Humans, Religion, and Normativity

*with Bruce R. Reichenbach, "Christianity, Science, and Three Phases of Being Human";
and Joona Auvinen, "On the Normative Significance of the Aims of Religious Practice."*

ON THE NORMATIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AIMS OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

by Joona Auvinen

Abstract.   During the last decades it has been common to assert—especially in the field of science and religion—that the aims characteristic of religious practice determine the norms we should employ when evaluating its normative status. However, until now, this issue has not been properly investigated by paying attention to contemporary metanormative research. In this article, I critically examine how different popular theories of normativity relate to the proposed normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice. I argue that whether or not, and in what way exactly, the aims characteristic of religious practice are normatively significant is highly dependent both on controversial issues concerning the nature of religion, and on a number of controversial metanormative issues.

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During the last decades, many scholars have been interested in investigating what philosopher Mikael Stenmark (1995; 1997; 2004) refers to as the axiology of religion. An important inspiration for this endeavor has been the interest philosophers of science have taken in the aims characteristic of the practice of science (e.g. Merton 1973; Kuhn 1977). The axiology of religion consists of the aims characteristic of religious practice, just like the axiology of science consists of the aims characteristic of scientific practice. Stenmark (1997, 494) asserts that: "It is clear, I take it, that the practitioners of religion and science aim at something with their activities, that they have goals. We can therefore look for a cluster of goals that individuals or the community more or less consciously consider to be the aim of the religious or scientific practice." In order to better get a grasp on the concept of aims being characteristic of a practice, consider a common conception of science, according to which an important

Joona Auvinen is a PhD researcher at the Faculty of Theology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland; e-mail: joona.auvinen@helsinki.fi.

aim characteristic of scientific practice is "…to make the world *technologically* and *predictively intelligible*" (Stenmark 1997, 494). Scientists seem to characteristically evaluate the practice of science by examining how it fares with respect to this end. There is not much of a consensus on what the aims characteristic of religious practice precisely are. Stenmark (1997) lists several different aims that have been asserted to be the characteristic ones, such as the aim of making the world "*existentially intelligible*" (Stenmark 1997, 494), and the aim of achieving the "*transformation of personal life*" (Stenmark 1997, 495). Nevertheless, many find it plausible that there are aims characteristic of religious practice.

I will not try to give here any precise definition for what it takes for an aim to be characteristic of religious practice. I will take there to at least be an important sense in which the aims that are characteristic of religious practice have to be very closely associated with the motivational states those practicing religion at least tend to be in, and investigate two different kinds of aims that could be characteristic of religious practice based on this quite broad understanding. This approach hopefully allows the article to be helpful to a wide audience.

Further, and importantly for the purposes of this article, it has become commonplace to assert that what the aims characteristic of religious practice are has significance for the normative question of what norms—that is, standards of evaluation, rules, or guidelines different activities are or are not in accordance with—we should employ when we evaluate religious practice. To assert something like this has been common especially in the context of investigating religion's relationship to science, as many have argued that scientific norms are not appropriate in the domain of religion. The most well-known argument along these lines is the famous biologist Stephen Jay Gould's (2001; 2002) theory of "non-overlapping magisteria" (NOMA), which has received attention even among the general public. According to NOMA, "the magisteria of science" and "the magisteria of religion"—as Gould refers to scientific and religious practices—cannot truly conflict, because they are concerned with completely different problems of life. Gould argues, very roughly, that while science aims at understanding and predicting the natural world, religion aims at existential understanding of how one should live her life, and that we should not for this reason employ the norms appropriate for evaluating scientific practice in the domain of religion, or vice versa. Gould writes that "Each domain of inquiry frames its own rules and admissible questions, and sets its own criteria for judgment and resolution. These accepted standards, and the procedures developed for debating and resolving legitimate issues, define the magisterium […]" (Gould 2002, 52–53) This line of thought can also be seen in one form or another in the writings of, for instance, Stephen Wykstra (1990) and several Wittgensteinian philosophers of religion such

as D. Z. Phillips (1988; 2000), who sharply distinguish the language game of religion from that of science.

Also some authors who do evaluate religious and scientific practices via some common norms sometimes feel the need to justify this by arguing that these practices do share at least some common aims. For example, in his recent book critical of religions, philosopher of religion Tiddy Smith (2019) argues at length that science and religion both aim at providing us a true description of reality, and that this common aim justifies employing epistemic norms in arguing that science should be preferred over religion. Smith writes that:

> Perhaps religion and science are, as philosophers like to say, incommensurable, or without a common measure. Perhaps religion and science fail to share a common aim or purpose […] If that's so, then to say that religion fails to deliver empirical knowledge would be akin to saying that Tiger Woods fails to deliver as a pro wrestler […] But why would we measure him by such standards? […] Against this view, I will argue that religion and science both necessarily share a common aim. Both aim to provide us with, among other things, true descriptions and explanations about the world. It follows that we can compare the distinctive methods of religion and science insofar as they are effective at achieving that aim. (Smith 2019, 2–3)

As I see it, authors such as these seem to assert that to employ norms when evaluating religious practice that are not sensitive to its characteristic aims would be viciously circular, confused, dialectically ineffective, or mistaken in some related way. If religious practice does not embrace the aims that the employed norms presuppose, why should practitioners of religion care about being positively or negatively evaluated with respect to these norms? Perhaps religion does not fare well with respect to scientific norms and science does not fare well with respect to religious norms, but if science and religion are practices with different aims, maybe this is not significant at all.

It has not unfortunately been common, however, to critically investigate with the help of contemporary metanormative research whether or not, and in what way exactly, the aims characteristic of religious practice are normatively significant. "Metanormativity" is a recently popular label for a family of philosophical research that outgrew from the past metaethical research. The key difference between these domains is that while metaethics is primarily interested in investigating questions related to the nature and normativity of the ethical domain, metanormative research makes it explicit that it is interested in the nature of normativity more generally – extending its focus past the ethical domain to include things like the nature and normativity of the epistemic and the practical domain. In a nutshell, metanormative research is interested in normativity in the most general sense. An influential philosopher specializing in

metanormative research, Thomas Scanlon, characterizes this change of focus in the study of normativity in the following way:

> In that earlier period, discussion in metaethics focused almost entirely on morality: on the proper interpretation of claims about moral right and wrong, and other forms of moral evaluation. Today, although morality is still much discussed, a significant part of the debate concerns practical reasoning and normativity more generally: reasons for action, and, even more broadly, reasons for belief and other attitudes, which are increasingly recognized as normative, and as raising questions of the same nature as those about reasons for action. (Scanlon 2014, 1)

In this article, I will draw on contemporary metanormative research, and show that there are complex metanormative issues underlying the question of whether or not the aims characteristic of religious practice are normatively significant. I will show that there are several different possible strategies for both defending and denying the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice. Further, I will show that these strategies differ in their details in important respects, and also face different kinds of challenges they need to provide answers to in order to be plausible.

In recent metanormative research, it has become clear that the concept of "normativity" is often used in various different senses in philosophical literature; see Finlay (2019) for an excellent overview of these issues. In order to be precise about the kind of normativity I am primarily interested in here, we must pay attention to the now common distinction between "genuine normativity" on the one hand, and non-genuine forms of normativity on the other. The purpose of this distinction is to distinguish the norms that unqualifiedly and authoritatively settle how one should act, what one should believe, and the like—generally, the norms that settle whether or not one should φ, standing for any activity—from the norms that lack this kind of normative authority. The distinction is motivated by the perception that, intuitively, there seem to be a lot of norms relative to which we can evaluate our activities, but which by themselves are completely insignificant for the question of whether or not we *really* should φ. The nature of the etiquette is often used here as an example (e.g., Foot 1972, 309). While it is true that we can evaluate whether or not an activity is in line with the norms of the etiquette, the etiquette does not by itself seem to be significant for whether one *really* should φ or not. Further, as Dale Dorsey points out, in addition to there being merely conventional insignificant norms, we can also theoretically come up with an infinite amount of completely hypothetical insignificant norms. Dorsey (2013, 118) illustrates this by making up in a humoristic way what he calls the "Society of satanic grave robbers." Although the rules of this society are intuitively by themselves completely insignificant for whether or not one *really* should φ, we can nevertheless evaluate activities relative to whether

or not they are in accordance with them. On the other hand, whether or not one's activities are in line with the norms of morality or the norms of practical reason, for example, seems to be by itself very significant for whether or not a person *really* should φ. Since genuinely normative norms are the ones that unqualifiedly and authoritatively settle what one *really* should do, this is the form of normativity that has been of most interest in contemporary metanormative research (but see Copp (1997), Tiffany (2007), and Baker (2018) for critical discussions of the concept of genuine normativity; I will briefly return to these criticisms in the fourth section of this article).

The quest for a theory[1] on the nature of genuine normativity tries to come up with an explanation for why it is the case that some norms are significant for whether or not one *really* should φ, while other norms are not. In what follows, I will critically examine how various contemporary theories on the nature of genuine normativity (I will just use the expression "normativity" in this *genuine* sense for the rest of the article unless otherwise specified) relate to the proposed normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice. I divide theories of normativity into two major groups in the article: theories that are in a fundamental way sensitive to the aims characteristic of activities on the one hand, and theories that are not on the other. By this I simply mean that in theories of the former kind, the things that on the most fundamental level explain why persons should do certain things but not others are aims of the very same kind as the aims that can be characteristic of activities, while in theories of the latter kind, these aims play no such role.

Aim-Dependent Theories of Normativity

In investigating the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice, we can pay attention to at least two different—although closely related—kinds of potentially normatively significant aims. First, we can investigate whether or not the activity of practicing religion characteristically has a certain set of normatively significant *constitutive aims*, and second, we can investigate whether or not those practicing religion characteristically at least tend to have a certain set of normatively significant *psychological aims*. Accordingly, in this section I will critically examine how two distinct kinds of theories of normativity can be invoked in defending the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice—the first theories being sensitive to the constitutive aims of activities, and the second theories being sensitive to the psychological aims persons have.

The Constitutivist Strategy

One strategy to defend the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice is to argue that 1) practicing religion as an activity

characteristically has certain constitutive aims, and that 2) these constitutive aims determine the appropriate norms to employ when evaluating it. In order to understand what philosophers mean by an activity having a constitutive aim, consider, for instance, the activity of playing chess. If a person claimed to be playing chess, but at the same time she claimed that it's allowed for her to perform two actions during each round, we would be right to point out to her that she hasn't properly understood the rules of chess. Further, if she claimed that she does understand the rules of chess, but that she just doesn't care about them, we would be tempted to say that despite claiming otherwise, she isn't really playing chess at all, but some other closely related game instead. Many philosophers have suggested that this is explained by the fact that following the rules of chess is a constitutive aim of playing chess—a player having this aim plays a role in defining what playing chess is in the first place. The constitutive aim plays a part in constituting the activity of playing chess, just as, for instance, every family is constituted by a certain set of persons, which is why someone who plays chess by definition accepts this constitutive aim's authority, just as by definition there are persons in every family.

According to theories of normativity often referred to as "constitutivist" theories, the norms that are normative are fundamentally determined by the constitutive aims of certain activities. For a common and intuitive philosophical example of a theory exhibiting this constitutivist line of thought, we can look at what philosopher Eric Wiland says about epistemic norms in the context of the activity of *believing*: "[…] the nature of belief tells us something about reasons for belief. So the person who questions whether she has a reason to believe what's true is not really asking a legitimate question […] Rather, if you are even in the business of believing things, you thereby have reason to believe what's true. Truth is the constitutive aim of belief, and so reasons to believe are necessarily related to considerations concerning the truth of what's believed." (Wiland 2012, 117–18). According to this line of thought, the norms that are normative when evaluating what a person should believe are necessarily of epistemic nature, because beliefs constitutively aim at truth, and employing other kinds of norms when evaluating beliefs does not respect this constitutive aim in a proper way.

Even though this all might sound a little bit abstract, it can actually be argued that one perk of constitutivist theories of normativity is their metaphysical parsimony. They allow for norms that are objective in an interesting sense, as constitutive aims of an activity in a way bind everyone participating in it, but they do not require us to posit entities like objective value or platonic forms many philosophers deem metaphysically problematic in our age of the scientific worldview.

Now, if normativity really has to do with the constitutive aims of activities one is participating in, maybe the normative significance of the

aims characteristic of religious practice can be defended along constitutivist lines by paying attention to the constitutive aims of practicing religion. Philosopher of religion Stephen Wykstra seems to be suggesting something like this when he writes that: "If we approach the claims of a theistic complex like Christianity—claims having to do with Creation, Covenant, Sin, Judgment, Grace, Incarnation, and the like—as if they must embody the values of scientific theorizing, we will not assess them by appropriate criteria; indeed, we will probably not even understand them. Their point is not to help us predict, control, and contrive the world." (Wykstra 1990, 138) According to Wykstra, those who evaluate religious practice in a way not sensitive to its characteristic aims run the risk of not even properly understand what practicing religion is in the first place. Just as those who defend a constitutivist theory in other domains argue that the constitutive aims of a certain activity determine the norms we should employ when evaluating it, Wykstra's suggestion could be interpreted as a claim according to which we can determine the norms we should employ when evaluating religious practice by paying attention to the constitutive aims of practicing religion. However, such claims face several challenges they need to provide answers to in order to be plausible.

For starters, are there any constitutive aims that define what it is to practice religion? Some seem to think so. For instance, perhaps it is the case that a person can only appropriately be said to practice religion, if she is aiming to "deal with existential concerns" (Stenmark 2004, 46–47), since this is a constitutive aim of practicing religion. However, whether or not suggestions such as this can be successfully defended is anything but clear. As the study of religions has shown, religious practice is a very complex phenomenon, and it seems to resist any strict definition in terms of necessary conditions a practice needs to satisfy in order to be a religious one. This is not really surprising, as the concept of "religion" is commonly intended to refer to a very wide range of things from world religions such as Christianity and Buddhism to the various unique practices of small tribes. For this reason, many scholars of religion have adopted a more or less Wittgensteinian family resemblance approach to defining religion (see e.g. Clarke and Byrne 1993; Fitzgerald 1996 for critical discussions). According to such approach, for a person to be religious, it is only necessary that the person has some features typical of a practitioner of religion, like some kinds of representations about supernatural reality, ritual behavior, certain kinds of emotions, or something else, but no feature is necessary for a person to be a practitioner of religion. Many seem to use the concept of religion in such a flexible way that a person can even appropriately be referred to as religious, if she merely attends certain events or dresses in some distinctive way, for example. This would mean that one could well lack the aim of, say, successfully dealing with existential concerns, but still be classified as practicing religion. If we adopt such a flexible

conception of religion, practicing religion wouldnot plausibly have any constitutive aims, and the constitutive aims those practicing religion are subject to would rather be related to other activities they participate in. Should this be the case, applying the constitutivist strategy to evaluating religious practice wouldnot give rise to any distinctive religious norms.

In order to give the aims characteristic of religious practice a significant normative role along constitutivist lines, one needs to provide a theory of religious practice according to which there are constitutive aims that define what it is to practice religion. Alternatively, one could focus not on the general constitutive aims of the activity of practicing religion, but instead on some more narrowly defined activity, like practicing some precise form of some precise religious tradition in a certain way, which could as a less diverse phenomenon more plausibly have constitutive aims. For instance, Stenmark (2004, 50) points out that we can generally investigate the aims characteristic of religious practice, but we can also investigate the aims of practicing Christianity, the aims of practicing Protestantism, the aims of practicing Lutheranism, and so on. Adopting a narrower strategy by focusing on some subset of religious practice could work, but it would have the cost of being less applicable to a variety of situations when evaluating religious practice.

Moving on to the next issue, even if practicing religion is agreed to be defined by certain constitutive aims, it is important to notice that most philosophers who advocate a constitutivist theory of normativity do not think that just any constitutive aim of an activity is normatively significant, since this would lead to consequences many deem highly unintuitive. For example, when criticizing constitutivist theories, Judith Jarvis Thomson writes that: "Suppose you are playing chess, and it is your turn to move. You then learn that if you don't move your bishop horizontally, hundreds will die! Are you all the same under an obligation to not do so? Must you, ought you not to do so? That idea is just silly." (Thomson 2008, 90) Not many philosophers are ready to bite the bullet by accepting that in the example above one indeed should favour the rules of chess to the requirements of morality – even though one is participating in the activity of playing chess. Thus, should one not want to embrace a non-restricted form of constitutivism, an explanation must be provided for why the constitutive aims of practicing religion are normatively significant, but the constitutive aims of many other activities such as playing chess are not.

In metanormative literature, the most popular constitutivist answer to this kind of challenge has been to argue that only those activities have normatively significant constitutive aims that are fundamental—that is, these activities are not tokens of any other activities—or in some relevant way inescapable for us—that is, these activities are something we just cannot help but participate in. For instance, from these points of view it can be argued that the constitutive aims of playing chess are not normatively significant,

because one can sensibly stop playing chess at any time, and because playing chess is itself a token of a more fundamental activity, the constitutive aims of which we can refer to in evaluating whether or not we should, say, act according to the rules of chess or the requirements of morality when these two conflict. The most popular suggestions for the most fundamental or inescapable activities with constitutive aims are *acting* and *believing* (e.g. Velleman 2000), or alternatively *agency* (e.g. Korsgaard 1996; 2009; Flowerree 2018).

Practicing religion, like playing chess, does seem at first glance to be escapable for us, and to be a token of some more fundamental activities, such as *acting* and *believing*, which could mean that the constitutive aims of practicing religion are not inherently normatively significant in a constitutivist framework. It would of course be important to determine what the activities that practicing religion is a token of precisely are, since *acting* and *believing*, for example, have plausibly quite different constitutive aims, but the constitutive aims of practicing religion wouldnot be inherently normatively significant. Rather, the normative work would be primarily done by the constitutive aims of the activities practicing religion is a token of.

Maybe some are willing to argue that practicing religion indeed is in some relevant way inescapable for us, or that it is a fundamental activity of its very own kind. For example, the influential scholar of religion, Mircea Éliade (1968), argued against all attempts to reduce the nature of religious practice into something else, such as into its social or biological functions or into kind of a scientific or philosophical practice. Instead, Éliade argued that religious practice is about experiencing what he referred to as "the sacred," and that it should be understood completely on its own terms. Although admittedly quite far-fetched, this line of thought could perhaps be developed so far as to distinguish practicing religion from all other activities altogether. In addition to theories of religion inspired by Éliade, it is also plausible that various mystics have believed practicing religion to be something completely different than anything else in its nature, and to be perhaps even in a relevant way inescapable for those who have established a connection with the divine realm.

However, even if practicing religion had constitutive aims, and was given the status of a fundamental or an inescapable activity, evaluating religious practice by merely referring to these constitutive aims would face a variant of the influential "shmagency" objection against all constitutivist theories. David Enoch (2006; 2011) originally presented this objection against theories according to which the constitutive aims of *agency* ground normativity – most famously championed by Christine Korsgaard (1996; 2009). Enoch complained that justifying the employment of a set of norms when evaluating the normative status of an activity by merely referring to its constitutive aims is problematic, even if the activity in question is fundamental or inescapable, because it seems to always be possible to imagine

a skeptic asking a further question, such as: "Very well, I accept that one cannot φ without being subject to accept the authority of a norm N. I might even accept that I just cannot help but φ. However, why should I care about being classified as φ:ing rather than as whatever it is that I would be classified as doing, if I were to deny the normative authority of N?". Enoch argued that in order to be successful, a constitutivist theory based on the nature of *agency* needs to provide an answer for why someone should not be a "shmagent"—something very close to an agent, but not defined as being subject to accept the authority of the constitutive aims of agency—but rather an agent instead. This allegedly sensible demand for external justification to participate in the activity of agency shows, according to Enoch, that constitutive aims cannot by themselves give rise to normativity even if they are constitutive of an activity that is fundamental or in some way inescapable for us. Instead, Enoch argues that constitutivist arguments can only succeed in showing semantic constraints on being classified as φ:ing, and that we need to use resources unavailable for constitutivism when we investigate whether or not one should φ in the first place.

After Enoch, the shmagency objection has been extended to cover other proposed sources of normatively significant constitutive aims, like *believing* (Flowerree 2018). In a similar fashion, it could be demanded that one provides some kind of justification for practicing religion rather than "shmeligion"—something very close to practicing religion, but not defined as its practitioners being subject to accept the authority of the constitutive aims of practicing religion—in the first place, since it is not enough that one de facto does practice religion, even if it is a fundamental or an inescapable activity. So influential has been the shmagency objection, that in order to be plausible, any constitutivist strategy for defending the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice needs to provide an answer to it by showing that an Enochian demand for external justification to practice religion rather than "shmeligion" is in some way confused (For proposed answers to the shmagency objection, see Paakkunainen 2018a).

The Subjectivist Strategy

Another strategy to defend the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice is to ultimately focus not on the constitutive aims of practicing religion, but rather directly on the aims those practicing religion psychologically have. This move could be motivated by the quite popular subjectivist theories of normativity, according to which what a person should do is fundamentally determined by the person's psychological aims. What I call here "subjectivist theories" includes various theories that differ from each other in various details, such as theories that ground

normativity in one's actual aims – often referred to as "Humean theories" after David Hume, the most famous proponent of a theory like this -, theories that ground normativity in one's counterfactual idealized aims of some sort (Brandt 1979; Joyce 2001; Goldman 2009; Sobel 2016), and perhaps even constructivist theories that ground normativity in the stand-point or process of instrumental rationality (Street 2012). The feature relevant here these theories have in common is that according to them, certain psychological aims of a person fundamentally determine what norms are normative for her.

The main motivations for subjectivist theories come from at least two different directions. First, some (e.g. Joyce 2001; Schroeder 2007; Goldman 2009, 20–24) argue that subjectivist theories can account for our intuitions about what we should do in different situations without invoking entities that are deemed metaphysically problematic in our age of the scientific worldview, such as objective value, platonic forms, and the like. Unlike these entities, our psychological aims are something we can understand and study scientifically. Second, some (e.g. Joyce 2001, 80–85; see also Williams 1981) argue that only subjectivist theories can provide an account of normativity that does not alienate us from our normative reasons in an unacceptable way. In other words, according to these philosophers, only taking our psychological aims into account in the very theory of normativity itself allows for us to be motivated or guided by our normative reasons in the right kind of way, which is argued to be a requirement for a successful theory of normativity.

One way for the subjectivist strategy to respect the spirit of the constitutivist strategy examined above is to claim that although the constitutive aims of practicing religion do not by themselves have any normative force, a practitioner of religion by definition aims to act and believe in accordance with these constitutive aims, since otherwise the person would not be practicing religion, but doing something else instead (recall the example above of a person not accepting the authority of the rules of chess). A subjectivist could then further argue that this fact about the psychological aims of practitioners of religion does have normative force, and that the constitutive aims of practicing religion thus determine the norms we should employ when evaluating it in an indirect manner. Here the subjectivist strategy faces a challenge similar to the one that the constitutivist strategy itself faces—is it really the case that there are constitutive aims that define what it is to practice religion? As I pointed out in the last section, since religious practice seems to resist a definition in terms of necessary conditions, it is not clear that we can talk here of any constitutive aims. Should this be the case, those practicing religion wouldnot necessarily share a certain set of psychological aims as a matter of conceptual fact.

A defender of the subjectivist strategy could accept that practicing religion has no constitutive aims, but still defend the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice, if there nevertheless are psychological aims those practicing religion characteristically at least tend to have. A non-conceptual relationship between religious practice and certain psychological aims could theoretically even take a robust causal form of some kind. For one example, although very controversial, it is at least logically possible that practitioners of religion undergo some kind of divine personal transformation that leads them to have certain theologically correct psychological aims when they practice religion. In situations such as this there would be certain psychological aims those practicing religion characteristically have, but not because of the activity of practicing religion having constitutive aims of some sort. However, it is plausible that psychological aims can usefully be said to be characteristic of religious practice even if the relationship between practicing religion and these psychological aims isn't just as robust as in the example above.

Moving on to the next issue, even if we agreed that practitioners of religion at least tend to have certain psychological aims—for whatever reason—it is very important to notice in assessing the subjectivist strategy that the majority of modern subjectivists allow for "idealization" in order to avoid what are often seen as the weaknesses of traditional Humean subjectivism. Many deem it problematic that Humean subjectivism, according to which merely having a psychological aim to φ suffices for having a normative reason to φ, seems to give even impulsive or otherwise defective psychological aims normative significance (consider, for instance, the defective psychological aims often caused by depression). When subjectivists idealize, they argue that the normatively significant aims of persons are not their actual aims, but rather the aims they would have in a certain counterfactual situation. Among suggested counterfactual situations are one in which a person is fully informed about the matter at hand, and is thinking clearly (Joyce 2001; Goldman 2009), and one in which a person has underwent the process of cognitive psychotherapy, as Richard Brandt (1979, 113) famously argued. Idealization makes it possible to move past Humean subjectivism, but to still retain the spirit of subjectivism by grounding normativity in certain kind of psychological aims rather than in something else.

Since most contemporary subjectivists prefer a version in which idealization plays an important role, the psychological aims practitioners of religion at least tend to have might only have a very limited amount of normative significance even in a subjectivist framework. For instance, a critic of religions could argue that many of those who actually practice religion wouldnot in an idealized situation have the aims practitioners of religion at least tend to have, because they would then notice that religious practice is actually a result of the workings of some kind of cognitive

biases—like a Freudian defense stemming from the fear of death—and therefore unattractive. Perhaps this could be a result of undergoing the process of cognitive psychotherapy à la Brandt. On the other hand, it is also possible to argue that many persons who do not actually have the aims those practicing religion at least tend to have would have these aims in an idealized situation. It could be argued, for instance, that in an appropriate idealized situation, even atheists would notice that God exists and loves us, which would cause them to be attracted to religious practice and to the aims those practicing religion at least tend to have. In a subjectivist framework, the normative significance of the aims those practicing religion at least tend to have is thus very much dependent on the nature of idealization a given subjectivist theory requires, and on what effects the appropriate idealization has on the aims persons have. These are both highly non-trivial questions, which is why the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice is anything but a straightforward matter in a subjectivist framework.

The final issue I will mention here that should be taken into account when pursuing a subjectivist strategy is that although religious practice seems to be very unique and complex in its nature with its ritual, emotive, and cognitive dimensions, to name a few, it is a relevant possibility that ultimately a subjectivist has to concede that those practicing religion have primarily or even exclusively epistemic psychological aims. This might follow from the fact that religious *beliefs* seem to play an important role in religious practice. For instance, the pioneer of the field of science and religion, Ian G. Barbour, asserts that: "Above all, religion aims at the transformation of personal life, particularly by liberation from self-centeredness through commitment to a more inclusive center of devotion. Yet each of these patterns of life and practice presupposes a structure of shared beliefs. When the credibility of central religious beliefs is questioned, other aspects of religion are also challenged." (Barbour 1997, 7) Barbour argues that all non-doxastic aspects of religious practice are highly dependent on religious beliefs, and that religious beliefs thus occupy a central position in religious practice.

Should those highlighting the role of beliefs in religious practice be right, this might well be relevant for the subjectivist strategy, since during the 21th century several philosophers (e.g. Shah 2006; Steglich-Petersen 2006; for criticism see Leary 2017; Rinard 2018; 2019) have argued, for various different reasons, that we can only have epistemic aims when we form beliefs. This feature, according to these philosophers, makes beliefs different to other propositional attitudes, such as *hoping* that something is true, or *imagining* that something is true. Should this be the case, and should we give religious beliefs a very central role in religious practice, subjectivism could well imply that epistemic norms should have the primary role when we evaluate religious practice, since those practicing religion

would have primarily epistemic aims. This would mean that the norms we should employ when evaluating religious practice are a lot less unique and complex in nature than some have suggested, since the appropriate norms would be the very same epistemic norms that should also be employed when evaluating all other beliefs besides religious ones.

However, in addition to the jury being still out there on the possibility of us having non-epistemic aims when forming beliefs, not everyone agrees that beliefs play a central role in religious practice. For instance, philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and his followers, often referred to as "Wittgensteinian fideists" (most influentially D. Z. Phillips 1988; 2000), are often interpreted as advocating a position according to which beliefs do not play an important role in religious practice. Instead, Wittgensteinians see practicing religion as a practical activity more akin to games and traditional conventions than to doxastic practices like science or philosophy. Philosopher of religion Neil Van Leeuwen (2014) has also recently argued that beliefs do not play an important role in religious practice. Rather, basing his argumentation on psychological and anthropological evidence, he argues that what he calls "religious credences" are more alike to propositional attitudes like "imagining" than to beliefs. Even if it was true that we can only have epistemic aims when we form beliefs, religious credences are not, according to Van Leeuwen's theory, subject to this limitation.

To summarize: it is important for those pursuing a subjectivist strategy to notice that whether or not it is possible for persons to have non-epistemic psychological aims when practicing religion is dependent both 1) on the role beliefs are given in religious practice, and 2) on what stance one takes on the possibility of us having non-epistemic aims when forming beliefs.

Subjectivist theories have their defenders, but they have also received their fair share of criticism – especially from philosophers who advocate some kind of aim-independent theory of normativity. Maybe the most influential of these critics is Derek Parfit (2006; 2011), who argued throughout his life that persons' psychological aims have nothing whatsoever to do with normativity, and that we thus need to conceive of normativity as a domain fundamentally distinct from these aims. In order to be plausible, a subjectivist strategy has to take the criticisms provided by these authors into account. I will turn to these aim-independent theories of normativity in more detail in the next section.

Aim-Independent Theories of Normativity

In the last section, I examined two kinds of aim-dependent theories of normativity one can invoke in defending the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice—although, as we saw, it is far from clear whether these attempts can succeed even if the theories are

accepted. In this section, I look at the options in the other direction, and briefly examine aim-independent theories of normativity, which are not in a fundamental way sensitive to the aims characteristic of activities. First, I will examine non-naturalistic theories of normativity, which are probably the most influential alternatives to aim-dependent theories in contemporary metanormative research. Second, I will examine an aim-independent theory put forward by Stenmark explicitly in the context of evaluating religious practice. Since aim-independent theories are not in a fundamental way sensitive to the aims characteristic of activities, they seem to be naturally suited for denying rather than defending the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice. However, I will return to this issue after giving examples of aim-independent theories, and argue that this is not necessarily the case.

According to non-naturalistic theories, normativity is a unique non-natural domain of reality of its very own kind that cannot be reduced to non-normative facts, such as facts about tables, mountains, physics, biology, or psychology. In recent years, perhaps the most popular non-naturalistic theories have adopted a quietist strategy (most notably Scanlon 1998; Parfit 2011; 2014), according to which some entities have the non-natural property of being intrinsically valuable – or as many authors have in recent times preferred to say, intrinsically reason-giving—and this fact cannot be further explained in any useful way without changing the subject. A non-naturalist can, however, also attempt to further explain the nature of non-natural normative facts by, for instance, exploring their relations to some non-normative facts in a non-reductive manner.

Invoking non-natural normative facts in theories of normativity has been criticized for decades, because these facts seem to be, as John Mackie (1977, 38–42) famously put it, "metaphysically queer." It seems to be hard for people to even get a grasp on what is meant by the concept of "non-natural normative fact," and these facts seem to be utterly different to anything else we know of, so why invoke them in a theory of normativity? The defenders of non-naturalistic theories answer to these kinds of criticisms in different ways. Some philosophers argue that non-natural normative facts are not actually strange in any vicious way, and can even perhaps be studied scientifically to a certain extent. More often, however, the defenders of non-naturalistic theories have argued that, strange or not, invoking non-natural normative facts is necessary for a theory to not lose its "distinctive normative character" (see Paakkunainen 2018b for an analysis of arguments of this kind), and for a theory to yield correct verdicts on what a person should do in certain situations. For example, in his much discussed "the agony argument," Parfit (2011, 73–82) argues that only by affirming the existence of non-natural normative facts can we explain the allegedly obvious fact that everyone has normative reasons to avoid situations that would cause her to experience agony in the future. Parfit

intends to target with the agony argument especially subjectivist theories examined above, since by idealizing these theories often seem to be flexible enough to be able to yield the same verdicts as non-naturalistic theories do about whether or not S should φ. For a subjectivist response to the agony argument, see Sobel (2016, 275–97).

For another example of a noteworthy aim-independent theory, I will pay attention to how an influential author in the field of science and religion, Mikael Stenmark (1995), has explicitly argued that the aims characteristic of religious practice do not fundamentally determine the norms we should employ when evaluating it. Although Stenmark himself has been instrumental in bringing the aims of religion and science to the center of attention in the field of science and religion, he also argues that we should introduce the concept of "axiological rationality" in order to properly evaluate these practices (Stenmark 1995, 255–56, 265). According to Stenmark, participating in a practice can only be axiologically rational, if acting and believing in accordance with its characteristic aims is in one's best interests, if acting and believing in such a way is instrumental in satisfying what Stenmark refers to as "intrinsic human needs." Paradigmatic examples of "intrinsic human needs" Stenmark gives are the maintenance of one's well-being, developing meaningful friendships, and being well informed about one's environment (Stenmark 1955, 255). Satisfying "intrinsic human needs" such as these just allegedly is something that is good for beings like us, which is why Stenmark asserts that they fundamentally determine whether something should be done or not. For this reason, according to Stenmark, our focus should ultimately be on the ability of religious practice to satisfy "intrinsic human needs" when we evaluate it. Stenmark does not really set his argumentation in to the wider context of metanormative research in too much detail, which means that as a theory of normativity it seems to be open for various interpretations, but it can nevertheless be further developed as an aim-independent theory of normativity.

These are just two examples of various possible aim-independent theories of normativity. As I said before, aim-independent theories of normativity seem to be most suited for denying rather than defending the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice, since these theories are not in a fundamental way sensitive to the aims characteristic of activities. However, I will now give reasons to think that aim-independent theories do not necessarily imply that the aims characteristic of religious practice have no normative significance whatsoever.

For starters, it is possible for an aim-independent theory to suggest that certain things religious practice aims at are normatively significant—by being intrinsically valuable, for instance—and that acting and believing in accordance with the aims characteristic of religious practice is something we have normative reasons to do for this reason. However, apart from

suggestions such as this being very controversial, it is important to notice that even if something like this was the case, the aims characteristic of religious practice wouldnot plausibly play any interesting role in *determining* the norms we should employ in evaluating activities. Rather, these aims' normative significance would be completely parasitic on the normative significance of the things religious practice aims at. For example, if a certain kind of transformation of one's personal life was intrinsically valuable, this wouldnot be affected by whether or not religious practice characteristically aims at it.

Alternatively, and more interestingly, an aim-independent theory could suggest that it is a normative fact that certain persons have normative reasons to successfully achieve the aims characteristic of religious practice *because* these are the aims characteristic of religious practice. For just one possible example, perhaps a case could be made that it is intrinsically valuable to achieve the aims of any practice one participates in, because there is value in such successful achieving itself. This would also mean that acting and believing in accordance with the aims characteristic of religious practice is something those practicing religion have normative reasons to do, whatever these aims exactly are. Should something like this be the case, the aims characteristic of religious practice would indeed have an important and informative role in determining what norms we should employ when evaluating it. However, even if there are theoretically possible scenarios in which the aims characteristic of religious practice play a role like this, to assert that such scenario actually obtains would be to make a very substantial normative claim, for which reason it is unclear to what extent the possibilities are significant.

To make some conclusions, since it is theoretically possible for an aim-independent theory of normativity to give the aims characteristic of religious practice at least some kind of normative significance, aim-independent theories should not be taken to automatically imply that the aims characteristic of religious practice have no normative significance whatsoever. However, those evaluating the normative status of religious practice should keep in mind that according to various aim-independent theories discussed in contemporary metanormative research, there is nothing fundamentally wrong with evaluating religious practice by employing norms that are not sensitive to its characteristic aims. It might well be the case that employing norms like this when evaluating religious practice would be problematic from the point of view of religious practice itself, or that it would be dialectically ineffective, since many practitioners of religion could deny the authority of these norms. However, according to various aim-independent theories, these are not conditions norms necessarily have to satisfy in order to be normative.

The Anthropological Strategy

As I mentioned in the introduction of this article, although not common, some philosophers have raised doubts over the possibility of any kind of theory of genuine normativity, and instead argued that we should only work with non-authoritative normativity in normative research. Before concluding the article, I briefly examine the prospects of defending the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice in light of such position.

David Copp (1997), Evan Tiffany (2007), and Derek Baker (2018) are among the philosophers who have argued at length that there is not any well-defined or coherent concept of genuine normativity. According to these philosophers, talking of the "normative authority" of certain norms or about what one "*really* should do" is only kind of "table-thumping" without any real content—as Baker (2018, 234) puts it. Baker further characterizes the nature of normativity as follows: "Individual agents may have their deliberative standards for measuring one kind of consideration against another, but these standards are themselves arbitrary, in the sense that each is simply one more standard among many. Conflicts between […] any […] two normative standards, cannot be resolved by coming to appreciate some philosophical (or everyday) truth. Rather, it is resolved through […] partisanship and existential choice." (Baker 2018, 251) According to philosophers who deny the existence of genuine normativity, there are norms that we employ in deliberating on what to do, and there are norms we do not employ in such a way, and there is not really anything philosophically interesting to say about the matter by invoking the vague concept of "genuine normativity."

Should Baker and other like-minded philosophers be right, it could be argued that it is not philosophically interesting at all to investigate how activities fare with respect to norms alien to their characteristic aims, because normative research should be practiced as a branch of purely descriptive anthropology that focuses on the norms people actually embrace. According to this line of thought, although no norm has the kind of normative authority that genuine normativity requires, some norms are nevertheless more philosophically interesting than the others in virtue of being something that people take seriously in deliberation, and also in social reality by criticizing those who violate them and applauding those who adhere to them. We can refer to the kind of normativity related to norms people actually take seriously as "formal normativity," following Jack Woods (2018). Even if we doubted the meaningfulness of the concept of "genuine normativity," formal normativity could nevertheless still be argued to be an interesting species of normativity. This position could be relevant in the context of evaluating religious practice, since if practitioners of religion are characteristically guided by certain aims, or criticized and applauded

on the basis of these aims, it could be argued that these aims determine to a great extent the appropriate norms to employ when evaluating religious practice just in virtue of being taken seriously by the practitioners.

That said, denying the existence of genuine normativity would have consequences many deem highly unintuitive. The norms of morality or the norms of practical reason, for example, would in an important sense be of no more normative significance than any conventional or even made up norm. Because of this, denying the existence of genuine normativity requires one to bite a bullet many judge to be a very bitter one.

Conclusions

In this article, I critically investigated with the help of contemporary metanormative research the nowadays common claim that the aims characteristic of religious practice are normatively significant. This is not unfortunately something that has been done before in any great detail, even though metanormative research specializes in issues such as this. As became clear, whether or not, and in what way exactly, the aims characteristic of religious practice are normatively significant is very much dependent both on controversial issues in metanormative research and on controversial issues concerning the nature of religion, which is why no position should be taken for granted on this issue. Many issues should be further investigated in more detail concerning the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice—for one example, could the natural functions Neo-Aristotelian theories of normativity (e.g., Foot 2001; Bloomfield 2004) pay attention to be understood as a further kind of potentially normatively significant aims, and does religious practice characteristically have such natural functions? My hope is that this article helps everyone interested in evaluating religious practice to see various complex issues that underlie the space of possibilities available on the question of the normative significance of the aims characteristic of religious practice, and encourages them to pay further attention to contemporary metanormative research in this context.

Note

1.   A referee points out that although the notion of "metanormative theory" is commonly used in contemporary philosophy to refer to theories about the conditions of having normative reasons to do something, one can additionally refer by the notion to theories about the exact nature of normative reasons themselves. This is a useful distinction to keep in mind, as various theories of normativity I will examine are indeed theories only in the former sense of the notion, not the latter.

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