns whether you should join Nansen’s expedition to the North Pole). To count as momentous, the option needs to be unique and the choice irreversible (James 2014: 10).

What does it mean that an option is forced? It means the same thing as Pascal was after when claiming that the wager is obligatory, namely that, practically

³⁸ However, things are a bit more complicated on James’s view, since our epistemic reasoning is not independent from our passional nature. According to James, we have two competing epistemic duties, to believe what is true and to avoid believing what is false, and epistemic reason alone cannot decide which one to follow and when. Should we be epistemically bold, or should we be risk averse? That, according to James, can only be decided by our passional nature (James 2014: 16).

³⁹ For more on what determines whether an epistemic possibility is live or not, see Palmqvist (2020b).

speaking, there is no neutral position. It is an option where it is not practically possible to “sit on the fence”, since doing so also counts as taking a stand.

According to James, all three considerations apply to the situation most of us face when considering religious belief. When faced with the question whether we should believe basic religious propositions or not, this is a genuine option reason alone cannot decide (James 2014: 19-22).

In general, I do concur with James’s characterization of the “religious option”. As already stated, when it comes to the existence of God, I think epistemic considerations naturally leads to agnosticism. I also think that for most people in the West today, even in highly secular countries, the notion that there might be a religious reality remains a live possibility. And the option whether to commit religiously or not is surely forced in the sense purported by James. The only thing I am less sure about is whether the choice could be considered momentous. I do not contest the life-changing potential, but is the option really unique or irreversible? There does not seem to be anything stopping me from postponing my decision, or from changing my mind again and again. Unlike an opportunity to join Nansen’s polar expedition, it is hardly like religion is going to disappear if I do not make up my mind. Surely, advocates of religion would claim that one needs to commit and never look back, but does that alone make the option momentous? However, since I think what matters most is that the choice is living, forced and live-changing, I will not press this point further.

I do not want to deny that it could be rationally permissible to choose to believe in such circumstances as James describes, but I do want to deny the basic assumption that we *can* believe in this way. Taken at face value, James’s view clearly requires the stronger kind of doxastic voluntarism, and that theory is simply not realistic.

James himself thought that criticism such as this is mainly a matter of considering a candidate for belief which we do not consider a live hypothesis. That is, that the objector considers some unbelievable superstition and rightly points out that we cannot believe *that* by an act of will (James 2014: 21). However, it seems clear to me that it is impossible to believe by an act of will even if what one tries to believe is a live hypothesis one desires to be true. Had it been otherwise, I think religious doubt or loss of faith would have been a very sparse phenomena indeed. As would non-clinical depression, and many other states originating in negative and hurtful beliefs.

Presumably, James would have been better off had he claimed, like Schellenberg, that religious propositions might be “epistemically faith-contingent” (it seems clear to me that James himself primarily thought such considerations to hold in matters of mundane or secular faith, like faith in a friend or in a spouse, see James 2014: 19). This kind of weak doxastic voluntarism can make sense of James’s view to at least the same degree it can make sense of Pascal’s, while at the same time re-casting it as belief-less religion.

While most of James's and Pascal's considerations might seem eminently plausible when considered in isolation, they fall flat when the basic assumption of doxastic voluntarism is rejected. However, as the discussion of "epistemically faith-contingent" propositions makes clear, reinterpreting these views as belief-less religion could make all the difference. On both fictionalism and non-doxasticism, many of the main attitudes that one can have instead of belief are clearly voluntary, like acceptance, propositional faith or make-believe. Therefore, I suggest that the proper response for an agnostic in the situation described by James and Pascal is to make a belief-less religious commitment. In that way, the subject can engage with religion without violating either the demands of reason or the limits of her cognitive powers. Relieved from the assumption that religion needs to be belief-based, the views advocated by James and Pascal start to make considerable sense.

3. An Introduction to Belief-Less Religion

In the previous part of this introductory essay, I demonstrated some of the more serious problems associated with the major ways of trying to provide a positive answer to the question whether it can be rational to believe in God. The most straight-forward approach is natural theology, where contemporary pro-religious philosophers try to base belief in God on natural evidence and probability calculations. As we saw, these probability calculations are hard to conduct in a satisfying manner, and the insufficiency problem makes it doubtful whether it is really God these arguments would point at, could the calculations be fixed. Reformed epistemology rejects the evidentialism basic to natural theology. According to Reformed epistemology, belief in God can be properly basic and need not be evidentially based if produced by a reliable process. However, since Alston's project of showing how religious belief might be rationally based on mystical perception fails to handle the problem of religious diversity, we are left with Plantinga's proper function theory, and that theory only makes religious belief rational for those who already possess it. According to the great voluntarists, Pascal and James, religious belief might be based on practical reasons when the epistemic reasons are inconclusive. They suggest that it can be rational to simply choose to believe in God, even though the evidence is insufficient to produce belief. While I do not want to deny that it could be rational, I do not think it is actually possible to believe by an act of will as suggested by these philosophers (also, on the most charitable reading, the voluntarist position already cross the line to belief-less religion).

All the positions discussed in the previous part had one assumption in common, namely the idea that a religious commitment need to be based on belief in some way or other. Let us call this assumption "doxasticism". Even though I make no pretention that my considerations in the previous part should be nearly enough to conclusively dismiss doxasticism, I do think they are enough to warrant exploratory work in other directions.⁴⁰ Therefore, we now leave doxasticism behind, and turn our attention to belief-less religion.

⁴⁰ In belief-less religion, doxasticism is rejected. Another possible, but perhaps even more radical, route to go is to reject supernaturalism instead. If so, one still claims that religion should be belief-based but rejects the idea that religion's proper object is a transcendent or supernatural reality. On this approach, called "naturalistic religion", one worships things in the natural world,

To get a first feel for the main idea behind belief-less religion, it might be helpful to contrast it with some content-oriented approaches. The question of how one can relate positively to religious discourse if one is unable to believe its central propositions has been with us since the Enlightenment. Many theologians have responded to this challenge, mostly by addressing the content of their belief-system. The most straight-forward approach, one frequently used in Protestant so-called “liberal theology”, is to simply reduce the content of religious discourse until it becomes believable. For example, during the nineteenth century it was common practice among theologians to reject most supernatural claims of Christianity, and instead promote Jesus as a moral and spiritual teacher (Thiselton 2002). Another approach has been to reinterpret religion as being about something else than a supernatural reality. The most famous of these accounts is presumably Bultmann’s project of *demythologization*. Bultmann rejected the literal truth of the mythological worldview of the Bible, and advocated a reinterpretation along the lines of existentialist philosophy (Bultmann 1958).⁴¹

Belief-less religion works the other way around, as compared to the content-oriented approaches. Instead of thinning the content of religious discourse, it suggests a thinning of the attitude one has towards that discourse, substituting belief with some epistemically weaker attitude. For example, consider the Christian idea of a resurrection of the dead. What should we make of it? A reductive liberal theologian would deny its literal truth and assure us that the important thing is that we live on in the memory of God and in the memory of our loved ones. The psychological reinterpreter would have us believe that what the idea actually conveys is the possibility of experiencing a “new life” when all feels dead and hollow inside. On belief-less religion, the content of the idea remains intact, but instead of belief, one only hopes for resurrection, or treats it as an inspiring fiction.

First a clarification. I will address two major belief-less approaches to religion, fictionalism and non-doxasticism.⁴² Strictly speaking, it might seem reasonable to label all approaches which reject doxasticism as non-doxastic. It might even be argued that only an approach which rejects all need for belief in p could be properly called non-doxastic, while an approach requiring the belief that p is an epistemic possibility should rather be called sub-doxastic (Eklund 2017: 28). Seen this way, only fictionalism is properly non-doxastic, while the approach commonly called non-doxasticism is in fact sub-doxastic. However, this is not the terminology

like the flow of energy through the universe. See Crosby & Stone (2018) for an introductory anthology.

⁴¹ To avoid oversimplification, it must be noted that Bultmann held that religious language is irreducible in the sense that it cannot be fully translated into non-religious language, and that there exists a transcendent reality of which one cannot speak directly. On possible ways to interpret Bultmann’s position, see Jeffner (1972: 60-64).

⁴² There might well be other approaches to religion, philosophical or theological, which can rightfully be considered belief-less. However, in contemporary analytical philosophy of religion, the two approaches here under consideration are by far the most well-formulated and most commonly discussed.

standardly used, and to avoid confusion, I will stick with the ordinary labels. This is also the approach I have chosen in the papers (for more on the distinction between fictionalism and non-doxasticism, see paper III).

3.1 Religious Fictionalism

Fictionalism is a common approach in many areas of philosophy. It is a way of making sense of the continual usage of some discourse which we find in some way beneficial, but for which we have significant reasons to doubt its literal truth. For example, there are well-known defenders of fictionalism concerning topics such as morality, science and metaphysics.⁴³ Since we do have reasons to suspect that religious discourse might not be literally true, and since, arguably, a religious life comes with many benefits, it is no surprise that this approach has been adopted by several philosophers of religion, in later years⁴⁴ most notably by Andrew Eshleman (2005; 2010; 2016) and Robin Le Poidevin (1996; 2003; 2016; 2019).⁴⁵

The idea behind religious fictionalism is to treat religion as a kind of fiction and religious life as a game of make-belief. The main thrust of the approach is captured in the following quote from Robin Le Poidevin:

To engage in religious practice is, on this account, to engage in a game of make-believe. We make-believe that there is a God, by reciting, in the context of the game, a statement of belief. We listen to what make-believable accounts of the activities of God and his people, and we pretend to worship and address prayers to that God... What remains, when the game of make-believe is over, is an awareness of our responsibilities for ourselves and others, of the need to pursue spiritual goals, and so on. (Le Poidevin 1996: 119)

Like other kinds of fictionalism, religious fictionalism is above all a view on language. Proponents often contrast fictionalism with other non-realist approaches, where the original meaning is abandoned and religious language is reinterpreted, and it is considered a strength of the approach that it is able to preserve original meaning (Le Poidevin 1996: 112; Eshleman 2005: 187-188).

What separates fictional language use from ordinary use is that the former is not truth-normed, meaning that its truth-value is irrelevant for its usage. It is important to see that this claim does not commit the fictionalist to the stronger view that religious language is not truth-apt, i.e. that it lacks truth-value. Most fictionalists

⁴³ For moral fictionalism, see Kalderon (2005b). For scientific fictionalism, see Van Fraassen (1980).

For a more thorough introduction to fictionalism, see Kalderon (2005a) or Sainsbury (2010).

⁴⁴ For an influential earlier version of fictionalism, prompted by the verificationist theory of meaning, see Braithwaite (1955). Braithwaite's account has recently been assessed by Le Poidevin (2019: 17-26).

⁴⁵ For a closely related view, see Deng (2015). For a very similar but more text-oriented approach to fictionalism, see Lipton (2009). For an important contemporary criticism, see Cordry (2010).

agree that religious language has a truth-value, and only hold that this truth-value is irrelevant.⁴⁶ Thereby, the fictionalist can hold that the fiction is literally false but deny that this has any relevance.

If not truth-normed, what functions *do* religious language have? The common fictionalist answer to this question comes in terms of “instrumentalism”: language is a tool, an instrument used to achieve certain things. To this picture, Eshleman adds “expressivism”, according to which religious language is also used to express certain important values (Eshleman 2010).

The rejection of a truth-norm for religious language means that being a religious fictionalist is entirely consistent with being an atheist. It is a way for the atheist to engage positively with religion (it is standardly conceived to be a position one can take as an agnostic as well, but questioning this assumption is my primary objective in paper III).

It is common to distinguish between two main types of fictionalism: revolutionary fictionalism and hermeneutic fictionalism. Revolutionary fictionalism is when we decide to start viewing as fiction a discourse we have previously regarded as truth-normed, presumably because we have gained some reasons to doubt its literal truth. Hermeneutic fictionalism is when we reject a truth-normed interpretation of a discourse and claim that it was never meant to be taken literally. In other words, it is when we discover that the best interpretation of a discourse is to view it as fiction.⁴⁷ For religious fictionalism, it seems clear that the revolutionary interpretation is the one to prefer. Even though religious language is rich with symbol and metaphor, and even though it might sometimes be hard to pin down exactly what is meant to be taken literally and what is not, there is no denying that religion traditionally has been seen as bearer of the most important truths there are, and that most adherents still view religion this way. To suggest that this has just been a big misunderstanding seems presumptuous to say the least.

Since the main point with fictionalism is that one should be able to continue to use a language which is beneficial in some way, one might ask what it is that the fictionalist is hoping to receive by her commitment? It is mainly the spiritual side of religion the fictionalist is after. In the passage above, Le Poidevin exemplifies with “an awareness of responsibilities” and “the need to pursue spiritual goals”. According to Eshleman, the fictionalist seeks to “be recreated in the image of God”:

Like the realist, the fictionalist may be guided by the ambition to be recreated in the image of God. This aspiration does not require that God exist, but it does require a conception of God, i.e. a representation of a perfected state of

⁴⁶ A notable exception is in fact to be found in Le Poidevin’s original case for religious fictionalism in *Arguing for atheism* (1996: 108). While this work constitutes the starting point for the contemporary debate concerning religious fictionalism, most commenters have disagreed with Le Poidevin on this matter. He now seems to have changed his own view as well (Le Poidevin 2019: 61).

⁴⁷ For a criticism of the distinction, see Jay (2014). Note that Jay uses the term “non-doxasticism” so broadly that it includes all belief-less religion.

being. The religious aspiration to imitate God is not an aspiration to wield god-like power or obtain perfect knowledge, but to construct a life in which the internal aspects of one's self (e.g., one's desires and values), as well as its relation to others and the wider natural world, are fully integrated and harmonious. (Eshleman 2005: 192)

Here, one might ask (as I do in paper III), whether the symbol of God really carries the same strength on fictionalism as it does on realism? In other words, can a fictionalist engagement with religion really deliver what the fictionalist is after? However, we should be careful not to demand too much from fictionalism. As pointed out by Eshleman, we do not need religious fictionalism to deliver the same goods as realism for it to be a legitimate enterprise. Instead, "all that is required is the minimal thesis that the practice of a fictionalist form of religion is a means to promote human flourishing" (Eshleman 2005: 195).⁴⁸

It is also commonly acknowledged that the fictionalist needs this kind of external motivation for it to be rational for her to make a fictionalist engagement with religion (Deng 2015: 201; Le Poidevin 2016: 185-187). Acting for fictional reasons only is supposedly a mark of irrationality and doing so while realizing that one acts on a fiction is presumably a worse offence against reason than acting on fiction while being delusional, like Don Quixote. However, I do think it is a mistake to claim, as some proponents of fictionalism sometimes seem to do, that independent justification is needed for every single religious action. As I mention briefly in my review of Le Poidevin's *Religious fictionalism* (Palmqvist 2020d), a fictional engagement with religion only requires holistic justification, i.e. an overarching justification for the entire commitment. If such justification is present, there is no need to have independent motivation for individual actions.⁴⁹

Finally, note that the question with which we began in section 1, whether one can rationally believe in God, becomes a non-issue on fictionalism. Whether we engage in fictionalist religion or not is entirely a question of which practical reasons we have for doing so. Rejecting the truth-norm means leaving all epistemic standards behind.

3.1.2 The Current Debate on Fictionalism

The fictionalist approach to religion is still very much a minority view, and as a relatively young approach, it is still a contested issue whether religious fictionalism is a feasible position.⁵⁰ In recent years, we have seen a new development where fictionalists are beginning to address religious issues which at first glance might be

⁴⁸ Also see Deng (2015: 203-209).

⁴⁹ I elaborate this point in a minor article which unfortunately is only available in Swedish (Palmqvist 2019c).

⁵⁰ For example, see the debate between Eshleman (2005; 2010) and Cordry (2010).

dismissed as irrelevant for the approach, like the problem of evil.⁵¹ As a brief introduction to the current debate, we will now take a closer look on some stock objections against religious fictionalism, as well as some of the attempts at re-orientation.

Some stock objections

Many objections have been raised against the project of religious fictionalism, and several potential problems or problematic assumptions have been brought to attention. Some issues, like the question regarding what kind of motivation a fictionalist need, primarily concern how the details of fictionalism are best spelled out. Others, however, are more serious, concerning the feasibility of the entire enterprise. The fictionalist's capacity to make a religious commitment has been questioned, as has the fictionalist's use of religion language.

One important problem concerns the fictionalist's ability to participate in a religious community. Objectors standardly stress the difference between realist and fictionalist religion. It has been suggested that the fictionalist is engaged in an altogether different project than the realist believer (Harrison 2010: 55). It has also been suggested that since the fictionalist uses religious language in an instrumentalist and expressivist fashion, and the realist uses it to ascertain religious truths, no real communication will be possible and the fictionalist will be like an actor trying to play a role in a setting all other participants take seriously (Cordry 2010).

In response to objections such as these, proponents of fictionalism tend to stress three things. First, the fictionalist is not supposed to "pretend" to be a believer in a way that deceives her religious community. Secondly, the fictionalist would naturally choose a more liberally oriented congregation where the emphasis on religious truth is weaker and the acceptance for non-belief stronger. Thirdly, and most importantly, there is a great bit of continuity between realist and fictionalist use of religious language. For example, Eshleman claims that while religious language undoubtably has a truth-normed use for the realist, it commonly has instrumental and expressivist functions as well. The fictionalist is not inventing new functions for religious language but tries to capitalise on the non-truth-normed functions already present (Eshleman 2010).⁵²

Another pressing concern regarding religious fictionalism is why an atheist should engage in a religious fiction at all, in order to reach some spiritual or moral ends? Why not use secular language and non-religious instruments to reach the same goals? To this, the fictionalist reply is that religious language contains symbols which cannot be reduced to non-religious language (Eshleman 2005: 92).

⁵¹ For a discussion on the afterlife, see Eshleman (2016), for treatments of the problem of evil, see Robson (2015) and Le Poidevin (2019: 46-55).

⁵² This crucial point is easily overlooked. For more on the distinct functions of religious language, and how these functions might be understood theoretically, see Jeffner (1972).

As I make clear in paper III, I think the claim that religious symbolic language is irreducible leads to inconsistency, when taken together with the very plausible assumption that a fictionalist needs reasons independent from the fiction to justify her engagement. Since the fictionalist is driven by non-religious motivation, to achieve some non-religious goals, there seems to be no room for irreducibly religious concepts. However, I do not think religious fictionalism requires an irreducibility thesis. It presumably can be defended as one kind of fiction amongst others, and just like we need not defend the “irreducibility of literature” to justify reading a novel, we should need no special reason to engage in religious fiction.

Fictionalist re-orientation

In recent years, fictionalists have started to explore issues which might seem surprising given the core assumptions of the approach. Most notably, there has been a growing interest in the impact of the problem of evil on fictionalism. The assumption that the problem of evil becomes irrelevant by the move from realism to fictionalism has been seriously questioned. It has been objected that if the fictionalist does not include evil into her fiction, she will miss out on much of religious life, not being able to react religiously on severe negative events (Robson 2015: 355-356). It might be suggested that the problem could be easily overcome by providing a revised, coherent version of the religious view one adheres to. However, such a solution has been forcefully rejected by Le Poidevin who suggests that to make possible existential struggle on fictionalism, we should allow for religious fiction to be paradoxical (Le Poidevin: 2019: 46-55).

Another recent development is due to Eshleman, who has begun exploring whether the afterlife can be a useful fiction. According to Eshleman, the coming kingdom of God can be one such useful fiction. The idea is that a moral agent can be strengthened in her good work, if imagining or pretending that it will be brought to perfection by God (Eshleman 2016). While I think the afterlife must be included in a religious fiction, I am doubtful whether it can be a useful fiction. I am especially doubtful of Eshleman’s idea that one’s morally good work will improve by pretending it will be brought to perfection. For example, I do not think you become a better policeman if you continuously pretend that Batman will take over after you have done your best.⁵³

3.1.3 Why Not Fictionalism?

Religious fictionalism provides a way to engage with religion consistent with epistemic reason (since the former lacks relevance on fictionalism), letting us answer the question whether religion can be rationally permissible in the positive. However, while I have done some work on fictionalism (as in paper III), and while

⁵³ I made this point in my presentation “Heaven and Hell on Belief-less Religion” during the British Society for Philosophy of Religion conference in Oxford, in September 2019.

my assessment of the view is generally favourable, it is not the view I am ultimately defending. Why is that?

Defenders of fictionalism tend to agree that belief-based religion would have been superior to fictionalism,⁵⁴ had it been a feasible option. Fictionalism is therefore defended, not by the claim that it is the best approach to religion, but by the claim that it is the only tenable option left:

Realist justification of religious practice is an option that has already been rejected, on the grounds that theological realism is untenable... The instrumentalist justification of religious practice is superior, simply because it is not based on dubious metaphysical assumptions. (Le Poidevin 1996: 119-120)

Proponents of non-doxasticism, on the other hand, standardly claim that fictionalists are moving too fast when assuming that fictionalism is the only route after the abandonment of doxasticism. As Schellenberg puts it:

I'm always at least a teensy bit suspicious that the thinkers in question [i.e. the fictionalists] have already written off notions of transcendence as objectively a failure – that it's in part because they have done so that this idea [i.e. fictionalism] appeals to them. It seems to represent, for them, the only live religious alternative. (Schellenberg 2019b: 14)

What is implied in Schellenberg's comment is that there are other alternatives the fictionalists are neglecting. Like non-doxasticism.

There are really two issues at stake here, which we should be careful to separate. It is commonly acknowledged that fictionalism can run on both atheism and agnosticism, while non-doxasticism requires agnosticism. Therefore, the first issue we should consider is whether agnosticism concerning the divine is a feasible option, or if atheism is the only reasonable position. The second issue is which of the two approaches of fictionalism and non-doxasticism is the superior one. It should be noted that for the second question to be relevant, we need to answer the first in favour of agnosticism. And for Schellenberg's criticism to be accurate, we also need to answer the second question in favour of non-doxasticism. Only if agnosticism is feasible and non-doxasticism superior do we have any reason to criticise the fictionalist in the way Schellenberg does. As it happens, I do think that Schellenberg is right in his criticism, and that the position it presupposes is true.

The first part of this essay was dedicated to demonstrating that we have reason to at least tentatively adopt agnosticism due to the many problems facing religious belief. Unfortunately, I do not have the space to do the same concerning religious disbelief (i.e. atheism).⁵⁵ Therefore, I will rest content with pointing out that the

⁵⁴ However, in his most recent work on the topic, Le Poidevin (2019: 44-46) plays with the idea that fictionalism might have some advantages over belief-based religion.

⁵⁵ For a case for agnosticism where it is made explicit that one should be as agnostic concerning naturalism and atheism as one is regarding religious claims, see Schellenberg (2007).

move from belief to outright atheism is commonly taken too fast. Just because one does no longer believe, disbelief is not automatically warranted. Disbelief requires as much justification as does belief. To assume $\neg p$ just because one lacks evidence for p is fallacious reasoning, an argument from ignorance.⁵⁶ When one lacks conclusive reasons for belief either way, agnosticism is the proper stance.

In paper III, I develop the idea that non-doxasticism is superior to fictionalism, making the latter approach redundant for the pro-religious agnostic. Here, I will only point out that on non-doxasticism, the realist assumptions of belief-based religion are preserved, and so the non-doxastic adherent is commonly viewed as being part of the same project as the believer, although on a weaker cognitive ground. This means that on non-doxasticism, religion is still about achieving goals such as alignment with ultimate reality and salvation, and not only moral and spiritual development. *Ceteris paribus*, this surely seems to make it a superior religious option compared to fictionalism.

In all, while I do not think that there is anything inherently wrong with religious fictionalism, I do not find it the best option available. As long as we have reasons to prefer agnosticism over atheism, we should also prefer non-doxasticism over fictionalism.

3.2 Non-Doxastic Religion

Non-doxasticism is an approach to religion which constitutes a kind of middle-ground between traditional doxastic religion and fictionalism. It rests on a realist interpretation of religion, but it rejects the traditional idea that a religious life must be based upon belief. Instead, epistemically weaker attitudes such as faith, hope, assuming or acceptance serve as the cognitive ground of religion. However, the exact nature of the attitude which is to replace belief varies greatly between the accounts, and the field offers many competing analyses of non-doxastic faith.

Not only is non-doxasticism compatible with agnosticism, in a sense it even requires it since the attitudes on which it rests are generally considered inconsistent with both belief and disbelief. On non-doxasticism, an agnostic stance is not a religious dead-end, but a kind of door opener, closing the door only on belief-based religion while opening it to another kind of religious landscape.

Proponents of non-doxasticism generally embrace the idea from Pascal and James, that when the epistemic reasons are inconclusive and leave the subject an agnostic, practical reasons might be brought in to motivate a commitment. That means that the rationality of a non-doxastic engagement with religion is governed by factors having to do with both epistemic and practical rationality.

⁵⁶ In my experience, people with no philosophical training who initially claim to be atheists often accept this when it is pointed out to them, claiming that “well, in that case, I guess I am an agnostic”.

From the perspective of epistemic rationality, it is important that the religious view in question constitutes an undefeated epistemic possibility. One's epistemic reasons must give the religious view one considers some probability of being true, without warranting full belief. An atheist cannot be a non-doxasticist, but neither can a believer. From the perspective of practical rationality, the subject needs practical reasons motivating her religious commitment. These practical reasons might be the achievement of some goods, natural (like an increased moral awareness) or supernatural (like reaching Nirvana).⁵⁷ Other possible non-epistemic reasons include a love for the idea of God, or a longing for divine justice.

The dependence on both epistemic and practical rationality makes a non-doxastic religious commitment semi-voluntary. What we perceive as epistemic possibilities depends on our beliefs, and these are not voluntary states. One does not become an agnostic by choice. However, the commitment itself, which is governed by practical reasons, is voluntary. One has a choice to make, if one is to remain a "pure" agnostic or make a non-doxastic commitment.

To get the general idea of non-doxasticism, a comparison between a traditional Christian believer and a non-doxastic Christian might be illuminating. Imagine two churchgoers participating in the celebration of the mass. The believer participates because it is the right thing to do, according to her religious beliefs. Obviously, the content of these beliefs will vary somewhat depending on which theological tradition she belongs to, but they will standardly include that her participating puts her into communion with God, as well as other Christians, and that it is vital for her salvation etc. The non-doxastic believes none of these propositions, but neither does she disbelieve them. She regards them as epistemic possibilities, and she hopes that they will turn out to be true. According to most accounts, she has also decided to have faith that they will turn out to be true. Her faith enables her to act, and so she partakes in the mass hoping that it will put her into communion, and that there will be salvation for her (if, and this is a big if indeed, the epistemic possibility that Christianity is a true religion turns out to be true).

Historical proponents of non-doxasticism

While the current debate on non-doxasticism only goes back to the late 20th century, its main ideas are not exactly new.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ In a recent article (Palmqvist 2020a), I have argued that one might also commit non-doxastically to avoid supernatural bads (like hell) if one considers such things epistemically possible. I also argue that natural goods can be "nullified" by earthly disadvantages like religious persecution.

⁵⁸ In this subsection, I explain why Kant and Mill might be viewed as historical forerunners to contemporary non-doxasticism. Here, one might question if I should not also include Kierkegaard? Should we not understand the qualitative leap (or "leap of faith" to use the popularized term Kierkegaard himself did not use) one must take to be a Christian according to Kierkegaard as an example of a non-doxastic commitment? I am hesitant to do so. Since much of Kierkegaard's work is written under pseudonym, and since his use of both humour, irony and poetry is extensive, it is not easy to pin-point his exact position. It seems clear, however, that

Kant is the earliest philosopher of which I am aware who has formulated a view in line with the main thrust behind non-doxasticism. Kant famously claimed that he “had to deny knowledge to make room for faith” (Kant 1998: XXX) and that the central religious question was not what may I believe but rather “What may I hope?” (Kant 1998: 833). Not only did he claim that religion is the domain of faith and hope *rather* than knowledge, he also suggested that epistemic reason leaves us agnostic when it comes to religious matters. Echoing Pascal (and in line with later philosophers such as James and contemporary non-doxasticists like Schellenberg), Kant famously claimed that when epistemic reason cannot decide what we should believe, we should consider practical reason. As explained by Kantian scholar Robert Merrihew Adams:

In Kant’s view the inability of our theoretical faculties to prove the truth or falsity of religious claims leaves room for our practical reason to determinate our religious stance. (Adams 2018: viii)

Kant was no full-fledged non-doxasticist. His practical postulate that we ought to accept the existence of God for practical reasons is commonly interpreted in terms of belief, suggesting both doxasticism and voluntarism in a way reminiscent of James and Pascal. However, Kant went further in a non-doxastic direction that these philosophers, not least by contrasting faith with knowledge and by framing the religious question in terms of hope. In fact, the core ideas of non-doxasticism are all present in Kant: epistemic agnosticism, reliance on attitudes such as faith and hope, and dependence on non-epistemic reasons for taking a religious stance. I have already suggested that Pascal and James might fruitfully be reinterpreted along belief-less lines, and this is even more the case when it comes to Kant.

Another early proponent of non-doxasticism is John Stuart Mill. In the highly fascinating essay *The Utility of Religion* from 1874 (Mill 2016), Mill begins with the insightful observation that it is only when we start to doubt the truth of religion that we experience the need to consider its practical benefits:

The utility of religion did not need to be asserted until the arguments for its truth had in a great measure ceased to convince. (Mill 2016: 70)

Kierkegaard emphasises the absurd and paradoxical in religion to a point where one must ask if a rational person could even consider its truth an epistemic possibility. Unlike Pascal and James, Kierkegaard does not seem to suggest that one can make a voluntary commitment only when intellectual reasons are inconclusive, he seems to suggest that one can and should make a voluntary commitment against one’s intellectual reasons, by “believing against the understanding” (Kierkegaard 2009: 195). Therefore, Kierkegaard’s “fideism” seems to constitute a much more radical position than non-doxasticism or the voluntarism of James and Pascal, both which require epistemic possibility. I am no Kierkegaard scholar, but I suspect that he would reject the basic premise of the non-doxastic project, that religion should be an epistemically rational endeavour, at least in the sense that it does not conflict with the demands of reason.

Mill held that rational considerations concerning religious matters could leave one an agnostic at best. In *The Utility of Religion* he argues not for traditional supernatural religion, but for us to have a religious devotion towards humanity itself. It is this naturalistic “Religion of Humanity” which is his main concern. However, at the end of the essay he worries that some might not be content with humanity as their object of devotion. This is where non-doxasticism comes in. Mill suggests that the religion of humanity might be combined with some religious view one considers an undefeated possibility.⁵⁹

There is for those who need it, an ample domain in the region of the imagination which may be planted with possibilities, with hypotheses which cannot be known to be false... The contemplation of these possibilities is a legitimate indulgence, capable of bearing its part, with other influence, in feeding and animating the tendency of feelings and impulses towards good. (Mill 2016: 118)

Here, we explicitly find the idea of a religious engagement based upon epistemic possibility, which is vital to non-doxasticism, again together with the idea that such a commitment might be made for practical reasons.⁶⁰

3.2.1 The Common Core

When it comes to spelling out the details of non-doxasticism, there are almost as many accounts as there are philosophers working on the approach. This diversity aside, there exists a common core to non-doxasticism, a kind of smallest common denominator view to which all non-doxasticists adhere (even though, of course, there is some variety in how it is formulated). Before turning to the individual accounts and the difference between the major positions, let us take a closer look at these shared assumptions.

The common core of non-doxasticism boils down to two conditions.⁶¹ The first condition is about motivation. It is commonly held that the subject must desire *p*, which on any reasonable interpretation means that the subject must desire the *truth* of *p* (what would it even mean to desire an epistemic possibility but not its truth?). However, it is sometimes suggested that desire is not always enough, since we might have dysfunctional or “dirty” desires (like the smoker who tries to quit

⁵⁹ Curiously enough, Mill suggests not traditional Christianity but some dualistic religion, like that of the ancient Manicheans. The reason is that according to Mill, dualism is much more coherent with the world as we experience it than is traditional theism (Mill 2016: 116-120).

⁶⁰ The view proposed by Mill shares striking similarities with the view on non-doxastic faith advanced by Schellenberg, according to which faith consists in imagining an epistemic possibility as being true.

⁶¹ I first formulated these conditions in paper II and used them again in paper III. To avoid a possible misinterpretation of which I was made aware after I wrote paper II, the second part of ND2 “...and neither believes nor disbelieves *p*.” was added in paper III. Here, for similar reasons, I have further elaborated ND1, making explicit that it concerns the truth of *p*.

who desires to have a cigarette or the motor sport enthusiast who secretly desires to witness a deadly accident)⁶² on which we do not want to base any consciously chosen pro-attitude. To amend for that, we can add that alternatively, the subject might view p as an overall good thing:

ND1: S desires the truth of p , or judges that p being true is an overall good thing.

Note that there is nothing in ND1 which denies the possibility of pursuing non-doxastic religion for purely instrumental reasons, as long as these reasons depend upon the truth of p . You can be a non-doxastic theist if you desire some supernatural goods that only God might bring, like resurrection and everlasting life. But if you are only in it for natural goods⁶³ and lack any desire for your religious view to be true, you cannot be a non-doxasticist but only a fictionalist.

The condition has been challenged by Lara Buchak, who has presented us with the following example:

Consider an individual whose friend brings her news that the individual's child has been kidnapped and that the individual must pay a ransom to rescue him: it is felicitous to say that the individual pays in part because she has faith that her friend is telling the truth, but she of course prefers that the friend be lying. (Buchak 2014: 53)

Buchak suggests that ND1 is incorrect since the individual will not judge the news her friend brings "an overall good thing". However, the objection seems to conflate propositional faith with relational. Clearly, the individual in the scenario has faith in her friend, not in the proposition "My child has been kidnapped" or even the proposition "My friend is correct when telling me my child has been kidnapped". If relational faith is at all reducible to propositional faith, it will be to a statement like "My friend is trustworthy and cares for me". If we take care not to conflate the question of the friend's trustworthiness with the issue of the child's well-being, the individual in question would have no reason to prefer this latter statement being false.

The second condition is about epistemic possibility. The core idea here is that the subject must be agnostic, in the sense that she lacks outright belief both that p and $\neg p$, therefore regarding the truth of p an epistemic possibility:

⁶² These examples are due to Muyskens (1979: 17-18) and Bovens (1999: 679).

⁶³ I have recently suggested this distinction between natural and supernatural goods, since when considering the rationality of a belief-less engagement with religion, we have strong theoretical reasons to separate the benefits of religion which depend on its worldview being true from those which do not (Palmqvist 2020a). It can be contrasted against Malcom's (2018) similar distinction between temporal and eternal goods which fails to capture the important difference between truth-dependent and truth-independent benefits, since a supernatural benefit like a blessing might still be temporal.

ND2: *S* believes *p* to be epistemically possible and neither believes nor disbelieves *p*.⁶⁴

Now, there are many ways in which we might spell out this epistemic possibility, and on this issue proponents of non-doxasticism tend to disagree. Some opt for a very wide sense of epistemic possibility, including everything which is “neither known nor justifiedly believed to be false” (Schellenberg 2009: 8).⁶⁵ Others suggest a narrower sense, only admitting as epistemic possibilities propositions with a “non-negligible chance of being true” (McKaughan 2013: 13).

Before continuing to discuss the details of full-blown accounts of non-doxasticism, I want to highlight an interesting feature of the common denominator view. It so happens, that this common core of non-doxasticism coincides with the standard account of hope. This means that hope should be understood as the common denominator of non-doxasticism, so that if you have any non-doxastic pro-attitude at all towards *p*, you also hope that *p*. Since arguably hope is a non-doxastic attitude in its own right, this also means that it is possible to not go beyond the minimal view but rest content with hope alone, and that a person satisfying ND1 and ND2 already is a non-doxasticist (I rely heavily on this assumption in my main argument in paper III).⁶⁶

3.2.2 Some Important Accounts

I will now turn to the details of contemporary accounts of non-doxasticism. While there are many writers on non-doxasticism I have been forced to leave out, I hope to cover the most important views. To make it possible to see how the approach has

⁶⁴ This way of formulating ND2 requires that one understands belief as “outright” belief rather than as something which comes in degrees and is based on probability. I think there are good reasons to prefer this view. It escapes the problems of assigning threshold-values associated with Locke’s thesis, and it avoids lottery paradoxes. If for whatever reason one still prefers to think about beliefs in degrees, one would have to rework ND2 to exclude only beliefs and disbeliefs with a high degree of certainty.

⁶⁵ For an even wider account, which suggests that non-doxastic faith can even be combined with disbelief, see Whitaker (2019).

⁶⁶ However, as I was made aware after publishing paper III, the standard account is under severe pressure due to the fact that it seems unable to distinguish hope from despair. This problem has spawned a new literature on hope, and the common suggestion is that we need to add a third condition to the account. The debate is developing in a direction which naturally leads the thoughts to the post-Gettier search for a fourth condition to the analysis of knowledge. Important contributions include Bovens (1999), Meirav (2009), Martin (2014), Calhoun (2018) and Kwong (2019). I have suggested that rather than adding a third condition, one might qualify the condition regarding epistemic possibility, and replace the broad notion of epistemic possibility with the Jamesian notion of a live possibility (Palmqvist 2020b). I argue that this move both solves the despair problem and retains the unity between hope and non-doxasticism (granted, of course, that we go for the narrow Jamesian notion of epistemic possibility in non-doxasticism as well).

developed, I have tried to present the accounts in chronological order, as far as possible.

Accounts in terms of hope

The contemporary discussion on non-doxasticism dates back to the late 20th century. In the earliest accounts, pioneers such as James Muyskens (1979) and Louis Pojman (1986) put forth the idea that hope might play the role usually filled by belief in a religious life.

According to Muyskens a religious engagement might be rationally based on hope rather than faith (the latter being understood as a belief-based attitude). He offers the following extended analysis of hope:

We have the following set of necessary [and sufficient] conditions for “S hopes that *p*.”

- (a) “S desires that *p*”
- (b) “It is not the case that *p* is not preferred by S on balance, or that S believes that *q*, which he prefers on balance, is incompatible with *p*.”
- (c) “Neither *p* nor not-*p* is certain for S.”
- (d) “S is disposed to act as if *p*” (Muyskens 1979: 18-19)⁶⁷

Condition (a) is simply the desire-component of hope, and (b) serves to qualify (a) as to exclude cases like the recovering alcoholic (Muyskens offers the very similar example of a smoker who hopes to quit but desires a cigarette), so (a) and (b) are roughly equivalent to ND1. Condition (c) is the epistemic possibility criterion, here understood in a very wide sense (arguably, the wide sense is more reasonable when considering hope than faith).

Condition (d) must be rejected. As made explicit by Daniel McKaughan, hope does not always come with a disposition to act as if what one hopes for is true. If you have a lottery ticket and hope to have won the great prize (the winner has been drawn but you are still ignorant),⁶⁸ you will under standard circumstances not have any disposition to act as if the million-dollar jackpot is yours (McKaughan 2013: 113). Some things one can hope for are simply so unlikely that acting as if they are true becomes irrational. Without (d), Muyskens’s analysis does not move beyond the minimal account in any significant way.

While Muyskens suggests we replace belief-based faith with hope, Pojman’s idea is that we can base our faith on hope rather than belief.⁶⁹ This has become the path preferred by most non-doxasticists; instead of replacing belief-based faith with

⁶⁷ In the original, the conditions are numbered 5a-5d since it is the fifth suggestion for analysis Muyskens considers. To avoid confusion, I have omitted the number “5” from the labelling.

⁶⁸ McKaughan’s original example concerns a lottery where the winner has not been drawn. However, since Muyskens’s account concerns hope regarding the unknown rather than the future, I have changed the example accordingly.

⁶⁹ For another philosopher discussing faith in terms of hope, see Sessions (1994: 114-128).

another attitude, one argues that faith can be properly based on something else than belief. As far as I am aware, this move was first suggested by Pojman. His analysis of hope, however, is very similar to Muyskens's:

Hope involves belief in the possibility of a state of affairs obtaining...
Hope precludes certainty...
Hope entails desire for the state of affairs in question to obtain or the proposition to be true...
If one hopes for p , one will be disposed to do what one can to bring p about.
(Pojman 1986: 162)

The first three conditions correspond roughly to ND1 and ND2. The condition about action is not as strong as in Muyskens's account. However, one must note that Pojman's account is centred on future-oriented hope while Muyskens mainly treats hope concerning the unknown. While I would not deny that future-oriented hope often comes with a disposition to act,⁷⁰ hope regarding the unknown does not, and that is enough to reject any action-condition if we presume a unified account of hope covering all instances. This does not mean that hope never comes with a disposition to act, only that such a disposition is not a defining trait or necessary condition for hope.

To distinguish it from belief-based faith, Pojman calls the kind of faith which is based on hope "experimental faith". He explicitly holds that this faith is compatible with agnosticism, and it is characterized by living "as if" what is hoped for is true. The label "experimental faith" is meant to emphasise this faith's tentative nature, and the fact that one is supposed to be able to hold it while still searching for new evidence regarding the truth of what is hoped for. Pojman also claims that while holding such faith is incompatible with belief that God exists, the subject of experimental faith has the same kind of faith *in* God as the believer (Pojman 1986: 169-171).

Pojman's account is an important contribution in many ways, and the emphasis on living as if has been taken up by many accounts which have followed, as has the idea of non-doxastic faith based on some cognitive attitude weaker than belief. However, I do find the idea of analysing faith in terms of hope mistaken, since we have good reasons to keep the attitudes separated. In ordinary language and folk psychology, the attitude of faith is normally conceived as much stronger than hope, and as enabling action in a way hope does not. At the same time, as I argue in paper I, hope is not subject to the same problems as faith. If we keep the attitudes separated, hope can be an option in situations where faith is unavailable.

⁷⁰ If so, this must be a disposition which often fails to be manifested in actual action. For example, I might hope that my favoured candidate gets elected, but since I am lazy and do not care overly much, I skip voting and stay at home watching TV instead. Or I might hope for the positive evolution of the human race into something more magnificent in the far future, even though there are no actions I can undertake to bring about this development.

Also, it seems that Pojman is moving too fast when he suggests that one might “live as if” and have “faith in” based on hope alone (see papers I and IV for more details). Since acting on hope is problematic and anything but required, it seems that we need a more firmly action-grounding attitude than hope if such a practical religious commitment is to be warranted.

Faith based on acceptance

Another important and relatively early contribution is due to Alston (1996; 2007). His account of non-doxastic faith builds heavily on the distinction between belief and acceptance as it is explicated in *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* by L. Jonathan Cohen (1992).

According to Cohen, belief and acceptance are two very basic and also very different attitudes, and the failure to properly distinguish between the two is the source of much confusion in epistemology. Belief is a passive cognitive attitude, a disposition to have the mental feeling that something is the case. It is at its core an involuntary attitude. Acceptance, on the other hand, is an active, voluntary attitude one can take to some proposition. Accepting p means using it as a premise in reasoning or action, either on a single occasion or as a prolonged policy. What one accepts is a matter of *both* epistemic and practical rationality, and what one believes is a matter of involuntary cognitive function. Most of the time, we tend to accept the propositions we believe and vice versa. But it is fully possible to accept something we do not believe, or to have a belief we do not accept (Cohen 1992: ch. 1).

Obviously, it is the special case of acceptance without belief which is of interest to the non-doxasticist. Alston suggests that religious faith might be properly based on acceptance rather than belief. To get from acceptance to propositional faith, two more conditions need to be met. Unsurprisingly, these conditions are variations of ND1 and ND2:

1. The acceptor of p must consider the truth or realization of p to be a good thing...
2. To count as faith that p , S 's acceptance that p has to be less than ideally or fully supported by reason, evidence, or experience (Alston 2007)

Alston stresses the similarities between belief-based and acceptance-based faith. He explicitly holds that a subject having acceptance-based faith can live a religious life on par with the religious life of the believer:

The person who *accepts* the doctrines is not necessarily inferior to the *believer* in commitment to the Christian life, or in the seriousness, faithfulness, or intensity with which she pursues it. The acceptor may pray just as faithfully, worship God just as regularly, strive as earnestly to follow the life enjoined on us by Christ. (Alston 1996: 17)

In a passage which at first might be read as criticism against Pojman, Alston rejects the characterization of the non-doxasticist as acting “as if”:

This is not a matter of resolving to act *as if* the doctrines are true, while not really taking seriously the idea that they are true... It is only the unthinking assumption that *belief* exhausts the possibilities for a positive attitude towards the articles of faith that gives rise to the judgement that the acceptor is engaging in an elaborate game of make-believe or pretence. (Alston 1996: 18, italics in original)

However, it seems that Alston’s real target here is fictionalism rather than Pojman’s hope-based faith. It is the objection that the acceptor is pretending or playing a game of make-believe he wishes to forestall, and in doing so he is perhaps the first to draw a clear line between non-doxasticism and fictionalism.

Many contemporary defenders of non-doxasticism have followed Alston and opted for attitudes which lie close to Cohen’s acceptance. However, these philosophers have standardly chosen other labels for their preferred attitudes, like belief-less assumption (Buckareff 2005; Howard-Snyder 2013a; McKaughan 2016).⁷¹ Cohen’s account is extensive and comes with several theoretical commitments which might become problematic in the religious case, like context-dependency or sensitivity to evidential reasons (Cohen 1992: 12-14). Therefore, it does not seem far-fetched to suppose that avoiding these problematic aspects of acceptance might be part of the motivation of going with some other, similar attitude.

Faith as imagining what might be true

According to Schellenberg’s account, propositional non-doxastic faith consists in adopting a policy of imagining that an epistemic possibility is actualised. He offers the following analysis of such faith:

S has faith that *p* ... is synonymous with the conjunction of the following propositions:

- (1) *S* lacks evidence causally sufficient for *S* to believe that *p*.
- (2) *S* considers the state of affairs reported by *p* to be good or desirable.
- (3) *S* tenaciously and persistently represents the world to herself as including that state of affairs.
- (4) *S* voluntarily and committedly adopts a policy of assent toward that representation—or, more broadly, toward *p*. (Schellenberg (2005), 138-139)⁷²

⁷¹ It should be noted that Howard-Snyder and McKaughan, both who have written extensively on non-doxastic faith, seem more interested in other aspects of non-doxastic faith than its proper analysis, and both also seem sympathetic to an umbrella account.

⁷² As I explain in note 3 to paper I, in Schellenberg (2005) where this analysis is first presented, it includes a fifth condition which is lacking in subsequent work (see Schellenberg 2009: 3-4 and

Condition (1) and (2) correspond roughly to ND1 and ND2. (3) is the central condition, telling us what it is to have faith, namely, to represent the world to oneself in a certain way. In other words: having faith that *p* means imagining that *p* is true. But not any imagining will do the trick, it must be sustained by a policy of commitment towards the imagined picture of reality – the policy of voluntary assent requested by (4). Schellenberg paints a vivid picture of how the different conditions come together in imaginative faith by using the secular example of a runner, far from his optimal shape, who is warming up to an important race:

Think of a runner who is considering whether he will do well in the important race that is about to begin. Loosening up and stretching behind the starting line, he broods about how on this day of all days his condition is not exactly favourable to success, because of various physical ailments. (1) Going over the relevant evidence, which at first he is inclined to treat very negatively, he notices that it does not *establish* that he must fail... But all in all the evidence on which he reflects still is insufficient to cause in him the belief that he will do well; it takes him from disbelief to doubt but no further. At this point he realizes that he will have to do something about his frame of mind if he is to have any chance of beating the odds. (2) Winning the race, or at least placing in the top three, would obviously be a good thing; so he tells himself to contemplate on that good thing for a bit. (3) As he focuses his attention on it, the unsettling feelings associated with his doubt recede to the background; there is no longer any room for them at the forefront of his consciousness. (4) Keeping that picture in place before his mind as he positions himself with the other runners, he mentally affirms over and over that it corresponds to the way things are: “Yes, I will do this, yes, I will do well”. (Schellenberg 2005: 129-130, italics in original, numbers added)

I will not assess Schellenberg’s propositional faith here, since that is the main topic of paper I.⁷³ Instead, I will complete the picture by also introducing what Schellenberg calls “operational faith”. While propositional faith is “faith that” something is the case, operational faith is “faith in”. When it comes to this kind of faith, Schellenberg follows the standard view which identifies it with trust (Schellenberg 2005: 106-109). He offers the following analysis of religious operational faith or religious trust, in terms of a disposition to risk-taking action:

“*S* has faith in *x* (a putative ultimate and salvific reality)” is equivalent in meaning to the conjunction of the following propositions:

(1) *S* believes or has faith that *p* (where *p* is the religious proposition that *x* – a putative ultimate and salvific reality – will be or do for *S* what *S* needs or wants).

Schellenberg 2013, 102-103). Since Schellenberg has obviously abandoned this condition (which made the strange requirement that a subject of religious faith must take her own faith to be religious), there seems to be no reason to discuss it further.

⁷³ For another critical assessments of Schellenberg’s view, see Howard-Snyder (2013b).

- (2) *S* lacks evidence rendering *p* certain.
- (3) If *S* is disposed to act on her belief or faith that *p*, and *p* is false, *S* will suffer bad consequences.
- (4) *S* is disposed to act (directly or indirectly) on this belief or faith: that is, to do what seems appropriate to the truth of *p*, given *S*'s other purposes and the rest of *S*'s worldview. (Schellenberg 2005: 124)

The first condition states that the subject must believe *p* *or* have propositional faith, and that both propositional faith and belief can serve as the basis for operational faith.⁷⁴

The second and third conditions are about uncertainty and the stakes involved. As pointed out by Schellenberg, “if my interests were not at stake in trusting and if I could not be in at least some degree hurt by doing so, there would be no point in using the language of trust” (Schellenberg 2005: 110).

The fourth condition concerns a disposition to act. Unlike hope, trust obviously comes with such a disposition. If I trust my friend to pick me up at the airport and she is not present when my plane arrives, I will wait for her outside the terminal. Acting in a way not presupposing that she will show up, like ordering a taxi, signifies a lack of trust.

While I think that acting on faith (or religious belief) amounts to something along the lines suggested by Schellenberg’s operational faith, the identification of such faith with trust is highly problematic. As I make clear in paper IV, if non-doxastic faith is supposed to be a rationally acceptable stance, it cannot be analysed in terms of trust, since trust requires you to anticipate certain outcomes which you cannot rationally anticipate if you lack the corresponding beliefs.

The umbrella account

Does it really matter exactly how the details of non-doxastic faith are spelled out? Could it not be the case that there are several attitudes or combinations of attitudes which might rightfully be thought of as faith? In one of the most influential articles on non-doxasticism “Propositional faith: what it is and what it is not”, Daniel Howard-Snyder (2013a) provides us with a broad meta-account covering both doxastic and non-doxastic faith.

According to Howard-Snyder, faith is an umbrella term, used to cover a range of related attitudes which all share some structural similarities. On Howard-Snyder’s view, propositional faith that *p* is a composite attitude, being constituted by three components: a positive evaluation of *p*, a positive conative orientation towards *p* and a positive cognitive stance towards *p*. In every instance of faith, this abstract template is to be filled with concrete content and the important thing is that several different candidates might play each of these roles. For example, one might

⁷⁴ It should be noted that according to Schellenberg, propositional faith is always non-doxastic. This view contrasts sharply with the position held by most proponents of non-doxasticism, that non-doxastic faith is an alternative to belief-based faith.

have propositional faith by considering p 's truth to be good (positive evaluation), wanting p to be the case (positive conative orientation) and assuming without belief⁷⁵ that p (positive cognitive stance) (Howard-Snyder 2013a: 367).

Howard-Snyder's meta-account subsumes most other accounts. For example, the accounts we have taken a closer look at, by Pojman, Alston and Schellenberg, can all be used to fill in the template. What about ND1 and ND2? Here, we must remember that Howard-Snyder's umbrella is supposed to cover doxastic faith as well. While ND1 is explicitly expressed in the template (as positive evaluation and conative orientation), ND2 cannot be part of such a broad definition, since it only holds on non-doxasticism (but of course, when a subject actually has non-doxastic faith, he will fulfil ND2 as well also on Howard-Snyder's account).

Howard-Snyder is not the only one to suggest that non-doxastic faith can be based on several different attitudes. For example, similar views seem presupposed by McKaughan (2013) and Buchak (2014). Since faith is such a disparate phenomenon, even if we concentrate on propositional faith, an account along these lines certainly has some intuitive appeal.⁷⁶ If Howard-Snyder is correct, exactly how we spell out the details of non-doxastic religious faith matters less, and I think the current trend over the last few years has been that philosophers working on non-doxasticism have become more interested in issues other than providing a detailed account of the attitudes involved.

However, the meta-account is not entirely unproblematic. Non-doxasticism has recently come under attack by Finlay Malcolm for not being able to properly rule out fictionalism, and it is perhaps telling that Malcolm bases his understanding of non-doxasticism on Howard-Snyder's umbrella view (Malcolm 2018). Howard-Snyder has met Malcolm's criticism by pointing out that it is only in some rare circumstances a fictionalist might have faith (Howard-Snyder 2019a). I think the fact that Howard-Snyder has to make this concession displays the weakness of the umbrella account. I meet Malcolm's criticism in paper III, where I defend the distinction between fictionalism and non-doxasticism relying only on the common-denominator view (ND1 and ND2). Unlike Howard-Snyder, I do not have to grant Malcolm that the fictionalist might ever have non-doxastic faith. ND2, which Howard-Snyder has left out to be able to accommodate for belief-based faith, makes all the difference here.

One might also worry Howard-Snyder's account is too broad to be able to distinguish doxastic faith from non-doxastic in all instances. This problem becomes especially pressing when the cognitive attitude in question is Cohenian acceptance. Since acceptance is usually evidence-sensitive and held in combination with belief, acceptance-based faith without an ND2-condition can be interpreted as being both doxastic and non-doxastic. Even if the point with Howard-Snyder's account is to

⁷⁵ Belief-less assumption is Howard-Snyder's preferred candidate for the cognitive stance.

⁷⁶ For the view that the word "faith" is used in so many different ways that a conceptual analysis is impossible, see Kvanvig (2018: 1-4).

provide an account covering both doxastic and non-doxastic faith, it seems reasonable to demand that it should still be able to distinguish between the two.

In paper IV I discuss some important desiderata for any analysis of rational, non-doxastic faith. My tentative conclusion is that providing an analysis of such faith is far more complicated than one might initially suppose, and that it depends very much on the specific cognitive attitude whether non-doxastic faith can be rationally held or not. Since Howard-Snyder's umbrella account might give the impression that almost any positive cognitive attitude can substitute for belief, I think it comes dangerously close to obfuscating the problems involved in the analysis.

Practical or action-centred accounts

On some recent accounts, the cognitive side of faith has been downplayed in favour of commitment and action. The philosophers behind these accounts typically insist that non-doxastic faith is best understood in action-oriented terms, and they provide accounts not dissimilar from Schellenberg's operational faith. In these accounts, faith is understood mainly from the perspective of what it means to act upon faith.

One of the more well-known accounts of this kind is due to Lara Buchak (2017), who has developed her original idea that faith means an end to active investigation (Buchak 2012) into an account centred on risk-taking behaviour.⁷⁷ According to Buchak, in addition to prerequisite conditions close to ND1 and ND2, faith should be understood as follows:

Act A is an act of faith that X, for S, if and only if:

- (i) S performing act A constitutes S taking a (subjective) risk on X.
 - (ii) S chooses (to commit to A before he examines additional evidence) rather than (to postpone his decision about A until he examines additional evidence).
- (Buchak 2017: 115)

Buchak's account surely captures vital aspects of what it means to act on faith. Providing such an account is an important part of formulating a full-blown philosophical view of faith. However, Buchak claims that her account covers propositional faith, an "act of faith *that* X", and that is where it becomes problematic. To put it bluntly, for propositional faith the cognitive attitude matters greatly, and no action-centred account can escape that. The conditions of Buchak's account are not sufficient for capturing the cognitive aspect of faith.

For example, imagine that you are going to take the train in heavy winter weather, and that the train often gets delayed or even cancelled if there is a lot of snow. In this scenario X equals "the train will leave roughly on time" and A is the act of going to station as if the train is on time. The risk involved is that you might freeze quite a lot if the train is not on time. You meet ND1 and ND2, because you

⁷⁷ Also see McKaughan (2016).

desire that the train will leave on time, and it is not certain but epistemically possible that it will. Now, if you do A instead of trying to find out more evidence concerning the truth of X, does that necessarily mean that you have faith?

No, there are a lot of possible scenarios where a subject satisfies Buchak's conditions without having faith. To construct such a scenario, we only need to find a plausible attitude other than faith which explains why the subject does not search for more evidence. For example, you might worry about the possibility that you will miss the train if it happens to be on time, and hurry to the station instead of taking the time to check the train company's website for the latest information. If you do, it seems that your cognitive attitude is not faith but rather fear that X will occur (without you being at the station simultaneously). Surely, when an analysis of faith lacks the resources to distinguish faith from fear, something is missing (also see my discussion on faith and despair in paper IV).

Howard-Snyder (2017) has also developed his original account by adding some conditions concerning reliance and action. According to his latest suggestion, propositional faith should be analysed as follows:

For you to have *faith that p*, for some proposition p, is for you to have a positive cognitive attitude toward p, for you to have a positive conative orientation toward the truth of p, for you to be disposed to live in light of that attitude and orientation, and for you to be resilient in the face of challenges to living in that way. (Howard-Snyder 2017: 57, italics in original)

While Howard-Snyder's extended account still suffers from the problems I identified for the original version, it now also demonstrates how one might capture the action-related aspects of faith without neglecting faith's cognitive side.

3.2.3 Current Trends in the Literature on Non-Doxasticism

Before moving on, I want to close this presentation of non-doxasticism by highlighting some trends in the current literature.

A common faith?

An interesting question regarding non-doxastic religiosity is how widespread it is. I find it reasonable to believe, as did Alston, that in the cultural climate of our time, many sincere and reflecting religiously committed persons have non-doxastic rather than belief-based faith (Alston 1996: 18). However, the fact remains that no one really knows how common non-doxasticism is among contemporary religious people, since no one has investigated the matter empirically.

However, there are other routes than empirical investigation to show that non-doxastic faith is more than a philosophical curiosity. In the article "On the value of faith and faithfulness" McKaughan (2017) explores two such routes. He begins by examining notions of faith from ancient times, from the Greco-Roman culture and from Judeo-Christian religious thinking. According to McKaughan, faith in these

historical contexts was primarily a matter of faithfulness and resilience in relationships, and he argues against interpreting such faith as a kind of belief (McKaughan 2017: 7-21). After his exploration of faith in antiquity, McKaughan continues with a close reading of the diaries of Mother Teresa, an icon of faith from more recent history. The severe doubt expressed in the passages McKaughan examines are blatantly inconsistent with belief, and the conclusion that Mother Teresa's faith was non-doxastic is hard to escape (McKaughan 2017: 23-28).

While McKaughan wrestles with history, in "Markan Faith" Howard-Snyder goes head to head with the New Testament itself. To pre-empt the objection against non-doxasticism that the Bible understands faith as a kind of belief, Howard-Snyder conducts a close reading of the Gospel of Mark. He argues that Mark's account of faith is at least as consistent with a non-doxastic understanding of faith as it is with a doxastic (Howard-Snyder 2017). Taken together with McKaughan's historical results, this surely implies that the understanding of faith in terms of belief is of a later date than the biblical sources.

The proper object of non-doxastic religion

What is the proper object of non-doxastic religion? Several of the philosopher working on non-doxastic faith are Christian, and they are primarily interested in the possibility of basing Christian faith on something epistemically weaker than belief. However, Christianity or even theism are not the only options available here. According to Schellenberg, who for the record is an atheist concerning perfect-being theism and agnostic regarding most other religious options, the proper object of non-doxastic religion is a view he calls "simple ultimism".

Simple ultimism is a kind of smallest common-denominator view of religion. It consists of the claim that there is an ultimate reality, which is ultimate in three ways: metaphysically, axiologically and soteriologically. Since it is entailed by all major religious views, if any more detailed view of the ultimate turns out to be true, ultimism will be true as well (Schellenberg 2005: ch.1).

Schellenberg has gone to great lengths to promote propositional faith in simple ultimism.⁷⁸ In paper II, I challenge his view and argue that traditional religion is a more suitable object for the non-doxasticist (to be clear, I do mean *any* traditional religion, I do not presuppose that Christianity is better or worse off than for example Islam or Buddhism). Paper II has prompted a response from Schellenberg (2019a), as well as from Kirk Lougheed (2020) who also defends Schellenberg's view.

However, traditional religion and simple ultimism are not the only alternatives here. William A. Rottschaefer (2016) has suggested that instead of a transcendent ultimate, a kind of naturalistic alternative he calls "Darwin's Hegelian

⁷⁸ The whole of Schellenberg 2009 is dedicated to this aim. Schellenberg even claims that faith in the ultimate is rationally required. Obviously, this strong claim has not been left unchallenged (see Morrision 2013).

spirit” should be preferred. James Elliott (2017), on the other hand, has suggested we should prefer a minimal view of the transcendent labelled “Ietsism” (“somethingism”). On “Ietsism” one only commits to the idea that there is soteriological transcendence (rather than an ultimate reality) and one stays agnostic regarding any metaphysical and axiological transcendence. Schellenberg responds to Rottschaefer and Elliott as well in his recent paper. His response to Rottschaefer ends with the claim that given our current agnosticism and considering the deep future, “it is far too soon to give up on the more ambitious dreams of religion” (Schellenberg 2019a: 583). To this, I can only concur, and I find the answer relevant in relation to Elliott as well. However, that does not mean that I find the question in any way settled, and I think it is important to see that non-doxastic religion could be much more than simply a new way of being Christian.

The faith-debate and the feasibility of non-doxasticism

In the literature on non-doxasticism, two important issues are often confounded, namely the question whether faith can be non-doxastic and the question whether the non-doxastic approach itself is feasible. The reason these issues tend to get confused is that most non-doxastic accounts come in terms of faith, even when the basic cognitive attitude at work is acceptance or belief-less assuming (as I have shown, the tendency to call the composite attitude “faith” goes all the way back to Pojman’s faith in terms of hope). So what happens is that the less profound question regarding non-doxastic *faith* tends to take over, and the more basic issue concerning the feasibility of a belief-less engagement with religion based on a pro-attitude and epistemic possibility tends to get either ignored⁷⁹ or at best discussed under the guise of the faith-question.⁸⁰

There are at least two ways to view the debate over the possibility of non-doxastic faith. Either we can view it as an inquiry concerning the cognitive foundations of a specific type of mental state, namely faith. Or we can view it as a debate over when it is appropriate to describe a mental state as faith. On the latter interpretation, the whole question reduces to a verbal issue. As such, it is largely uninteresting because clearly non-doxasticism might be a feasible enterprise even if we cannot call its bearing attitude faith. However, the former interpretation also

⁷⁹ For arguments for non-doxastic faith, which cannot plausibly be interpreted as concerning the feasibility of the approach, see argument from linguistic data (Howard-Snyder 2019b: 116-120; Schellenberg 2005: 147-160) or the argument that faith must be non-doxastic to make sense of the idea that faith is something meritorious (Alston 1996: 25; Schellenberg 2005: 148).

⁸⁰ The many examples of secular non-doxastic attitudes found in the literature gives the approach significant initial plausibility, since they make plausible the suggestion that these attitudes could be used as a basis for a religious engagement regardless of whether they could be thought of as faith or not. Famous examples include, apart from Schellenberg’s runner (Schellenberg 2005: 129-131), Howard-Snyder’s Captain Morgan (a hiker bitten by a venomous snake who staggers on based on the epistemic possibility that help might lie in the direction he has randomly chosen, see Howard-Snyder 2013: 364), and Alston’s army general (who makes up plans based on unconfirmed rumours of enemy movement, see Alston 2007: 133).

makes the question largely uninteresting, because even if it would turn out that proper faith can only be built on belief, proponents of non-doxasticism have shown beyond doubt that there exist very similar non-doxastic attitudes (think of Schellenberg's runner) which non-doxastic religion could be based on instead.⁸¹ So regardless of interpretation, the possibility of non-doxasticism remains even if non-doxastic faith cannot be had. I have two points I like to make here.

First, I think it is safe to say that the more important and interesting question is the more basic one, which concerns the feasibility of the entire non-doxastic approach. This issue is not much explored in the literature, especially if compared to the debate over fictionalism, where the feasibility of the approach is a recurring main topic. Regarding fictionalism, the feasibility of the approach has been considered from social, moral, practical and language-based perspectives, and I am aware of no corresponding discussion concerning non-doxasticism. Intuitively (and as I claim in paper III) non-doxasticism is less problematic than fictionalism, but that does not mean that its feasibility should be taken for granted.

Secondly, I think that proponents of non-doxasticism overemphasise the importance of faith and neglects other possible attitudes. As I think I make clear in paper I and IV, I am not as optimistic about non-doxastic faith as most philosophers working in the field. While I do think we can reach a philosophically acceptable concept of rational, non-doxastic faith if we use a reconstructive methodology, I very much doubt it could be reached using conceptual analysis. I also think that hope is an underestimated candidate when it comes to playing the lead role in non-doxasticism, and I also suspect that the attitudes normally viewed as a plausible grounds for faith, like acceptance or belief-less assumption, might work just fine on their own. So, while I am not so sure about non-doxastic *faith*, I am optimistic regarding the possibilities of reaching an acceptable full-feathered account of non-doxasticism based on *some* non-doxastic attitude. That is, I am much more optimistic about answering the more profound question in the affirmative, than I am about giving a similar answer to the faith-question it is usually conflated with.

⁸¹ In such a case, non-doxastic faith is in fact easily within reach if one employs the method of rational reconstruction (see paper IV).

4. Summary of the Papers

Paper I (Palmqvist 2019a) is about Schellenberg's proposed analysis of non-doxastic propositional faith (Schellenberg 2005: 138-139; 2009: 3-4; 2013: 102-103). According to Schellenberg, propositional faith can be analysed in terms of a policy of voluntary assent to an imagined picture of reality where a desired epistemic possibility is actualised. While I am sympathetic to an imagination-based account of faith, I argue that the voluntary assent condition suggested by Schellenberg is too strong.

As explicated by Schellenberg, having faith means an end to active scepticism, and in order to have faith "one must set aside all questions about the possibility of truth in competing claims" (Schellenberg 2009: 82). In the religious case, this turns into an indefinite, long-term commitment (Schellenberg 2005: 138). It is this long-term commitment I find especially problematic. The problem is that Schellenbergian faith means postponing further religious investigations indefinitely, without any plans to take them up again. This violates Schellenberg's own restriction on faith, that it must not conflict with the demands of reason if it is to be held rationally.

Schellenberg does not lack answers to objections like this, and I discuss two major strategies according to which he might reply. While I do remain unconvinced by these replies, especially the second answer (i.e. that a subject who has faith in simple ultimism can conduct a new kind of religious investigation on the basis of such faith) is of a magnitude that makes it hard to reject conclusively. Therefore, I rest content with pointing to some difficulties, before turning to my constructive proposal.

In the last part of paper I, I present a revised version of Schellenbergian faith I call "Occasional faith". The general idea is to restrict faith to special occasions, just like we normally do with secular faith. It is a faith "one wears in church", so to speak, but since it is non-doxastic this should be no problem. What might be a problem, however, is that these instances of faith might be overly isolated events, which is why I suggest that they could be tied together by hope. Hope does not imply an end to active investigation and is therefore epistemically unproblematic. However, since hope constitutes a weak ground for action, it is insufficient on its own. For religious actions to be possible, we need to take on faith on occasion.

Paper II (Palmqvist 2019d) is closely related to paper I, and it too constitutes a critical discussion on the philosophy of Schellenberg. In paper II, however, it is not the non-doxastic attitude itself that is in focus, but its proper object. Schellenberg

famously argues that the proper object of faith is simple ultimism, the smallest common denominator view of religion according to which there exists a triply ultimate reality (i.e. a reality which is metaphysically, axiologically and soteriologically ultimate) (Schellenberg 2009; 2013). I object to this claim and argues that traditional religion is the choice to be preferred.

My argument rests on the assumption that simple ultimism is too abstract to allow for contact with ultimate reality. I argue that having a true view which does not allow for contact with ultimate reality is pointless, so instead of choosing the religious view which has the greatest chance of being true (which without doubt is simple ultimism), we should choose the religious view which, if true, has the greatest chance of putting us into contact with ultimate reality.

I argue that to align with ultimate reality, we at least need to get the basic details right, like if the ultimate is the personal God of Abrahamic tradition, the impersonal Brahman, some collective of gods, or something else entirely. I also argue that since we do not know just how detailed a view we need to align with ultimate reality, we should prefer a full-blown, fully detailed view. That is, we should go for traditional religion.

Another major reason why we should choose traditional religion is that it contains most religious experience of which we are aware. If our goal is to come into contact with ultimate reality, what could be a better choice than to follow a tradition where people actually claim to have such contact?

Paper II closes with a discussion on religious experience on non-doxasticism. I consider some common arguments against basing religious belief on religious experience, and while I grant that these arguments are successful concerning belief, I argue that they have no force on non-doxasticism. On non-doxasticism, all that matters is that it remains an epistemic possibility that the experiences in question are veridical, and to my knowledge no one has ever argued against that claim.

While papers I and II are concerned with a specific account of non-doxasticism, paper III takes a more general approach. The question here is which approach to belief-less religion an agnostic should prefer, religious fictionalism or non-doxasticism? I argue for non-doxasticism (Palmqvist 2019b).

I begin by meeting the objection made by Malcolm (2018) that non-doxasticism might collapse into fictionalism. I argue that Malcolm overstates his case, and that what he really argues for is that non-doxasticism is not properly distinguishable from fictionalism. I then argue that non-doxasticism can be distinguished from fictionalism by making explicit that the non-doxasticist cares about truth (as, for example, I do in the version of ND1 presented in this introductory essay).

After rejecting Malcolm's objection, I turn to discuss two major problems confronting proponents of fictionalism: the problem of justifying religious practice and the problem of justifying the use of religious language. I assess how these problems are handled by fictionalists, most notably by Eshleman (2005). While I do not want to suggest that these problems make fictionalism untenable, I also note that

non-doxasticism lacks such canonical problems, and that an easy way to avoid them is to adopt non-doxasticism instead of fictionalism.

The last major part of paper III presents my argument for exclusive availability. Here, I argue that since a pro-religious agnostic already satisfies ND1 and ND2, she is in fact already hoping for the truth of her chosen religious view p . Furthermore, since fictionalism requires that one holds the truth of p to be irrelevant and since one does care about the truth of p if one hopes for p to be true, fictionalism is not an option for the pro-religious agnostic. My conclusion is that non-doxasticism is exclusively available for pro-religious agnostics, and fictionalism exclusively available for atheists and agnostics without such a pro-attitude.

Paper IV (Palmqvist 2020c) returns to the question on how to best analyse rational, non-doxastic faith. As in paper III, the discussion is kept on a general level but the implications for some prominent contemporary accounts of faith are spelled out in detail. I offer three major desiderata for such faith: that it must be coherent with the demands of reason, that it must not include trust, and that it should imply hope but not despair.

The first desideratum reflects the discussion on Schellenberg's faith in paper I, and the demand is simply that our faith must not stand in the way of our epistemic endeavours. Here, I find reason to criticise accounts which treat the demands of reason too lightly, presuming epistemic reason to be largely irrelevant on a non-doxastic approach (Buchak 2017; McKaughan 2016).

The second desideratum builds on current literature on trust, where it is commonly held that trust is either doxastic and epistemically rational, or non-doxastic and irrational (Simpson 2018). I argue that since trust cannot be both rational and non-doxastic at the same time, we are forced to reject the intuition that faith implies trust when it comes to non-doxastic faith. This is a problem for all accounts of non-doxastic faith which employ the notion of trust in some way, and I focus on this problem in McKaughan's account (McKaughan 2016).

The third desideratum is that faith should imply hope but not despair. In the literature on hope, it is generally conceived that the standard account of hope cannot properly rule out despair, and philosophers are looking for a new analysis of hope (Meirav 2009; Martin 2014; Palmqvist 2020b). Since, intuitively, faith implies hope, this means that when providing an analysis of faith, we must keep an eye on the developments in the philosophy of hope. Even more importantly, however, is that it is not only the standard account of hope but several accounts of faith as well which seem unable to exclude despair (Buchak 2017; Howard-Snyder 2017).

There exists a tension between the last desideratum and the first one, since it seems that the best way for faith to keep out despair is the kind of strong, cognitive attitudes which are problematic with respect to epistemic rationality. Some suggestions on how this tension could be handled are made.

Paper IV is ended by some methodological remarks. It is acknowledged that the kind of rational, non-doxastic faith I search for might differ in important respects from the everyday notion of faith. However, this is not the serious problem it might

appear to be, since I do not purport to make a conceptual analysis of faith. Rather, I understand the project of finding an adequate analysis of rational, non-doxastic faith as one best conducted using the method of rational reconstruction.

Paper V (Palmqvist Manuscript) is different from the other papers, in that it does not concern non-doxasticism but the feasibility of some important kinds of belief-based religion. It is centred on the insufficiency problem for theism, and my main concern is that this problem should make us reconsider deism as a viable position in natural theology. I begin by explaining the seriousness of the problem, including an assessment of some theistic strategies to handle it (Taliaferro 2013; Collins 2009), a discussion closely related to my treatment of the insufficiency problem in part 2.1.2 of this introductory essay.

The insufficiency problem shows that the arguments of natural theology fail to reach all the way to perfect being theism, but I am interested in what they *do* reach. Taking a closer look at the argument from fine-tuning and the *kalam* cosmological argument, I notice that the former supports any designer-hypothesis, and the latter the idea of a first cause. To once again demonstrate the difficulties in reaching any further theistic conclusion, I assess and reject some attempts (Pruss & Gale 1999; O'Connor 2004) to deduce that the first cause must be a personal cause.

With a clearer grip on what the arguments at best can establish, I offer my tentative case for deism. I argue that if we accept some plausible principles of reasoning, it becomes reasonable to argue that the first cause of the *kalam* argument, and the designer of the fine-tuning argument are in fact the same entity, some kind of deity who has both created and ordered the world. The principles of reasoning invoked are Occam's razor, that entities should not be postulated beyond necessity, and Swinburne's (2004) cumulative approach, which claims that the arguments from natural theology must be viewed together for their true potential to be obvious.

Paper V is ended with some suggestions as how to develop the deistic case by considering the "insufficient" conclusions of further natural theological arguments.

5. Concluding Remarks

In these concluding remarks I will sum up and comment on the points made in the papers and the discussion conducted in the introductory essay. I will make explicit connections between the different pieces of writing and put the light on some conclusions previously left mostly implicit.

Natural theology and belief-based religion

I have argued that there are enough problems besetting the various attempts to base religion on rational belief, that we should consider belief-less approaches. Reformed Epistemology at best makes religious belief rational only for those who already possess it, and the assumption of doxastic voluntarism is unrealistic, which is why the position advocated by James and Pascal must be considered untenable. Most importantly, however, I have argued that natural theology is not up to the task of providing religious belief with evidentialist justification, at least not in a way which should impress an agnostic without any prior leanings towards theism. I wish to further qualify my assessment of natural theology in two ways.

First, I want to make clear that the problems I have identified concerning natural theology only have bearing on belief-based religion. As I argue in paper II, natural theology can play a useful role on non-doxasticism by making clear which religious views constitute epistemic possibilities. The current trend to treat natural theological arguments as probability-based certainly suggests that the views under consideration constitute epistemic possibilities – probability-arguments only make sense when certainty is lacking, and more than one option is epistemically possible.

Secondly, I want to address the scope of the insufficiency problem and its relevance for belief-less religion. As I suggest in my tentative defence of deism in paper V, natural theological reasoning has much potential which remains untapped as long as the narrow focus on perfect being theism remains. If my case for deism is on the right track, a non-theistic reinterpretation might lead to some fascinating conclusions involving a transcendent reality, or at least a reality separated from our space-time. But will these conclusions be religiously relevant? Schellenberg has claimed that true religion is always ultimistic, and as long as we are concerned with such religiosity, the insufficiency problem will remain. The core of the insufficiency problem is that one cannot on evidential grounds justify a move from postulating a transcendent reality to postulating an ultimate reality, which implies that true

religion must always be belief-less in the sense that it can never be properly based upon the evidence.

Belief-less religion and the case for preferring non-doxasticism

I advocate belief-less religion since I hold that agnosticism is the proper intellectual stance given our epistemic situation. I have presented two major belief-less approaches to religion, fictionalism and non-doxasticism. While I think both approaches can be cast in terms which make them intellectually satisfying and psychologically feasible, I have argued that we should prefer an approach to religion which takes its transcendent claims and promises of salvation seriously. That is, we should prefer non-doxasticism.

My case for preferring non-doxasticism over fictionalism depends on the assumption that the two can be properly distinguished from each other. This assumption has been recently questioned, but in paper III I argue that the objection ignores the fundamental role the possibility of truth holds on non-doxasticism.

However, claiming that non-doxasticism is the superior choice when compared to fictionalism is somewhat misleading. In my argument for exclusive availability, presented in paper III, I deny that an agnostic can choose freely between the approaches. I argue that if an agnostic has a religious pro-attitude, only non-doxasticism is rationally available to her. The pro-religious agnostic already possesses a religious hope, and therefore it would make no sense for her to pretend that religious truth does not matter (as required by fictionalism).

Towards an account of non-doxasticism

It is important not to forget the easily overlooked distinction between non-doxasticism in general, and non-doxastic faith. As I have explained, there is a strong tendency in the literature to conflate the question of whether faith can be non-doxastic with the question whether the non-doxastic approach itself is feasible. While I have my doubts concerning the first question, I am much more positive concerning the second.

As I make clear in papers I and IV, it is hard to combine a cognitively strong notion of non-doxastic faith with the demands of epistemic reason, since cognitively strong faith tends to make one insensitive to counter-evidence. To make matters worse, an account of faith which is cognitively weak and thereby acceptable from an epistemic point of view will standardly have a hard time to account for the intuition that faith should be clearly distinguishable from despair. Furthermore, if non-doxastic faith is to be a rationally held attitude, we also have to deny the common intuition that faith implies trust. What should we make of all these problems?

The possibility of finding a working account of rational, non-doxastic faith depends on our methodology. Such an account could hardly be the result of conceptual analysis. Even if we take the ambiguity of the concept of faith into consideration and only demand that conceptual analysis should capture one possible

meaning of this ambiguous concept, I have a hard time seeing that one of the meanings of “faith” in ordinary language is “a rational non-doxastic attitude which allows for continued investigation but which does not imply trust”. On the other hand, if we choose a reconstructive method, which focuses on theoretical desiderata and which allows for significant departure from ordinary language (even though our common intuitions should be preserved if possible), the prospects of a functioning account of rational, non-doxastic faith seem much brighter.

If we allow for reconstructive methodology, the question whether rational, non-doxastic faith is possible reduces to a verbal issue. It becomes a matter of terminology whether we want to keep calling the result of our reconstructive analysis “faith” or whether we find some other term more fitting. Of course, this is no arbitrary choice - keeping the original term is more reasonable the more relevant intuitions we are able to preserve.

The modified version of Schellenbergian faith I present in paper I under the label of “occasional faith” should be considered the product of a reconstructive method. The faith I present there is strong enough to be incompatible with despair. Perhaps a bit surprisingly, I also take it to imply trust. In fact, I do take it to preserve all common intuitions regarding faith, except that faith should be an uninterrupted, continuous commitment. By sacrificing that intuition, occasional faith becomes feasible even though it does not directly meet the demands of reason. Because surely it is acceptable on occasion to pick up an attitude which is incoherent with intellectual inquiry (I mean, it is not as if one is spending every waken moment investigating religious matters anyway).

To strengthen the case for occasional faith, I suggest that such isolated moments of faith can be combined with a continuously held hope. If, as I argue in paper III, the pro-religious agnostic has hope by default, this seems an even more reasonable solution.

I would not claim that the combination of occasional faith with hope is the only feasible way of spelling out rational, non-doxastic faith. A reconstructive method allows for many creative solutions to the problems involved. However, I also want to make clear that I think there is an overemphasis on faith in non-doxastic literature. I am not convinced that we should follow Pojman and present a composite faith-attitude based on hope, or acceptance, or belief-less assumption etc. It would be more straight-forward and less problematic to claim that one can base a religious commitment directly on hope, or acceptance, or belief-less assumption etc. If so, one could spell out the details of non-doxasticism without having to worry about cramming faith-intuitions from ordinary language into one’s analysis.

The proper object of non-doxastic religion

In paper II I argue that we should prefer traditional religion over simple ultimism, since simple ultimism is too abstract to allow for contact with ultimate reality and since traditional religion contains religious experience (as long as its veridicality remains an epistemic possibility, such experience should be seen as an indicator that

the tradition it belongs to might provide access to ultimate reality). Here, I would like to make some clarifications.

I do not deny that simple ultimism is a better choice if one aims only for truth, or if one wants to pursue the view best suited for conducting a religious investigation. Traditional religion is only the better option if one seeks to align with a soteriologically ultimate reality in order to achieve the ultimate human good. However, and this is a point I might not press enough in the paper, the achievement of this ultimate good is something everyone should prefer. If one does not prefer the ultimate human good over everything else, one has either failed to grasp the concept of soteriological ultimacy, or one has failed to reason rationally. Therefore, I argue that traditional religion is the choice everyone should prefer on reflection.

Of course, one can fail to view the existence of a soteriologically ultimate reality as an epistemic possibility. Nothing prevents a subject from regarding as epistemically possible only some transcendent view which does not entail soteriological ultimacy. Or one can fail to regard one's personal achievement of the ultimate human good an epistemic possibility, even if one finds its existence possible. In both these cases, one can rationally make a non-doxastic commitment without striving to achieve alignment. On the latter alternative, such a commitment might also be directed at simple ultimism.

Personally, however, I cannot see any good reasons to think the existence of soteriological ultimacy epistemically possible while denying the possibility of alignment with it. To repeat the earlier quote from Schellenberg, although with a different emphasis, it is far too soon to give up on the *more ambitious* dreams of religion.

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