

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

God as an asset and some paradoxical implications

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Abstract

Conventional monotheist religious believers commonly believe that God will sometimes assist them, will be on their side. God, in other words, they believe, is an asset. Conceptually an asset is anything (such as a person or an object) that can assist one, something that is *prima facie* good to possess or to have on one's side, that is likely to or can assist one to make one's life go better, overall. Having assets can have weighty implications, including moral ones. I argue that here the implications are quite surprising, and indeed paradoxical. In particular, the religious will have in certain circumstances good reasons, and sometimes even moral obligations, to give up their interests for those who lack such assets, namely secular non-believers. The claim is not that religious people actually see things in this way but that, normatively, given their beliefs, many of them should, in the sense of the subjective 'ought'. This can be relevant both in this world and concerning the next. Moreover, in many situations plausible religious replies are not sufficient to block the move. This topic has not, to the best of my knowledge, ever been seriously analysed philosophically.

Keywords: Religious beliefs; assets; moral obligations; moral dilemmas; moral paradoxes

Preliminaries

Conventional monotheist religious believers believe that God is all-powerful, all-knowing and all-good.¹ They think that there are good reasons to do what they think God commands, both principled and self-interested ones. Moreover, and particularly if one follows God, they believe that God will sometimes assist them, will be on their side. God, in other words, they believe, is an advantage, or an *asset*. Conceptually an asset is anything (such as a person or an object) that can assist one, something that is generally advantageous, that it is *prima facie* good to possess or to have on one's side, that is likely to or can assist one to make one's life go better, overall.² Pascal (1670/1995) famously argued that one ought to try to become religious, in order to be on God's good side, thus hopefully ending up in heaven. There is a variety of views among believers, and differences in religious doctrine, but clearly most believe that God is an asset for believers such as themselves, that his existence is or can be good for them. Indeed, this description of folk religious sentiment seems almost impossible to deny, and is implied in the texts and practices of theistic traditions. Believers typically *give praise* to God for his beneficence, *pray* to God for assistance to themselves and their loved ones, and feel personally *assured* by the thought of his presence.

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This does not mean that the believers follow God only for self-interested reasons; many surely do so because they believe that that is the right thing to do. God is, for believers, also other things, beyond an asset, such as a value; and it is also recognized that some of the harms of this world and not only its benefits happen ‘in God’s world’. Yet the idea of God as an asset is clearly explicitly and implicitly there. This belief matters. Having assets can have weighty implications, including moral ones. *I argue that here the implications are very surprising, and indeed paradoxical.* In particular, the religious will have in certain circumstances good reasons, and sometimes even moral obligations, to give up their interests for those who lack such assets, namely secular non-believers. The claim is not that religious people actually see things in this way but that, normatively, given their beliefs, many of them should; in the sense of the subjective ‘ought’. Moreover, as we shall see, in many situations plausible religious replies are not sufficient to block the move. Sacrificing for others has of course an important role in many religions, but the idea of a possible moral obligation of the religious towards the secular because of the notion of God as an asset for the religious has not, to the best of my knowledge, ever been seriously analysed philosophically.

The widespread view among the religious is that God is a being that, they believe, is likely to be on their side, and make *an actual positive difference* in their lives, in this life and in the afterlife. This may include, in folk religious monotheistic belief, also an idea that God’s ‘asset aspect’ may extend to the next world, such as if he sends good believers to heaven. Not all the religious believe in an afterlife, and for those who do not the argument of this article will be more limited. Admittedly, God’s beneficence is not automatic, he ‘works in mysterious ways’, and his reasons may be unfathomable to the believing. The religious will also often have some self-doubts, as to how worthy they themselves are as recipients of divine beneficence.³ Nevertheless, there is frequently a belief that God loves you, and a clear moral expectation that God will look out for the honest believer walking in his path. That, for instance, lies at the basis of Job’s wonder and complaint (and our identification with Job), as to how he, God’s obedient servant, is being treated. The religious, then, according to their typical view of things, are *prima facie* better off than their secular brethren.

What matters for this article are two categories: those religious people who believe in a God whom they take to be an asset for them and not (or not to the same extent) for the secular, and secular non-believers in God-as-an-asset. For the sake of simplicity this article will call the former ‘Rs’, and the latter ‘Ss’, even though there is no intent to take R to refer to all religious people, since there are examples of non-theistic religions that do not even mention God (e.g. Buddhism, Daoism), and some religious people may take God to be an equal asset to everyone, irrespective of religious belief and affiliation.⁴ We also need not worry about the doubting, the agnostic, or those who believe in an impersonal God, or in one that otherwise is not concerned with the lives of individuals. In order to explore our issue, what matters, again, are two categories: the more or less conventionally ‘folk’ religious, who believe in God as well as in his being an asset for them, and the rest, whom we can assume for the sake of simplicity to be secular non-believers.

Finally, we shall assume, as major religions do, that being religious makes a significant difference from the point of view of God, so that, while he does not abandon the secular, there is, nevertheless, a special bond between God and his faithful followers: *a commitment by the deity to the pious*. This means that according to widespread beliefs of the religious, while God is a special asset of theirs, the secular are not in the same position. This view is also shared by most of the secular who (in a way that echoes Pascal’s move) would acknowledge that, if it turns out in the end that God exists, then by remaining secular they have probably missed out on a chance to have God more on their side.⁵

Why believing that God is an asset matters

Consider:

Desert Dilemma

Two very good close friends have taken a hike together. They have, through unforeseen bad luck, ended up in a desolate place, with no food. There are two paths, yet they do not know which is the better one to take. It makes sense to part, each taking one of the paths. This increases the likelihood that at least one of them will be saved and, if that person finds help, hopefully he could get the rescuers to come and find the other friend in time. All they have are three bottles of water, and a camel. They decide to split their assets: one will take the camel and one bottle; the other, who will have to walk, will get two bottles. But then, as they hug each other goodbye and prepare to part, the camel is bitten by a venomous snake, and promptly dies. What should they do now? One option is to have a draw, hence randomly deciding who gets two bottles and who only one. Other psychological and moral considerations are raised by the two as they discuss the matter, such as their different ages, and the fact that one of them has young children. Then one of the friends, R, makes a suggestion. God is surely aware of their predicament. He firmly believes *that God will not abandon him*, a lifelong good religious disciple. Furthermore, as he walks along the path, he will pray to God, and ask for his help. Moreover, since God will know that he has given his friend the two bottles and kept only one for himself, God may give him extra credit, both morally and for his manifest religious faith. Don't worry, he tells his secular friend S, I have the greatest asset that one could wish for – I am not alone, God is on my side. I have trust in God, and faith that I will survive even with the single bottle. You are my dearest friend. Please take the two bottles and I will take one.⁶

Now consider:

Lifeboat Dilemma

Two very good close friends have taken a journey together in a fairly large ship. They have, through unforeseen bad luck, ended up in a storm, and the ship is about to capsize. All will drown, except those who get into the sole remaining lifeboat (all the other lifeboats have been swept away by the storm). There is only one place left in the lifeboat; one of the friends will take it and should be saved, the other one will drown. How should they proceed? One option is to have a quick draw, hence randomly deciding who gets the last available seat. There are various other possibly relevant psychological and moral considerations. Then one of the friends, R, makes a suggestion. He firmly believes in God. God is all good. He himself has tried very hard to be both a good person and a religious observer all his life. Moreover, if he gives up his place for his friend, God will surely be aware of this great sacrifice. Don't worry, he tells his secular friend S. I have trust in God, and faith that I will be sent to heaven. Your chances, I believe, are much slimmer. You are my dearest friend. Please go ahead, and take the seat in the lifeboat.

Sacrifice by religious people, in the appropriate situations, for the sake of the secular, due to the belief of the religious that they have a distinct advantage in having God as an asset, is surely something that we can sometimes expect. The sacrifice R makes for the sake of his closest friend in Desert Dilemma is morally admirable, but given his beliefs, makes sense, and does not seem out of place. (If one's intuitions are resistant here, just imagine that R and S are brothers.) It naturally follows from his closeness to S and how much he cares about him, coupled with his understanding of things, of the way

that he perceives himself as being *privileged* in having divine-based hope, in God's being on his side, in a way that S, his friend, does not. Given the camel, the choice was clear – the person without the camel ought to get the spare water bottle. But surely, for a believer, God is even better than a camel!?

In Lifeboat Dilemma, matters are more difficult, since R realizes that if he gives up his place, he won't realistically be saved, and his life will end; only the promise of the afterlife remains. Yet as a true believer, who feels that he has been an exemplary person both in moral and in religious respects, and moreover has now given up his place in the lifeboat for his beloved friend, R has good reason, given his beliefs in and about God (and heaven), to believe that he *will end up in heaven*. There is much less, if any, reason to think so of his good close friend, S. My argument does not need certainty on R's part, which might indicate smugness and complacency concerning his virtues and standing before God. *It suffices that R believes that his chances of reaching heaven are greater than are S's*. Given that we are assuming that R and S are otherwise equal, differing only in their ir/religiosity, surely this assumption is standard in much of religious doctrine and folk belief, and very reasonable for R, given his beliefs.⁷

Giving up the place in the lifeboat is supererogatory, but at least in a situation like this, there are, for R, certain good reasons to do so. These reasons begin from his love for S and devotion to him, but are also due in part to his belief in God. The situation is analogical to a seventy-year-old man giving up his place for his thirty-year-old friend, since he himself has already lived many more years than the friend will have, if he now dies. Having (had) the extra years provides a reason for the sacrifice. In the age-difference case, the years are behind one, while with the afterlife, the years are ahead of one, but in this context this does not seem to matter. And the situation is radically *asymmetrical*. Clearly there can be no similar God-related reasons available from S's perspective, to make the sacrifice for R, either in Desert Dilemma or in Lifeboat Dilemma.

Note that we can set aside the notion of an 'asset' and translate my claim into one about one's well-being, broadly understood:

- (A) Many religious believers hold that, in virtue of their relationship with God, their lives are likely to be significantly better, in important objective respects, than the lives of non-believers.
- (B) In some situations involving two people, one of whom is a believer and another a non-believer, and where their choices can affect which of them might be subject to significant harm, the believer has good reasons to, and perhaps morally ought, to prioritize the non-believer over themselves, given that they hold that the non-believer is significantly worse-off (from A).⁸

However, the notion of 'asset' as I use it here should not be seen as problematic, and is fruitful.

Objections and replies

First, one might say that the religious person is inherently worth more than the secular, because he or she is a believer. It is better that the heathen die than a believer. And so the religious by no means ought to give up any advantage for the sake of the secular. Many believers, and one hopes most, do not believe this denial of what is, from one central religious perspective, the criterion that ought to matter, namely, the equal worth of all people: God's children. We will set this objectionable thought aside.

A different thought is that God has set the world so that the religious function, in the relevant respects, just like the secular, without building upon divine assistance. The

religious when sick ought to go to the doctor, and when in trouble they should use all the resources they can (fairly) use, just like the secular. God, in turn, will do as he sees fit. This is plausible insofar as it is, indeed, reasonable to think that the religious ought to function in the world in an active way, rather than expect God to do everything for them. Monotheistic religions also emphasize that one ought not to rely upon miracles but rather operate in life as best as one can. In the Abrahamic faiths, relying on miracles is strongly discouraged. The Bible tells people to ‘watch their lives’ and not to depend on miracles for survival: God helps those who help themselves (see e.g. Deuteronomy 6:16). Here we might note Jesus’ own clear example of this in his response to Satan’s second temptation in the wilderness to throw himself off a cliff and let the angels save him: we are not to put God to the test (Matthew 4:1–11). God is said to be on one’s side, if one is properly religious, but that does not mean that one can rely on miracles and not do one’s part.

But our concern here is more limited: what ought (in the subjective sense) the religious to do under conditions of danger and scarcity, when belief in the likelihood of God’s assistance is salient for them? Under such conditions the religious of the sort that we are considering do *pray* for divine assistance, are *comforted* by their belief that God is out there watching over them, and sometimes they even *undertake* things (e.g. transform themselves, donate a kidney) in the hope, trust, and faith for divine support. All these are clear indications that the relevant believers see God as an actual and potential asset for them. But then, this opens up the possibility of consideration for the secular, whom such religious people consider to be far less secure, not only psychologically but in actual reality.

Third, are the religious forbidden to opt for self-sacrifice, and hence could not properly sacrifice their interests for the secular? This, surely, is too strong. Sometimes the language of obligations would be improper, yet some sacrifice by Rs for Ss in light of the idea of God as an Asset would be reasonable, given Rs’ beliefs. Letting someone else who is behind you in line, but seems extremely anxious, take your place and get the last available Corona vaccine for that day, and waiting to get one in a few days (when there will be enough vaccines for everyone), is morally admirable. If a religious woman does this, quite naturally, also with some thoughts about her faith in God, surely her act cannot thereby become immoral, and it seems wildly implausible that her deed thereby somehow makes her bad in religious terms. It would be difficult to find fault in such basic human generosity.⁹

In many other instances, religious people knowingly sacrifice themselves or incur great risks (e.g. a soldier jumping on a loose grenade in order to save his comrades; a person rushing into the neighbour’s burning house in order to save a crying toddler; protesters confronting a dictatorship), while hardly any religious tradition would want to criticize such actions. And, of course, certain religious traditions such as Christianity particularly praise the willingness to sacrifice, in the appropriate situations.¹⁰

Fourth, there is more generally the worry that, by acting in the light of my argument, the believer would be ‘playing God’. It is, as already noted, a common religious assumption that God’s ways are inscrutable and we should not presume to understand them. Moreover, God helps those who help themselves, etc., so one should neither passively expect assistance nor interfere in events in a way that presumes understanding of God’s plan, or that could disrupt it. However, this sort of objection would preclude the familiar ways in which religious can be generous and sacrifice their interests or even themselves for others, and consider this permissible or even appropriate, as we have just seen.

The same sort of reply would help counter a further, fifth worry, that operating in the way I raise, in favour of the secular, might even be dangerously presumptuous. For, by presuming a benefit – which might be a freely given gift from God, not something God is required to give – one perhaps in fact gives God reason *not* to bestow that gift upon

you. Such a worry, again, cannot be too strong, lest it preclude common generosity, like giving up one's place in the line for the vaccines, coupled with the hope that God is watching over one; or heroic self-sacrifice by religious people who nevertheless think that they are likely to go to heaven.

Sixth, it might be countered here that, after all, the way to religion and a relationship with God is open to all. If the secular lack God as an asset, this is their responsibility; and if it is their fault, they have only themselves to blame. Deserved differences are relevant to what the better off owe the worse off, and the religious need not compensate the secular for the latter's willing failure. There is no reason why the religious, who have worked hard and as it were invested in their relationship with the divine, should then have to share the fruits of their investment with those who did not bother to do the same. Even sophisticated versions of egalitarianism such as luck-egalitarianism (e.g. Arneson (1989); Cohen (1989); Temkin (1993)) do not hold that strict equality is always the rule, that whatever one has done, he or she has the right to a share of the resources of others who have fared better. On the contrary, if one is considerably less well-off than others because s/he, say, gambled away his or her share, or otherwise behaved irresponsibly, then it would be *anti*-egalitarian for others to have to pay for his or her irresponsibility and cover his or her losses. Similarly for the secular, who have chosen to be 'Godless', and now are not entitled to expect any share of the 'assets' the religious have acquired through faithfully serving God.

However, this argument has severe limitations. It seems to be common among folk believers, and I need not deny that it can carry some weight. Nevertheless, typically, the religious are religious because they were born to religious parents, just as the secular were born to secular ones. There is gross brute inequality here in the initial conditions for religiosity. Moreover, unlike the way one spends (or saves, or invests) one's money, which is as a rule under one's direct control, being religious in our sort of context is a matter of belief. If one does not believe, then presumably one does not have a good (intellectually honest) reason to try to make oneself believe, but rather continue to investigate the issues open mindedly. And it would be highly unreasonable to hold that everyone ought to believe, namely, that the existence of God is so obvious that not believing is manifestly a culpable fault and renders one morally undeserving in the relevant sense. In most contexts it would be unreasonable for the religious to see being secular, as such, as a serious moral failure, which would then make the non-believer deserving of the possible loss (hence the believer would never be in a position in which she should bear a cost instead of a non-believer). In any case, one cannot will oneself into believing in God, and if one does not, then (if God is an asset for believers), the secular have little say as to whether they will have the assets that the religious have.¹¹

Seventh, it might be claimed that urging the religious to take into consideration the thought that they believe that they, unlike the secular, generally have God's support, and so ought in some circumstances to consider being generous to those likely to be less fortunate, means that we are cynically taking advantage of the false beliefs of the religious, for the sake of the secular. But this is an external perspective, assuming the secular point of view and indeed atheism. To say so from the religious point of view would be paradoxical. The belief in God as a personal asset follows from typical, normative religious beliefs of the sort we have seen; it is a corollary of ordinary folk faith and trust in the deity. But if that is the foundation for the religious person's engagement in the world, then the implications of the 'asset' aspect cannot be so easily dismissed. At least on standard deontological ethical theories, we as moral agents are responsible/have a duty to act based on what we take to be the facts of the case. So it's how R sees the facts that matter for R's moral responsibilities.

Finally, it might be claimed that recognizing a possible obligation of the religious to give up valuable advantages for the secular is likely to harm people's motivation to become religious. This is another side of the coin of the admirable added value and purity of motivation which can accrue to the religious, for such 'asset-based' sacrifice (see more below). However, at least for some, this might make religion more admirable and more attractive. To deny this possibility is surely too cynical, and puts too much emphasis on people's being religious as a way of getting on and furthering themselves in the world. In any case, if what I have argued is convincing, there is a striking *test* here of the religiosity and moral decency of religious people, given their beliefs, in certain contexts. If they really believe in God, and then believe (as surely it is then sensible for many of them to do) that he is an asset for them, then such beliefs have consequences.

Some further tentative thoughts and implications

We saw good reasons to think that R's choices in Desert Dilemma and Lifeboat Dilemma were morally admirable, and show great religious faith, and trust in the deity. Beyond that, what we think will also be affected by whether we believe that God exists, and is likely to behave in the way R thinks. And this brings up, first, the question of how S, his good friend, ought to act. If S indeed has no faith, and thinks that R is living in fantasy, then arguably, as his good friend, he ought not to let R do what he intends. In Desert Dilemma, a demanding view would be that he should refuse outright to receive the spare bottle, and insist that they conduct a draw. Perhaps the thought of God and his support gives R psychological comfort, but a non-existent God will not help him practically. S believes that R's belief can be his undoing, that he is harmed or at least seriously put in danger by his false belief in the deity. So he ought to avoid taking R's offer. A less demanding view might be that S does not have to avoid taking up R's offer. If we all have an initial equal claim to the water, there is no harm in letting someone voluntarily sacrifice his right to a chance for some of it. S's obligation, therefore, is merely to tell R that he, S, thinks that R is mistaken. If R nevertheless insists, S may take the water. In any case, a serious attempt by S is called for. In Lifeboat Dilemma, matters are even more striking. The gift of an extra water bottle is an asset, and getting it increases the probability of surviving, but the sole seat on the lifeboat is crucial. Since S does not believe in heaven, he believes that R's giving him the available place amounts to total self-sacrifice (that cannot be justified by any difference among the two friends, i.e. that R will probably go to heaven while S is unlikely to).¹²

From the secular, strongly unbelieving perspective, the more the religious would act in the way that we are arguing they should (in the appropriate cases), given their beliefs in God as an asset, the more the decent secular ought to aim to save them from what the secular believe to be groundless reasons for sacrifice; namely, from their own beliefs. We would then see, in the appropriate circumstances, and with people of good will and decency on both sides, the equivalent of a *comedy of the absurd*. The religious will seek to sacrifice for the sake of the secular, while the secular will seek to stop the religious from sacrificing their interests for them. The secular have a self-serving interest that the religious live according to the implications of their beliefs. In fact, if many of the religious would do so, the secular, paradoxically, will also have a pro tanto interest that there be more religious people; indeed, that other secular people become religious! But, in all decency, the secular should not wish that the religious operate as they should, given their beliefs, since the secular take these to be but fictions. This would be paternalistic, but morally seems appropriate. The secular should not take advantage of what they take to be the credulity of the religious.

Second, what practical implications would there be for the religious towards the secular in their society, once they come to recognize that God is an asset? This would surely depend on many factors and will be contextual. To the extent that the situation is similar to Desert Dilemma and Lifeboat Dilemma, that is, with people who have close relationships and commitments, the reasons of the religious, and even their moral obligations, might be considerable.

Desert Dilemma and Lifeboat Dilemma present two different sorts of sacrifices. The first sort of sacrifice, for example in giving up the water bottle, involves trust and faith in God's assistance, when confronting risk, with the hope and belief that matters will be fine despite the sacrifice. It is hoped that the belief and good deeds of the religious will be recognized and, thanks to God, *no harm* will befall them. The second sort of sacrifice, for example in giving up one's seat in the lifeboat, involves an expectation of one's death, and the price is thus greater (or at least much more directly certain). Here the trust and the faith are that God will *send you to heaven*.

The first sort of sacrifice is readily available – cases like giving up one's place in the line for vaccines is an example of it, in moderate form. Opportunities for the latter sort of sacrifice are also available. Within a close, integrated fighting unit composed of religious and secular soldiers, a religious soldier can be motivated by the thought that he or she ought to be ready to take on particularly dangerous tasks for his or her secular buddies. If they die, they are unlikely to go to heaven, and hence their existence will presumably (at best) simply end. He or she, by contrast, will indeed be deprived of the rest of their life on earth, but are likely to have many happy years ahead of them in heaven.¹³

The two sorts of sacrifice can be combined. One can give up one's priority for an organ transplant, so that one will then be likely to receive an organ only months later, with the thought that (a) one has faith in God and trust that he will help to keep one alive and healthy till then; and (b) one believes that if matters become worse and one dies, one will go to heaven.

Real belief leads to real trust in God and therefore in what will happen in God's world, hence an inclination and a willingness (under conditions such as we specified) to behave in certain generous ways. Many religious people do a tremendous amount of work in trying to convince others to become religious too; and that would further indicate that they really believe that God is an asset for the religious, and that they want to spread the good to others. However, it seems that hardly any religious people currently do such things as we are considering, namely, operating generously towards the secular in the light of their belief that they have 'divine assets' and are thus privileged. That may seem to raise the doubt whether – or at least how seriously – the religious really believe. This however is a weak argument, for the religious could not have properly internalized the argument of this article, given that they have not read it. Now that these ideas are in the open, some discussion and certain expectations could, gradually, be formed.

Such sacrifice by the religious, if it becomes prevalent, should have two effects. First, even when not strictly required, or indeed even if inappropriate, it will strengthen our trust that the given person is, genuinely, a believer. Actions that would perhaps not make sense unless one has faith and trust in God, when carried out, are reasons for believing that such faith and trust exist. Second, many such actions would be seen as admirable by religious and secular alike, insofar as they express real belief, devotion and religious commitment.¹⁴ Being religious when it is in one's interest to be so, or when no price is involved, is one thing, but acting in the ways under discussion is much more significant; and with all the hope and trust in God, there is, even for believers, uncertainty on various levels. Acting in these ways one thus becomes particularly morally worthy. This worthiness depends upon the beliefs of the religious. If the religious operate on the basis of their understanding of God as an asset, they acquire value. This value does not depend on there

actually being a God but on the beliefs of the religious. If there is no God, *the extra value of the religious depends upon their having false beliefs.*

We have focused on the first- and second-person perspectives, but a third-person perspective is also possible; and the argument can apply to larger groups.¹⁵ Once we begin to see God as an asset (from the perspective of believers), this can affect many spheres in life, and different intuitions are likely to emerge in each one. One example would be distributive questions, even in non-emergencies. It can also make a difference to the way in which we come to see familiar social interaction. Governments and other public organizations regularly support religious practices; or even as in the United States where this is constitutionally prohibited, at least allow people the significant benefit of deducting their contributions from their income tax. This is usually seen as similar to the support given to any other kind of public non-profit organization in, say, music or sport. But, if God is an asset, then many such religious practices are as it were 'servicing' the relationship of the religious with God, that is, are a way of strengthening the dependability and value of God as an asset, for the religious.¹⁶

More ominously, if we could assume that the (morally good) religious typically survive in the afterlife and go to heaven, while the secular do not, then *the death of a religious person becomes prima facie not as bad as the death of a secular one.*¹⁷ Death-and-heaven is, surely, much better as compared to true, terminal death. Why not consider the overall picture, rather than only this world? Following through with such beliefs in establishing social policy would have enormous repercussions. Greater economic benefits for the secular in this life, as compensation; or priority in organ donation, since survival in this life is much more crucial for them, are but two illustrations. And, unless a religious position (a) denies heaven, or (b) holds that the secular are equally likely to go there (i.e. universalism), morally it becomes difficult to escape the implications.¹⁸ Officially theocratic countries, for example, might well be philosophically vulnerable here and perhaps obligated to give priority to the secular, who are believed not to have heaven to look forward to; although of course in practice this is hardly likely to be recognized. A religious military commander with the beliefs we are assuming might similarly feel the pull towards assigning the more dangerous missions to the religious soldiers under his command. Paradoxically, again it is religious beliefs that, normatively, would undermine the interests of the religious; while following the scepticism of the secular would safeguard the religious.

A countervailing consideration may not apply in the specific (individual) cases that we considered, but may nevertheless apply if the idea becomes widely accepted and many religious people start acting in accordance with it, or if such a policy becomes established. Favours the secular as a rule – and thus, probably, encouraging secularity – is arguably against the will of God, and should therefore, from the point of view of the religious, be avoided. This seems to create a tension within required religious attitudes, when deciding whether discriminating in favour of the secular is the right thing to do. For morally, as we saw, there is, given widely prevalent religious beliefs such as in heaven and who is likely to get there, often a strong case for such discrimination.

Beyond any strict obligations and questions of distribution, our topic also raises the issue of compassion, and of charity. Religious people frequently and typically contribute heavily within their own community. Most such contributions are morally acceptable and supererogatory. But, surely, according to their beliefs many religious people ought to think that they are *fortunate* to be religious and to have God, and that God is a great asset in their lives, not only psychologically but actually. This then implies that they ought to open up their hearts, and think of those less fortunate, the secular unbelievers, who lack such divine support.

Finally, what is to be made of this puzzling issue? For many of the religious, it may need to lead to a modification in fundamental views. Possible solutions can come in contrasting ways: for example, by pushing some towards stipulating that the religious (or at least the moral religious) would be inherently worth much more than even the morally best among the secular. For, in that way, the need to give priority to the secular could be cut off. More pleasantly, by assuming equality, that is, by giving up the idea that God is a special asset of the religious. For example, holding that the moral among the secular can be expected to go to heaven just as their religious peers (i.e. universalism) would block the need of the religious to give priority, with respect to staying alive, to the secular. Both strategies would however involve a considerable price, and make religion much less attractive (in different ways). Yet remaining with the implication that the religious ought to consistently be ready to sacrifice their interests for the secular is of course also very problematic. In any case, this neglected puzzle, and its potential highly paradoxical implications for religion, needs to be recognized.

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Notes

1. My argument can apply even to religious believers who do not hold God to be all powerful, but for the sake of simplicity I will focus on the conventional monotheistic model.
2. Semantically we might not ordinarily call friends and spouses 'assets'; we might refer to the *friendship* as an asset. There might even seem to be something objectifying in using the term that sits uneasily with their being people; the term asset might imply possession. But in a loose sense, assets are what we have in our lives, what might appear in the list we might make of the positive things in them, and in this sense friends, a spouse, or God would be within our assets.
3. On some religious views there is no direct connection between divine rewards and salvation, and moral behaviour, such as beliefs in double predestination, but we will set such views aside in the context of this article.
4. As we know already from objections to Pascal, it also might well matter which religion God, if he exists, actually favours. My argument can then potentially be extended here by replacing non-believers with believers in a different religion/sect; so that those not of one's religion/set *prima facie* may need to be prioritized by one. But we can set this issue aside, and divide the relevant social spheres into the R and the S.
5. In fact, there is a wide consensus of both the religious and the secular that God's existence is/would be good. This is not limited to God's being a personal asset, but that is surely a major consideration. For an exception even on the pragmatic side see for example Kahane (2019).
6. R might also add that, if God does not in the end save him, then this surely will be for a good reason, such as that he does not deserve to be saved. But this, while perhaps a requirement of true faith, is not necessary for our purposes.
7. Note however that the advantage one person has, by having God as a potential asset, is related directly to the emergency situation. The way we usually think about self-sacrifice/aid is rather compartmentalized. We would not, for example, expect someone in a party lost in a desert to prioritize others' survival just because they had a much nicer childhood, are much happier/successful, or the like.
8. Perhaps, if (B) is true, it should be generalized further. For example, we might hold that

(B') In situations where our choices affect whether a significant harm would befall either believers or non-believers, it follows from (A) that believers should *pro tanto* prioritize non-believers, given that they are (taken by believers to be) significantly worse off than believers.

But this stronger formulation is unnecessary for my argument, and I will remain with the weaker case I made.

9. One might wonder whether, for example, the virus is not God's way of wiping out secular people. If it is, giving up the vaccine for a secular person might be thwarting God's plans. Such thinking, however, would be 'over-

kill', in that it would have widespread implications, such as precluding trust in religious medical staff. We shall assume that acts of beneficence towards the secular are morally permitted for the religious.

10. For example, 'Greater love has no man than to offer his life for his friends' (John 15:13). In Judaism there is a plurality of views, but the general line tends to be more resistant (see e.g. Shatz (2016)).

11. If we also believe that the relationship of religious people with the deity is strengthened because of the comparison with all the secular people who do not follow in God's path, this may make room for a further source of obligation on the part of the religious. This could be interpreted in various ways; one for example may be as an obligation of sympathy and perhaps thankfulness to those who are secular without fault, but who, by comparison, make the religious appear better. If God exists, then just as the secular may be benefiting the religious in this way, the religious may also think that, by practising religion, they benefit the secular in some ways. But both of these sorts of claims do not seem to affect my main claim, and can be set aside.

12. Matters are however complicated. In certain contexts, the secular can recognize that the believer is in fact taking a 'leap of faith'. If by the believer's own lights, the value of their lives is enhanced or even dependent on such a leap, perhaps the non-believer can acknowledge that even if the religious beliefs are (as far as he can tell) false, it's still in the interest of the believer to live up to their own ideals. In a sense, respect for the believer's views would conflict with the concern over his well-being.

13. If the next life is thought to be infinite, this might be thought to nullify the sacrifice, but such rewards are difficult to fathom even for the highly religious, and the sacrifice of the present life would typically be thought to be substantial.

14. Surely there can also be similarly motivated actions that we will see as religiously fanatical and not morally appropriate or admirable, overall, but we can set these aside here.

15. While in one sense it is 'easier' to request self-sacrifice than to sacrifice a third person, self-sacrifice is also a more demanding request, whereas you might interpret (B') above as simply an impartial principle.

16. Can a society levy a tax on those who hold themselves to have such assets or resources: the 'God tax'? You could say that if they believe that God is an asset, then they cannot rightfully complain. If they do not believe he is an asset, then they can declare this and stop paying the tax. But in general, your tax liability follows your objective attributes, not your beliefs about them. Since there is wide disagreement that these assets or resources really exist, taxing them could not reasonably be public policy. Merely psychologically benefiting from the belief that God watches over them does not provide sufficient grounds for the taxation of believers.

17. This is one way in which the new 'burdens of religiosity' I am introducing can affect a Pascalian calculus.

18. A further paradoxical complication follows if the religious person believes that morally good secular people will go to heaven, but less morally good people (whether secular or not) will not. It might, under certain conditions, make sense to sacrifice oneself for the moderately less good people since the stakes are higher for them, as due to their misdeeds they are unlikely to have a happy afterlife. But this would acutely raise the issue of the lower desert of the relevant party, and I will not pursue this direction here.

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