

# REFERRING TO, BELIEVING IN, AND WORSHIPPING THE SAME GOD: A REFORMED VIEW

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We present a Reformed view on the relation between Christianity and non-Christian religions. We then explore what this view entails for the question whether Christians and non-Christian religious believers refer to, believe in, and worship the same God. We first analyze the concepts of worship, belief-in, and reference, as well as their interrelations. We then argue that adherents of the Abrahamic religions plausibly refer to the same God, whereas adherents of non-Abrahamic religions do not refer to this God. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to say that adherents of all Abrahamic religions believe in and worship the same God.

This paper addresses the question what a Reformed account of the relation between Christian and non-Christian religions entails for the question whether Christians and non-Christian believers refer to, believe in, and worship the same God. The Reformed account in question can be found in the writings of the Dutch theologians Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Johan Herman Bavinck, and Johannes Verkuyl, all of whom were inspired by John Calvin.<sup>1</sup>

## *1. A Reformed View on the Relation between Christianity and Non-Christian Religions*

In this section we present the Reformed view of the relation between Christianity and non-Christian religions in the form of several theses and provide explanatory commentary. We don't provide anything like a full-blown justification or defense of any of these theses. For that we refer to

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<sup>1</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 1898); Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1909). Johan Herman Bavinck, *Christus en de mystiek van het Oosten [Christ and Eastern Mysticism]* (Kampen: Kok, 1934); "Religious Consciousness and the Christian Faith," in *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt, John Bolt, and Paul J. Visser (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 145–301; and *Introduction to the Science of Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960); Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).



the works of the neo-Calvinist theologians mentioned.<sup>2</sup> The first thesis, which we call the *General Revelation Thesis*, is that

(A) God reveals himself to all humans at all times and all places.

Underlying this thesis is what St. Paul writes in the first chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome, and what he said in his famous speech on Mars Hill as related in Acts 17. The thesis says that God *reveals* himself—by which is meant that God manifests himself, makes himself known, or, as J. H. Bavinck used to say, that God “communicates with” or “speaks to” humans. Furthermore, God reveals himself to *all* humans at *all* times and at *all* places: No human being has ever been anywhere without God revealing himself to him or her. God’s revelation is not limited to certain people, places, or times, but is truly general.

This being said, two interrelated questions arise. First, how, in what manner, by what means, does this divine revelation take place. And second, what is its content? As to the first question, the Reformed view endorses that God reveals himself to all human beings in at least two different ways—through the works of nature that present themselves to the human senses, and through human conscience (cf. The Belgic Confession, Article 2). As to the second question, the Reformed view is that what God reveals of himself is, as St. Paul says, “his eternal power and divine majesty” (Romans 1:20) as well as his laws, of which moral laws form an important part. The guiding idea is that when humans observe and inspect the cosmos, either with the naked eye, or through telescope and microscope, they are in effect facing the manifestations of divine majesty, effects of divine activity, instantiations of God’s power. And when humans reflect on what they ought and ought not to do, on what is good and what is bad, on what is valuable and what is not, they will, when all goes well,<sup>3</sup> think thoughts that are in effect divine revelations of God’s will.

The first thesis, then, is that God reveals himself or his characteristics—his power and majesty and his will—to each and every human being, through nature as well as through conscience. In the Reformed tradition this revelation is named both “general revelation” and “creational revelation.” The first name indicates the address of the revelation (all humans), the second the means of the revelation (nature and conscience).

The first thesis is about what God does. The second thesis, the *Response Thesis*, is a thesis about what humans do:

(B) Human religions (or similarly encompassing worldviews) are responses to God’s general or creational revelation.

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<sup>2</sup>We also note that our presentation of the view differs markedly from the presentation of the Dutch theologians themselves—a difference that is, at least in part, due to the fact that we are analytically trained philosophers, whereas they were hermeneutically trained theologians.

<sup>3</sup>This qualification is needed in order to accommodate the Reformed view’s notion that, due to sin, the human cognitive capacities are impaired (although they are not rendered completely unreliable).

Buddhism, Hinduism, the Greek and Ancient religions, animism, and so forth, this thesis says, are in one way or another responses to God's general revelation (which is not to deny that they can *also* be responses to or expressions of things other than God's general revelation, such as cultural phenomena, lust for power, etc.). If we think of God's revealing himself to humans as God's "speaking" non-literally to us, then we can think of the world's religions as answers or responses to revelation. Humans are, in an astonishing variety of ways, responding to what is in fact God's power, God's majesty, as well as to what are in fact God's commands. In the world's religions these responses have been systematized and cast in the form of communal images, fixed rituals, and explicit creeds. But even in those systematized and communal forms, the diversity of the world's religions betokens the diversity of responses to God's revelation.

Often those who respond explicitly conceive of what they do as responding to God, but that isn't necessary. They may conceive of their responses as something other than responses to divine revelation—they may not even conceive of them as responses in the first place. This is important to note because of the ubiquitous presence (at least in our part of the world) of secular, non-religious people, who by their own lights are doing anything but responding to God's revelation. The Reformed view on this can be brought out by an analogy. If you walk through a shopping mall where Bruckner's ninth symphony plays through the speakers and you have never heard of Bruckner and aren't familiar with symphonies, then the following applies to you: You are hearing Bruckner's ninth symphony, but you don't know that what you are hearing is Bruckner's ninth, nor that it is a symphony.<sup>4</sup> Analogously, on the Reformed view, people can be in the following situation: They are perceiving, and even responding to, a revelation of God, but they don't know that what they are perceiving and responding to is a divine revelation. For example, one may decide to speak the truth because one's conscience tells one to do so, thus responding to God's call made through one's conscience, without realizing that it is *God's* call one is responding to.

To this the Reformed view adds a third thesis, the *Inadequate Response Thesis*:

- (C) Unaided human responses to God's general or creational revelation, such as those systematized in religions and worldviews, are sub-standard and inadequate.

This thesis holds that all unaided human responses to God's general revelation are a special case of the much wider phenomenon of inadequate reactions. We know that humans, generally speaking, react inadequately to each other. One can be invited, but fail to respond. One can be treated kindly, yet respond ungraciously. One can be told important facts that

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<sup>4</sup>Situations of this sort are analyzed in Fred Dretske, *Seeing and Knowing* (London: Routledge, 1970).

one fails to believe. Responses to our fellows can fail in various dimensions. Likewise human responses to God or to God's revelation can be inadequate behaviorally, morally, and doxastically. And as St. Paul says, this possibility is widely realized:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. (Romans 1:21–22)

Worshipping animals, the apostle affirms, is an inadequate response to God's general revelation, whereas an adequate response would be to honor and thank God, to devote one's life to him, to do what He requires us to do. The Reformed view is that inadequate responses to God's revelations are due to, and instances of, human sinfulness.

J. H. Bavinck (1949) analyzes such inadequate responses in terms of "pushing away" and "substituting." Inadequate responses to God's revelation are responses in which the true God is pushed away and replaced by an idol. Bavinck also compares this process with what happens when we are dreaming. Sometimes actually existing phenomena figure in our dreams, such as sounds, people, rocks, and examinations. But these phenomena are strangely malformed, enlarged, or intensified in our dreamt reality. The sound of a running faucet can enter our dreams as that of a roaring waterfall and the soft humming of distant traffic might appear as the threatening thundering of an approaching avalanche. The true nature of the phenomena is hardly recognizable in our dreams. Something similar is going on in human responses to God's revelation: These responses are hardly recognizable as concerning the true God who is revealing himself, even though they are still responses to him. That is why, as (C) has it, these responses are inadequate and sub-standard, *if* unaided by some special divine provision.

A further part of the Reformed view is the *Special Revelation Thesis*, which says that

(D) God reveals himself *specialy*, i.e., at specific historical times and geographical places, to and through specific persons and peoples.

Whereas thesis (A) endorses that God reveals himself *generally*, i.e., to all people always and everywhere, (D) endorses that God also reveals himself *specialy*. Examples of this are those high moments that jointly constitute salvation history: God's issuing of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai, God's calling of the great prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Christ's virgin birth, Christ's ministry and miracles, Christ's crucifixion, death and subsequent glorious resurrection from the dead.

Special revelation is "special" in the sense that it is God's revelation at specific historical times, at specific geographical places, to and through specific persons. But although it is "special" in this sense, it is at the same

time “general” in its intended audience. According to Christianity there has been a substantial body of special revelation.

Given that God reveals himself in the ways indicated in theses (A) and (D), the Reformed view endorses the following thesis about the nature of the Christian faith:

- (E) Christian faith is the appropriate response to both God’s general revelation and the totality of God’s special revelation.

This thesis indicates that religious belief should now, i.e., in the current phase of world history, meet a normative standard of appropriateness if it is to be Christian faith. Christian faith (or better: proper Christian faith) meets this standard, whereas other religious belief systems do not—or not to the extent that Christian faith does. If someone has been exposed, through the testimony of others, to the high points of Salvation history and subsequently turns away from Christianity, or starts to believe that there is no God, or believes that God exists but not that God was incarnated in Christ, etc., then that person does respond to God’s revelation, but the response doesn’t qualify as Christian faith, for the obvious reason that the relevant standard of appropriateness has not been met. Throughout church history there has been, and still is, discussion about what that standard exactly amounts to. But traditional Christianity, also traditional Reformed Christianity, has it that the standard is in effect formulated—at least in part—in the main ecumenical Christian creeds.

On the Reformed view, then, there are two modes of revelation—general and special. They are similar in that both are revelations from the same God; both ultimately (if not always directly) address all of humanity; and both inevitably evoke human responses. They are dissimilar in that the former is ubiquitous—it comes to us through conditions that are present at all times and places—whereas the latter is spatiotemporally limited—it comes to us through historical events at special times and places and then through the testimony of others about those events.

To this it must be added that the former is geared towards a cognitive faculty that forms specifically religious beliefs, whereas the latter is geared towards our general cognitive faculties. This requires some elucidation. On the Reformed view human beings have a specific indigenous cognitive capacity to appreciate (at least some of) the contents of God’s general revelation. This capacity is held to be on a par with perception, memory, and the faculty of reasoning, which are also indigenous cognitive capacities. This capacity has sometimes been referred to as the *sensus divinitatis*.<sup>5</sup> This capacity is operative in the formation of such beliefs as that God exists, that He is the creator of all things, that He is deserving of our adoration, that He disapproves of what is bad, and the like. Had this capacity not been marred, hemmed, suppressed, and impeded by sin, these beliefs would be as ubiquitous and universally agreed upon as are beliefs formed in

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<sup>5</sup>See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

response to perception, or such beliefs as that every number that is greater than 5 is also greater than 3. General revelation is thus geared towards a specific cognitive capacity that humans are endowed with (“specific” here indicating that the capacity engenders specifically *religious* beliefs). Special revelation, by contrast, is geared towards our general cognitive capacities, viz. the capacities of seeing and hearing, as well as the capacity of receiving and believing testimony (“general” here indicating that the capacities engender not only specifically religious beliefs). God’s special revelation on Mount Sinai, where He gave Moses the Ten Commandments, was what Moses heard and saw—and the Israelites and all those who subsequently got to know the Commandments did so because they accepted testimony to the effect that God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. But hearing, seeing and accepting testimony doesn’t *only* evince specifically religious beliefs.

There is a further thesis that is part and parcel of the Reformed view. Theses (A) and (B) already presuppose it, but it is useful to state it separately too. It is the familiar thesis of monotheism, the claim that

(F) There is, ontologically speaking, only one God.

This brings us to a final thesis that belongs to the Reformed view:

(G) Worshipping anything other than the one true God is idolatry.

Assuming that neither Zeus, nor Astarte, nor the Sun-god exist, (G) declares worship of Zeus, Astarte, and the Sun to be idolatry.

This ends our presentation of the Reformed view. We will now discuss what the Reformed view entails with respect to the question whether Christians and non-Christian religious believers worship, believe in, and refer to the same God. In order to do so properly, we begin by analyzing the relations between worship, belief, and reference.

## 2. *Worship, Belief, and Reference*

Worship, belief, and reference are not the same thing, and their interrelations are complex, as we will show.

### 2.1 *Worship*

To worship a god, or God, is to participate in certain individual or collective practices. These practices consist in performing certain actions and activities that are regulated by more or less official rules about time, location, roles and numbers of people, and can involve the handling of objects, the singing of songs, the recitation of words, or periods of intentional silence. In addition, worship can include or perhaps require attitudes like adoration, awe, or delight.

Worship, furthermore, has an object: to worship is to worship *someone* (or, in some cases, *something*, or several persons or things). One worships because the object of worship is believed to be worthy of worship and because one deems the worship practice in question an appropriate one,

or because one is part of a tradition in which the practice has been deemed to be so.

Worship involves additional beliefs as well. For instance, participation in the Christian Eucharist is an act of worship that involves or requires, on the part of the participants, not only the belief that God is worthy of worship, but also the belief that Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world, and that his death brought atonement and newness of life, as well as still further beliefs, for example that Christ is the son of God, the second person of the Trinity. Without these beliefs, Eucharistic worship wouldn't make sense. Analogous things hold for other forms of religious worship.

At this juncture a question may arise. Isn't it possible to participate in worship without (much) explicit belief? Small children, for instance, participate in some elements of Christian worship without having much by way of explicit Christian belief. In response, a distinction must be made between proper worship and "going through the motions." Two people can display all the same outward signs of participating in worship, while only one of them is actually worshipping, whereas the other merely goes through the motions. The relevant difference may be caused by their respective beliefs but also by their respective attitudes. If someone displays worshipping behavior but doesn't believe that the object of worship exists, or doesn't have the right sort of attitudes, she isn't worshipping properly. What she is engaged in, at best, is a degenerated form of worship. It is no doubt hard to say—and highly controversial—which beliefs and attitudes are required for proper worship, but a minimum seems to be belief in the existence and worthiness of the object of worship, as well as some degree of reverence.<sup>6</sup> This minimal requirement is something children can and typically will meet.

In sum, then, worship is participation in an individual or collective practice that minimally requires belief in the existence and worthiness of the object of worship, as well as certain attitudes of reverence towards the object of worship.

## 2.2 Belief

Next, what is belief? As we will be thinking of it, it is first and foremost a propositional attitude. *That Christ is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity*, is something that Christians believe. What they believe is a proposition, viz. the proposition that is expressed by the italicized words. Believing proposition *p*, we hold furthermore, is believing that *p* is true.

How does belief as a propositional attitude (belief-that) relate to "belief *in*"? Christians believe in God, and it is possible to believe in fairies, fate, astrology, or homeopathy. Although believing in these things may

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<sup>6</sup>But perhaps even full belief is asking too much. Maybe acceptance or hoping-to-be-true could also be sufficient. Perhaps worship on the basis of such weaker attitudes is sub-standard in some respects, but at the same time it definitely seems better than merely going through the motions.

involve various things such as (positive) emotional attitudes, dispositions to act, etc., it also requires that one holds certain propositions to be true. Minimally, to believe in X is to believe (a) that X exists, i.e., that X is a real person or thing, as opposed to an illusion or a creature of fiction, (b) that X is a certain kind of thing, i.e., that some characterization of X's basic nature is correct, and (c) that X can be trusted or relied upon in those matters that are relevant to things with X's presumed nature. To believe in homeopathy, for example, is to believe (a) that there exist certain actually operative (b) physical processes (c) that can be relied upon to cure people. When Christians believe in God, they believe (a) that He exists, (b) that He is (at least) a personal being and (c) that He can be trusted to do certain things. Clearly, there are logical relations between these beliefs: (b) and (c) presuppose (a), but not the other way around. (For it seems possible to believe that X exists while remaining entirely noncommittal about what X is or does.<sup>7</sup>) Beliefs of type (b) and (c) mutually constrain each other: To believe that something can be trusted in certain ways is minimally to believe that it is a thing with the powers to do whatever it is trusted to do. And, vice versa, to believe that something is a certain kind of thing imposes constraints on what it can be trusted to do.

Perhaps someone will worry that we have construed belief-in overly intellectualistically by including propositional beliefs of type (b) and (c) in our analysis. Many people, it may be argued, believe in God without holding much by way of specific beliefs about what He is like or what He can be trusted to do—and there is nothing wrong with that. In response, we should emphasize that the beliefs of type (b) and (c) we have in mind can be fairly unspecific and simple, and need not involve any sophisticated doctrine. It is also possible for individuals to defer to a (communal) authority for the specific content of (b) and (c), which is perhaps particularly relevant in the case of religious beliefs. Nonetheless, we think it is impossible to believe in X without believing anything whatsoever about the kind of thing X is and what X is supposed to do. What could it mean for someone to believe in God yet believe nothing whatsoever about who He is or what He does—e.g., not even that He is a personal being or that He wants to save human beings? Even apophatically minded believers countenance beliefs about what God is *not*. Belief in X, then, comes with a minimum of descriptive content about X. (Which is not to deny that, for some people, it involves richer descriptive content. For an orthodox Christian, for instance, to affirm her belief in God may well be shorthand for an affirmation of the ecumenical creeds.)

In the previous section we argued that worship of X minimally requires belief that X exists and is worthy of worship. We can now say that worship of X minimally requires *belief in X* as analyzed above.<sup>8</sup> The link between

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<sup>7</sup>Note that such an attitude would thus fail to qualify as belief-in on our analysis.

<sup>8</sup>Assuming that X's being worthy of worship at least requires that X can be relied upon in the relevant respects.

worship and belief-in gives us a possible handle on the idea that worship might be inadequate. If people worship X and hence believe in X, but X doesn't exist or has fundamentally different characteristics from what people assume, then their worship is (unbeknownst to them) misguided. Presumably, it is too demanding to require that proper worship must include all and only true beliefs about the object of worship, but if people's beliefs of types (b) and (c) are widely off the mark, their worship is misguided and may be a form of idolatry.

### 2.3 Reference

On to reference. True belief about something involves reference to that thing in the sense that for someone to have a *de re* belief (so, a belief *about* that thing), she must *have in mind* the thing that the belief is about. Your true belief that the earth has one moon, for example, involves reference to the earth in the sense that in order for you to have this belief (about the earth) you need to have the moon in mind. False belief, too, may involve reference. Had you believed that the earth has two moons, your false belief would still involve reference to the earth (in the sense explained). It is somewhat less clear that it would involve reference to the only moon that the earth does have, but presumably it does. In what follows we will avail ourselves of the locution "this belief involves a reference to X," or even "this belief refers to X." We use them because they make for easier formulations; but they should be understood in the way just explained. Furthermore, we also say that *terms* refer; this is an abbreviated way of saying that we *use* terms to refer to something—referring is something *we* do by using words.

There is an interesting interplay between reference and belief-in when we consider creatures of fiction such as Hamlet or Frodo Baggins. We can have true or false beliefs about them, depending on how well we know the stories in which they figure. When we believe that Hamlet lived in Denmark, we do seem to refer to a particular person, except, of course, that there is no person in the actual world available for our "reference" to latch onto. Depending on one's preferred account of the nature of creatures of fiction, one may hold that "Hamlet" either refers to an abstract object,<sup>9</sup> a merely possible creature,<sup>10</sup> or a non-existent object.<sup>11</sup> At any rate, it isn't a case of straightforward reference. Let's call reference of this kind *fictional reference* so as to distinguish it from reference *simpliciter*, which is always to actually existing persons or objects. Henceforth, we will use "reference" to stand for reference *simpliciter*. If an expression neither refers nor refers

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<sup>9</sup>John R. Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," *New Literary History* 6 (1975), 319–332; Peter van Inwagen, "Creatures of Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14 (1977), 299–308; Amie Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup>David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1978), 37–46.

<sup>11</sup>A. Meinong, "On the Theory of Objects," in *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, ed. Roderick Chisholm (Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1960 [1904]).

fictionally but still *seems* to refer or was intended to do so, then we have a case of *failed reference*.<sup>12</sup> Although fictional reference is possible, *belief in* creatures of fiction is mistaken. As we saw above, belief in X entails a commitment to the belief that X actually exists and such a belief is false if X is a creature of fiction.

With the above analyses of belief-in and sorts of reference in hand, the following permutations are possible. (i) *Belief in X with reference*: This is the scenario that most religious believers hold to be actual for their own case. (ii) *Belief in X with fictional reference*: This is the case when someone believes in, say, the god Astarte, while Astarte (unbeknownst to the believer) in fact does not exist, but is a character in an elaborate mythology or other piece of fiction; that person's belief *refers fictionally* to (the fictional god) Astarte. (iii) *Belief in X with failed reference*: This happens when a person believes in a non-existing god who isn't even a character in a mythology or a more or less established piece of fiction.<sup>13</sup> (iv) *Reference to X without belief in X*: This happens when someone believes that whom-ever it is that kept him alive during his long and very serious illness, is to be thanked. If it was in fact God who, perhaps by means of the doctors, nurses, and medication, has kept him alive, then his belief contains a reference to God—unwittingly.<sup>14</sup> It also happens when someone prays to God to stop being an atheist, as Tim Mawson has recently argued some atheists ought to.<sup>15</sup> (v) *Fictional reference without belief in X*: This is the case, for instance, when modern westerners talk about the god Astarte, whom they correctly believe to be a fictional god. Although irrelevant for present purposes, we mention the final option for the sake of completeness: (vi) *Failed reference without belief in X*. This occurs when someone uses a non-

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<sup>12</sup>An issue arises here about how to delimit creatures of fiction from non-referring expressions. The expression "the king of France" in the sentence "The king of France is bald" doesn't refer. But if we take that sentence as a tiny piece of fiction, you might go on to say that "the king of France" refers to a fictional character. Even weirder, we can make up stories about impossible objects: The square circle sat down with the third even prime number to discuss how they had made themselves impossible. Should we then say that "square circle" refers to a creature of fiction? Both of these moves seem wrong. Let's say that reference to a creature of fiction at least requires that there is a contextually salient piece of fiction available in which this creature figures. This might range from well-known stories to little narratives that are made up on the spot.

<sup>13</sup>Could the notorious Flying Spaghetti Monster be a case in point (assuming someone were to believe in it)? Perhaps so, especially when it was first introduced. By now, however, it seems that the thing has acquired a more or less established narrative in which it belongs, including its own webpage ([www.venganza.org](http://www.venganza.org)) and Wikipedia entry ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying\\_Spaghetti\\_Monster](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flying_Spaghetti_Monster)).

<sup>14</sup>This is just an instance of the general phenomenon that an expression can refer to a particular person or object without the person using the expression having beliefs about who or what he has uniquely referred to by means of the expression he uses. For example, "the fifteenth President of the U.S." uniquely refers to a person, even if the user of that expression doesn't know the name or anything else of the fifteenth President of the U.S.

<sup>15</sup>Timothy J. Mawson, "Praying to Stop Being an Atheist," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 67 (2010), 173–186.

referring expression that purports to refer to X, while being aware that X doesn't exist.<sup>16</sup>

Reference to X requires the existence of X, we said. But more is needed. Two different theories aim to explain what more. One preliminary point before we briefly recount these two theories: We will be treating "God" as a *proper name* for the divine being. Doing so is an assumption that meshes well with the three Abrahamic religions. Yet we should point out that there is also a venerable philosophical tradition that takes "god" as a common noun (a sortal concept) that refers to a class of objects (with only one member, according to monotheists). Anselmian perfect being theology is most naturally construed as doing this. Depending on one's account of reference for common nouns, this may lead to results that differ from the results one gets when one treats "God" as a proper name.

The descriptivist theory of reference was long taken as the obvious and commonsensical position.<sup>17</sup> According to it, a proper name like "Shakespeare" refers when its user associates a description with that name that uniquely picks out Shakespeare from among everything else.

Failure of reference, on the descriptivist view, can occur in various ways. *First*, the description associated with a name fails to identify someone uniquely; it holds true for more than one person. In this case reference is ambiguous and hence unsuccessful. *Second*, the description is satisfied by no person, in which case the name is empty in that it doesn't latch onto anyone. *Third*, the name is associated with a true description, but of the wrong person.

The classical descriptivist theory of reference faces a number of problems. For the purposes of this paper we highlight just one. We often have more than one uniquely identifying description of a person at our disposal. Which of them is associated with the person's name? Is one description more central than others? If so, which one, and who or what determines this? These are difficult if not unanswerable questions. Therefore, instead of holding that a speaker associates one uniquely identifying description with a name, it has been proposed that she typically associates a *cluster* of descriptions with a name.<sup>18</sup> This view, too, raises difficult questions. Must every description in the cluster be a uniquely identifying description or

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<sup>16</sup>We say this option is irrelevant here because even convinced atheists will have to admit that God figures in culturally salient pieces of fiction—fiction from the atheist's point of view, that is. So expressions for God minimally refer in the fictional sense (cf. for this Jonathan Schaffer, "On What Grounds What," in *Metametaphysics*, ed. David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009], 359). Note that it wouldn't even help the atheist if she had a compelling argument to the effect that a concept of God was inconsistent, for there can be stories about impossible objects and persons as well.

<sup>17</sup>Although it originates with John Stuart Mill, its canonical modern formulation is to be found in Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Reference," in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. Peter Geach and Max Black (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952 [1892]), 57–58, and Bertrand Russell, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description," in *Mysticism and Logic* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957 [1917]).

<sup>18</sup>See John R. Searle, "Proper Names," *Mind* 67 (1958), 166–173 and Peter Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959), 180–183, 190–194.

can the cluster also include some non-uniquely identifying descriptions? Are all the descriptions equally important or do some carry more weight than others? And who or what determines this? Can the cluster contain false descriptions? At what point does the presence of false descriptions make reference unsuccessful? Our present goal is not to look for answers to these questions, but simply to point them out, as they will become important later on when we investigate whether Christians and other religious believers refer to the same God.

On the descriptivist theory, then, descriptions play an intermediary role between the name and the referent. Because a speaker possesses a uniquely identifying description, she is able to fix the referent of the name. The second theory of reference, the causal theory, cuts out this "middle man." Successful reference, on this theory, is grounded in causal processes that establish an appropriate link between the referent and the speaker.<sup>19</sup> Proponents of the causal theory argue against descriptivism that knowledge of identifying descriptions is neither necessary nor sufficient for successful reference. *Unnecessary*, because people can refer to Aristotle, or Einstein, or other famous historical figures without knowing anything that uniquely identifies them. *Insufficient*, because someone may associate a uniquely identifying description with the wrong name, so that the description is true of someone other than the bearer of the name. In that case, causal theorists urge, reference is made to the *bearer of the name* and not to the thing or person satisfying the description. So even when someone associates "the Dutch prime minister in 1903" with the name "Bob Dylan," she has not referred to Abraham Kuyper when using the name "Bob Dylan," but to the singer of *Blood on the Tracks*.

The causal theory gives the following positive account of successful reference: for every name there has been an "initial baptism" or similar event in which that name is given to someone. Typically this happens through ostension: You point to someone and declare that, from now on, the person shall be called, for example, "William Shakespeare." It can also happen by using a definite description: Someone may declare that "the baby with the red socks in the left cradle" shall be called "Robert Zimmerman." The crucial point is that there is an instance of genuine cognitive contact—a non-deviant causal link of an appropriate kind—between the referent and the name-giver. This contact does not require the name-giver to have any specific knowledge of the person referred to, let alone to have a uniquely identifying description of her. It is even possible for the name-giver to have mostly or only false beliefs about the referent.<sup>20</sup> The name given in the initial baptism can then be communicated to others in the community and through history, so as to eventually be picked up by current speakers,

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<sup>19</sup>The *loci classici* for the causal theory are Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) and Keith Donnellan, "Proper Names and Identifying Descriptions," in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. Donald Davidson and Gilbert Harman (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972), 356–379.

<sup>20</sup>Although we will later argue for an important qualification of this claim.

who can then use it to refer to the person named in the initial baptism. So it is because we are connected through a causal chain of communication to the real person William Shakespeare that we can use the name "William Shakespeare" to refer to him.

This basic version of the causal theory faces a problem. Suppose that, to use an example inspired by William Alston, it wasn't God but Satan whom Abraham originally was in cognitive contact with when he believed that it was God who spoke to him.<sup>21</sup> Abraham baptized whomever he was in contact with, with the name "God." Of course, Abraham believed that there is a God and let us furthermore assume that he also believed that God is the creator of everything, benevolent, and trustworthy. On this scenario, the causal theory has it that Abraham would really be referring to Satan when using "God," while holding massively false beliefs about him (Satan being neither the creator of everything, nor benevolent and trustworthy). Moreover, so would be all adherents of Judaism, Christians, and Muslims. *Pace* Alston, we think this constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of a purely causal theory of reference.

This is not to deny that friends of the causal theory may be right in holding that massively false beliefs about X are sometimes *compatible* with reference to X. But we do think that this example shows that the purely causal requirements laid down by the causal theory are not sufficient for reference. We think at least the following two amendments are necessary. First, when someone who baptizes X is mistaken about X in *fundamental* ways, i.e., about the very kind of thing X is, it is implausible that by baptizing X she has introduced a referring expression for X into the language.<sup>22</sup> If someone sees a brownish rock from afar and says: "Let's call that stray dog Rocky," she hasn't thereby successfully baptized a rock "Rocky," for she has acted on the fundamentally mistaken belief that she was spotting a dog. So this is a case of failed reference. Similarly, in the Abraham case, since Abraham was fundamentally mistaken about the kind of being he was in cognitive contact with, his use of "God" fails to refer. In addition to the causal requirements, then, reference requires that a user of the name not be fundamentally mistaken about what kind of thing she is referring to. In other words, she must associate with the name a minimum of correct descriptive content. Secondly, if someone associates (or comes to associate) with "X" many specific beliefs that are false of X, but are in fact true about Y, it seems plausible to hold that she is referring to Y rather than X when using the name "X" (assuming that there are appropriate chains of communication to both X and Y in the speaker's community). Rather than insisting that she refers to X, we should say she refers to Y but has a false belief about Y's name—namely, that it is "X" rather than "Y."

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<sup>21</sup>William P. Alston, "Referring to God," in *Divine Nature and Human Language* (Ithaca, NJ: Cornell University Press, 1989), 103–117.

<sup>22</sup>For this criticism, cf. Gareth Evans, "The Causal Theory of Names," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 47* (1973), 187–208.

If someone is using “Albert Einstein” and it becomes apparent that the beliefs she associates with this name are massively false about Einstein, but all true of Nils Bohr, then her beliefs refer to Bohr, not to Einstein (assuming that there is the right kind of causal connection of that person and her community to Bohr).<sup>23</sup> Analogously, if Abraham’s beliefs are, in the main, true of God but false of Satan, then it seems plausible that his use of “God” refers to God, even if Abraham’s initial baptismal act mistakenly named Satan “God.” We take this to show that a purely causal theory of reference is inadequate and that modifications inspired by the descriptive theory are required to handle problem cases.

#### 2.4 Summary: The Relations between Worship, Belief, and Reference

When we take the results of the above discussion and apply them to the central issues of the present paper, i.e., worship of, belief in, and reference to god(s) or God, we can summarize our claims so far as follows:<sup>24</sup>

- (Proper) worship of God requires belief in God.
- Belief in God requires the beliefs (a) that God exists, (b) that God is a certain kind of being, (c) that God is trustworthy.
- Belief in God involves (attempted) reference to God.
- Reference to God requires the existence of God.
- False beliefs about God may nonetheless refer to God.
- Belief in God that involves mostly or radically false beliefs about God is misguided and leads to improper worship.

### 3. The Same God?

Worship of God, we said, requires belief in God. And there can be no adequate belief in God unless there is reference to God. And there can be no reference to God, unless God exists. So let us first look at reference and

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<sup>23</sup>Note that saying this doesn’t commit us to anything implausible in Kripke’s famous Gödel/Schmidt case (Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, 83–84). In this case, Gödel stole the proof of the incompleteness theorem from a man named Schmidt to pass it off as his own. People now incorrectly associate “the man who discovered the incompleteness theorem” with “Gödel.” In spite of this, Kripke urges, we think “Gödel” refers to Gödel and not to Schmidt. Now, since we say that someone who associates many beliefs that are true of Y with the name “X” refers to Y rather than X, it may look like we would have to reject the intuition that Kripke unearthed. This is not so, however, since it isn’t clear from the Gödel/Schmidt case description that the person referring to Gödel holds *many* false beliefs about Gödel that are in fact true of Schmidt. As far as the case goes, it’s just the one belief about Gödel’s proving the incompleteness theorem. This, we think, makes a crucial difference. The more systematically someone associates beliefs that are false about X but true about Y with the name “X,” the more plausible it becomes to think that she simply refers to Y when she uses “X” but has a false belief about Y’s name.

<sup>24</sup>For the sake of brevity, we formulate them as claims about God, but they hold generally. “God” can be substituted for (the names of) other gods.

consider whether on the Reformed view Christians and non-Christians refer to the same God when they (say they) believe in God.

### 3.1 Reference

What does the Reformed view entail with respect to reference to God? One might think that, since the view maintains that there is only one God (thesis (F)) who reveals himself generally (A) and since all humans respond to this general revelation (B), the Reformed view entails that reference to God is shared throughout the world's religions. After all, besides God, there is simply nothing for anyone to refer to.

But things aren't quite as easy as this. When applied to reference to God, both theories of reference introduced above make trouble for the above line of reasoning. According to the basic descriptivist theory, for a speaker to refer to God, she must have associated with the name "God" a description that is satisfied by God and God alone. For many believers it will be easy to come up with several such descriptions, as God is unique in many of his properties, e.g., "creator of heaven and earth," "omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good," or "righteous and merciful judge of all people." If adherents of Judaism, Christians and Muslims associate *these* or other shared descriptions with the name of God, then, on the basic descriptivist theory, they refer to the same God. But besides shared descriptions, there are also many descriptions that Christians take to be not only uniquely true of God but also of paramount importance to their faith—descriptions, however, which are emphatically rejected by Muslims and adherents of Judaism. For instance, that God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If a Christian believer associates this description with "God," while a Muslim or Jew associates its denial (or something obviously entailing its denial) with "God," the descriptivist theory entails that at most one of them is referring to God, since at most one of them associates a correct uniquely identifying description with "God." Hence, on the basic descriptivist theory, whether adherents of different religions refer to the same God turns out to vary on a case-by-case basis. If a Jew, Christian, and Muslim happen to associate a shared uniquely identifying description with the name of God, they do. But if they associate an unshared description with "God," they don't. This is unsatisfactory on multiple counts. It is too arbitrary. Whether or not Jews, Christians, and Muslims refer to the same God becomes a matter of which description individuals associate with the name "God," which is surely a highly contingent fact. Next, it fails to take any account of the Reformed view's claim that religious beliefs are always (perhaps in addition to other things) responses to God's general revelation (theses (A) and (B)). Although these theses do not entail guaranteed coreference all by themselves, they do put pressure on an account of reference to explain why responding to revelation from the same God does not lead to coreference to that same God. Finally, given the historical ties between the Abrahamic faiths, it is independently implausible that only some

Jews, Christians, and Muslims would be referring to the same God, while others aren't.<sup>25</sup>

The cluster version of the descriptivist theory falls prey to the same sort of worries. On the version that makes all descriptions in a cluster of identifying descriptions equally important, it becomes vague whether there is reference to the same God. Since some descriptions will be shared and others will not, the question whether there is coreference doesn't appear to have an answer. On the version that makes some descriptions in the cluster more important than others, adherents of different religious traditions almost certainly do not refer to the same God, since the reason why religions are different in the first place is because they have partly incompatible conceptions of God. As we said above, Christians will think it crucially important that God is a trinity, while Muslims and Jews are bound to emphasize that God is one in every respect (which they will take to entail that He is not a trinity). The same worries as on the basic descriptivist theory apply.

The upshot so far is twofold: (1) If reference is construed along descriptivist lines, the Reformed view does not straightforwardly imply that all religious believers refer to the same God. (2) The Reformed view doesn't sit well with descriptivism, as descriptivism lacks the resources to take account of the claim that people's religious beliefs are always some sort of response to general revelation from the same God and of the historical connections between the Abrahamic faiths.

What about the causal theory? It says that if "God" is to refer, there must have been an initial baptizing event in which someone was in genuine cognitive contact with God and named God "God." This name must then have been handed down through the ages by a (causal) communication chain, ensuring that later users of the name "God" still refer to God.

By understanding reference foremost in terms of causal connections between referent and speaker(s), the causal theory can easily incorporate the historical connections between the Abrahamic religions. Since the uses of "God" in these three religions supposedly all trace back to Abraham's baptismal act—albeit through communication chains that have diverged—there is shared reference to God. Adherents of historically unconnected religions, such as Hinduism or Buddhism, in so far as they use the name "God," would not be referring to the same God.

Other elements of the Reformed view, however, complicate this tidy picture. A natural way to understand the thesis of general revelation is

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<sup>25</sup>A further worry is that the descriptivist theory construes reference too individualistically, by requiring that every individual speaker possess her own uniquely identifying description. We're inclined to think, however, that this defect could be remedied fairly easily by insisting that a (religious) community or communal authority determines which uniquely identifying description ought to be associated with a name. Individual speakers could then defer to the community. Such an amendment would take care of the arbitrariness objection above, but would do nothing to address the plausible thought that the historical ties between the Abrahamic faiths ensure shared reference.

that instances of genuine cognitive contact with God are ubiquitous.<sup>26</sup> While not all of these instances will involve actual name-giving that initiates reference, surely some will. Instead of one baptismal event, there are many, some of them undoubtedly starting new communication chains. By itself, this need not pose a serious problem. In everyday life, something similar can happen. Sometimes, when you're talking to someone about someone else, you only find out after a while that the two of you are actually referring to the same person, but under a different name or description. For general revelation, the idea would then be that people often unknowingly refer to the same God under different names because they are part of communication chains that started from instances of cognitive contact with the same referent. In some cases, they might discover this, whereas in others they don't.<sup>27</sup>

A second issue generates more serious problems. The thesis of general revelation entails that there is, and always has been, ubiquitous cognitive contact with God, some of which involves baptismal name-giving. Hence, it is hardly plausible that reference to God started exclusively with Abraham (although he may have started a communication chain that was to become particularly influential). Bringing special revelation (thesis (D)) into the fold reinforces this. According to biblical testimony, God revealed himself specially already in pre-Abrahamic times, e.g., to Adam and Eve and later to Noah. So to the extent that pre-Abrahamic baptismal events started communication chains that branched out into the world's religions, there is universally shared reference to God in all world religions. And even if uses of "God" (or other words used to refer to God) in the world religions do not trace back to some pre-Abrahamic baptismal event, they may still trace back to different baptismal events of the same God in virtue of general revelation, so that there is universal coreference after all. Hence, together with the basic causal theory, the Reformed view indeed seems to entail that all the world religions refer to the same God.

Perhaps some will welcome this as a happy consequence. The view that all religions are somehow about the same ultimate reality is a popular option.<sup>28</sup> But regardless of whether there is good reason for its popularity, the Reformed theologians whose views we have been espousing certainly weren't attempting to formulate a version of it. Theses (C), (E), (F), and (G) make it clear that the Reformed view is more exclusivist: Only Christian belief is now the appropriate response to God's general and special rev-

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<sup>26</sup>Cf. also George Mavrodes, *Revelation in Religious Belief* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988) for a causal account of revelation.

<sup>27</sup>This does raise the question of how people discover that they refer to the same God. The causal theory itself is silent on this question, but presumably, it happens by comparing descriptions that speakers hold to be true of the referent and finding out that there is sufficient commonality in them.

<sup>28</sup>See Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism* (London: MacMillan, 1995) and John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005) for elaborate discussion and defense.

elation. Non-Christian worship is a form of idolatry. While these theses do not address the issue of reference explicitly, they do suggest strongly that the Reformed view doesn't endorse the idea that the world religions universally refer to (the same) God. To call a form of worship idolatry is most plausibly interpreted as saying that it involves fictional or failed reference. Here, then, the Reformed view and the basic causal theory do not mesh very well.

We already argued that the basic causal theory is in need of amendments for independent reasons and discussed two specific additions. First, reference requires that a speaker not be fundamentally mistaken about the kind of thing she is referring to, and, secondly, uses of the name "X" with which a speaker associates numerous beliefs that are false with respect to X and that are all true about Y should count as reference to Y (provided both "X" and "Y" in the speaker's community both trace back appropriately to baptismal events that initiated reference to X and Y). We will now go on to argue that the modified causal theory can deal with the problems we just identified for the basic causal theory. Therefore, it is a much better fit with the Reformed view.

Recall that the Inadequate Response Thesis (C) maintains that unaided human responses to God's general revelation are off the mark, sometimes widely so. Instead of believing that He is an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent personal being, some people outside the Abrahamic religions believe that God is an impersonal force, that there are many all-too-human gods, that God is a figment of our unconscious desires, or a byproduct of the evolution of human cognition. That is, some people come to hold *fundamentally mistaken* beliefs about the very kind of being God is in response to general revelation. Such beliefs, we proposed in our discussion of the Satan/God example above, preclude reference. So a proponent of the Reformed view who accepts the modified causal theory of reference is not committed to the view that any response whatsoever to general revelation refers to God. To the extent that fundamentally mistaken beliefs have developed into religious belief systems or mythologies, the proponent of the Reformed view should say that these beliefs involve only fictional reference. They can grant that these religions and mythologies may have started out as responses to general revelation of the true and only God, but will add that the truth is distorted and suppressed in them to such an extent that they don't refer to God anymore.

At the same time, the modified causal theory retains the advantage of making reference primarily dependent on causal links between referent, baptizer, and subsequent users of a name, rather than on the possession of uniquely identifying descriptions. Reference is thus compatible with a substantial amount of false beliefs about the referent (notwithstanding the exceptions we argued for above). This is congenial to central ideas of the Reformed view. Humans always respond to God's general revelation (B), so there is causal contact and hence reference, provided they do not form *fundamentally* mistaken beliefs about what kind of being they are in contact

with. Special revelation, too, involves genuine cognitive contact. But human responses are inadequate (C), which is to say that they will involve many or perhaps mostly false beliefs. On the modified causal view, however, this will not make reference impossible. The modified causal view, then, can do justice to both the universalistic and the exclusivist elements that are present in the Reformed view.

These reflections do raise an important question, namely when mistaken beliefs are to count as so *fundamentally* mistaken that they invalidate reference. Above, we suggested that beliefs that get the very ontological category of a thing wrong should count as such, but when it comes to God, it is not immediately clear which beliefs are guilty of such a mistake. A thorough discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of the present paper, but we suggest that at least the distinctions between personal and non-personal beings, between concrete and abstract entities, between universals and particulars, between substances, properties, stuffs, events, processes, and modifications, and between creator and created are of fundamental ontological importance. This is to say that views that place God on the wrong side of these divides fail to refer to God. Of particular urgency in relation to the question of coreference among the Abrahamic faiths is the question whether the belief that God is not a Trinity should count as a fundamental mistake that invalidates reference. We confess to having torn intuitions here. On the one hand, whether or not God is a Trinity strikes us as a matter of fundamental ontological category; on the other, it doesn't appear to be quite as fundamental as the distinction between, say, personal and non-personal or between creator and created.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, an answer to the question whether Jews, Christians, and Muslims refer to the same God depends on where you come down on this issue.

To sum up, the Reformed view and the modified causal theory of reference form fairly natural companions, whereas descriptivist theories of reference and the basic causal theory all fly in the face of central elements of the Reformed view. On the combination of the Reformed view and the modified causal theory, adherents of all the Abrahamic religions arguably refer to the same God, in spite of their considerable differences of opinion about his exact properties. And in so far as other religions have also arisen from genuine cognitive contact with God that isn't distorted by fundamentally mistaken beliefs about what kind of being He is, they too refer to the same God. Attempted reference to God/gods outside these religions, however, through names such as "Zeus," "Astarte," "Vishnu," etc. is unsuccessful, as the alleged beings these names refer to fall into a fundamentally different ontological category than God. They are, for instance, not seen as creator and ultimate ground of everything that exists. Hence, these are cases of fictional reference.

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<sup>29</sup>An anonymous referee helpfully pointed out that the kind of Trinitarian view one subscribes to might also matter here. It might be easier for Latin Trinitarians to defend the idea that Jews and Muslims do not get the fundamental ontological category of God wrong than it is for social Trinitarians.

### 3.2 *Worship and Belief*

We have argued that proper worship of X presupposes belief in X. This makes it possible to treat them jointly here. Belief in X, as we saw in section II, involves the beliefs (a) that X exists, (b) is a certain basic kind of being, and (c) is trustworthy. And if worship of X is to be proper, (a) and (c) must be true, while (b) must not be fundamentally mistaken. So to inquire whether adherents of different religions believe in and worship the same God, we first ask whether their beliefs of type (a) and (c) are true, and whether their beliefs of type (b) are not fundamentally mistaken. We also investigate what, if anything, the Reformed view entails on these issues.

In view of the previous section, the first thing to say is that people who, according to the Reformed view, do not refer to God cannot be said to believe in the same God as those who do refer to him. We found that, according to the Reformed view combined with the modified causal theory, adherents of the non-Abrahamic world religions do not refer to God. This entails that their beliefs of type (a), (b), and (c) are false, because they don't refer. They are cases of fictional reference—or of idolatry, as (G) has it. In consequence, worship premised on such false beliefs is misguided.

With respect to the Abrahamic religions,<sup>30</sup> the picture is more complicated. Belief in God requires more than mere reference, so the fact that the Reformed view can be taken to imply that users of “God” in these religions all *refer* to the same God doesn't automatically mean that Jews, Christians and Muslims all *believe in* the same God. If they are to believe in the same God, their beliefs of sort (a), (b), and (c) must be roughly the same and also correct. According to the Reformed view, beliefs of sort (a) and (c) as endorsed by Jews and Muslims are true.<sup>31</sup> But what about (b)? Are adherents of the Abrahamic religions committed to holding the same characterization of God's basic nature as true? Clearly, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are centered around different characterizations of God. Although they share various beliefs about God's basic nature, they also differ sharply on points that are considered to be non-negotiable by orthodox adherents of the three religions.<sup>32</sup> In view of this, we can try to make progress by distinguishing between those elements that belong essentially to God's basic nature and those that don't (i.e., that are either non-basic or not essential) according to these three religions. We are strongly inclined to think that, as long as we do this while honoring the beliefs of broadly orthodox adherents of these religions, we end up with characterizations that are incompatible in their essential elements. For no characterization of God that leaves out, say, the doctrine of the Trinity or the unique role of Christ will be acceptable to

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<sup>30</sup>For the sake of brevity, we omit the qualification that there may be non-Abrahamic religions which do refer to God and will speak as if only the Abrahamic religions do so.

<sup>31</sup>At least with regard to the minimal belief *that* God can be trusted. They will differ in their beliefs about *what* God can be trusted to do.

<sup>32</sup>We ignore any intra-religious differences among broadly orthodox believers for the sake of convenience. Adding them, too, would further complicate the story but not detract from the main point we're making.

orthodox Christians. At the same time, those very characterizations will be unacceptable to adherents of both Judaism and Islam. At most, then, we can expect agreement on a subset of the essential characterizations of God's basic nature in the Abrahamic religions.<sup>33</sup>

The conclusion we draw from this is that the question whether Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe in and worship the same God doesn't allow for a firm univocal answer. On the one hand, since belief in the same God requires commitment to the same characterization of God's basic nature, they do not believe in the same God and hence do not worship the same God. This is in line with the Reformed view's claim that only the Christian response to God's revelation is now appropriate. On the other hand, as we argued in the previous section, the Reformed view can be taken to entail that the word "God" as used in these three religions refers to the same God and, differences notwithstanding, there is certainly striking partial overlap in their characterizations of God's nature. For these reasons, it would be misleading to just leave it at an unqualified negative answer.

We can make sense of this conclusion as follows. It follows from the Reformed view that, strictly speaking, adherents of the Abrahamic religions do not believe in and worship the same God. Of course, however, ordinary speech isn't always strict, which is why we sometimes do say that adherents of the Abrahamic religions believe in and worship the same God. The Reformed view can grant that there is some justification for doing so, by acknowledging that it can be argued that they *refer* to the same God and that they share several important beliefs about God's basic nature. This move would still testify to the conclusion that there is no firm univocal answer to the question whether adherents of Judaism, Christians, and Muslims believe in and worship the same God. The Reformed view articulates this very predicament well.

#### 4. Conclusion

We have presented a Reformed view on the relation between Christianity and other religions, which finds its inspiration in the Dutch Kuyperian tradition. Next, we analyzed what it is to worship, believe in, and refer to God and looked at how these concepts are interrelated. We argued that worship of X requires belief in X, which at least involves having the beliefs (a) that X exists, (b) is a certain kind of thing, and (c) that X can be trusted or relied upon in those ways that are relevant to things of X's kind. If beliefs (a), (b), or (c) are false, belief in X and hence worship of X is improper. Belief in X also involves (attempted) reference to X, which fails if X doesn't exist. False beliefs about X, however, do not necessarily invalidate reference, at least if we construe reference along the lines of a causal theory of

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<sup>33</sup>But see Vincent Brümmer, *Atonement, Christology and the Trinity: Making Sense of the Christian Doctrine* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), for an attempt to identify a common core doctrinal structure in the Abrahamic faiths.

reference. Fundamentally mistaken beliefs, i.e., false beliefs about the very kind of thing that X is, do undermine reference.

We went on to argue that the Reformed view meshes well with a modified causal theory of reference. On this combination of views, there is a case to be made that adherents of the Abrahamic faiths refer to the same God, although this does depend on the assumption that disbelief in God's Trinitarian nature is not a reference-undermining fundamental mistake. Adherents of many non-Abrahamic religions do not refer to the same God, since they have fundamentally mistaken beliefs about the kind of being God is. The Reformed view further implies that, in a strict sense, Jews, Christians, and Muslims do not believe in and worship the same God. Nonetheless, we may be forgiven for sometimes speaking loosely and saying that they do believe in and worship the same God, because, arguably, they do corefer to God and their conceptions of what kind of being God is overlap to a considerable and important extent.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup>For comments on an earlier draft of this paper we thank two anonymous referees for this journal, as well as its editor. In addition we would like to thank Rik Peels, Emanuel Rutten, and the audience at the 2010 Abraham Kuyper Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary, where an early version of this paper was presented, for valuable discussion and feedback. Part of the work for this paper was made possible by a grant from the Templeton World Charity Foundation. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.