Can There Be Alternative Concepts of God?

JOHN BISHOP
The University of Auckland

1. Can it be consistent to adhere to theism, and yet to reject the belief that omni-God exists, where “omniGod” means a unique omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, supernatural person who is creator and sustainer of all else that exists?

On the assumptions prevailing within Philosophy of Religion, at least as practised by analytical philosophers, the answer is clearly “No.” Such philosophers typically presuppose that theism virtually by definition requires belief that omniGod exists.

But this presupposition may be questioned, and could be overturned by articulating an adequate alternative concept of God, satisfying the following requirements:

(i) the concept must be genuinely distinct from the concept of omniGod;

and

(ii) the concept must be acceptable as authentically a concept of God; that is, belief in the existence of a God of the kind the concept specifies must be religiously adequate to the theistic religious tradition, in the sense that it could count at least as one viable expression of that historical tradition.

2. My aim in this paper is to contribute some philosophical prolegomena to the search for alternative concepts of God: how best should one approach the project of trying to decide whether there are any alternative concepts of God in the sense described?

But first let me explain why this project should be considered important. It is important, in the first place, for those who (like myself) aspire to remain within a theistic faith even though they have come to reject the reasonableness of belief in omniGod—for example, through being persuaded by the Argument from Evil—
and who are nevertheless not prepared to retreat into irrationalist fideism (that is, the view that belief that omniGod exists can properly be held by faith contrary to reason). The intellectual integrity of such a position requires that there be an adequate alternative concept of God—and, moreover, an adequate alternative concept of God in whose instantiation it is reasonable to believe.

In the second place, the issue is important for the philosophical critics of theism. Someone who seeks to establish the unreasonableness of theism itself had better find out whether establishing the unreasonableness of belief in omniGod (on which so much atheistic philosophical effort has been expended) is indeed sufficient for this purpose. Such a person will need either to show that there are no adequate alternative concepts of God, or else to widen the attack on theism so that it deals not only with belief in omniGod, but also with belief in God according to each adequate alternative concept. The impatience of convinced atheists with radical theology is well known: they jealously guard the kind of God they don’t believe in! They would thus gain comfort from discovering that God-concepts genuinely distinct from the concept of omniGod and yet admissible as religiously authentic are just not to be had.

3. What method should be used in tackling the question whether there are any alternative concepts of God?

At first sight, it might seem sensible to begin by conducting a grand survey of theologians and philosophers who have thought of themselves as proposing alternatives to the traditional God of theism. And the survey may also have to include a number of philosophers who have not so thought of themselves, but about whom it might plausibly be claimed that, for all their professed atheism, they were in fact postulating alternative concepts of God. Each concept on the list produced by such a survey would then be examined to see if it does indeed count as an adequate alternative to omniGod, satisfying the two requirements stated in Section 1 above.

In fact, however, before conducting any such survey, it is important to begin by considering the question what the criteria are for a putative God-concept to be religiously adequate to theistic tradition.

4. One reason why this is important is that initial clarity about the criteria for a God-concept to be religiously adequate will provide intelligent focus and thus greater efficiency to any survey, by giving us from the outset a grasp of what it takes for a proposal for an alternative concept of God to count as a serious candidate.

But there is a more important reason why an inquiry into alternative concepts of God needs to begin from a discussion of criteria of religious adequacy. For, “omniGod conservatives”—on both the theistic and the atheistic side—will surely maintain that a proper account of the criteria for a God-concept to be adequate to theism will entail that any departure from the essential features of the concept of God as omniGod will breach the criteria. Accordingly, anyone who thinks it worth-
while exploring for alternative concepts of God must be prepared to offer and
defend some account of the criteria for religious adequacy of a God-concept
which would at least prima facie leave it open that some God-concept genuinely
distinct from the concept of omniGod might turn out to satisfy those criteria.
Obviously, this has to be done at the outset: the argument which concludes that
the quarry is not there to be found must first have its force significantly blunted
if there is to be any point in the hunt.

Furthermore, to begin by trying to provide religious adequacy criteria which
leave it open that some concept other than that of omniGod might turn out to be
adequate may provide heuristics for specific candidates for an alternative concept
of God. Insight into what it is for the concept of God to do the work it is supposed
to do in the context of theistic religion might suggest ways of constructing a
viable alternative concept of God from within the resources of theism. Lengthy
surveys of historical attempts at alternative God-concepts might then prove otiose.

5. How may criteria for the religious adequacy of a God-concept be generated in
such a way as to make appropriate room for the possibility of there turning out to
be some adequate alternative concept or concepts of God?

Traditionally, the criteria for the religious adequacy for a God-concept have
been set by means of a straightforward argument which seems to make it clear
that only the concept of omniGod can be religiously adequate to theism. The
concept of God has to be the concept of that which is worthy of worship. Worship
requires a uniquely excellently worthy object: an object which is supremely per-
fect, that than which a greater cannot even be conceived. From this, the “omni-
properties” of such an object have been directly inferred.

Now, of course, the proponent of the idea that there is a real possibility of there
being an adequate alternative concept of God will eventually have to come to
terms with this argument. And, since there would seem to be little point in trying
to deny that one criterion of religious adequacy is indeed that the concept of God
must be the concept of that which is worthy of worship, the traditional route from
there to the conclusion that God has to be omniGod in order to be worthy of
worship will have to be disputed. The would-be radical theologian will, however,
start off very much on the back foot if he or she tries to take on this dispute at the
outset. A better plan, I suggest, is to dig deeper and try and get at the source of the
criteria for a God-concept to be religiously adequate, to see if—once we identify
that source—we can find at least some additional criteria of religious adequacy
which don’t seem to lead quite so swiftly to the conclusion that a decently theistic
God really has to be the traditional omniGod.

6. I believe that a certain kind of “functionalist” proposal provides the source for
criteria for the religious adequacy of a God concept. I suggest that the concept of
God is the concept of something belief in whose existence plays a certain func-
tional role within what might be called the psychological economy of the theist.
And the question whether there are any adequate alternative concepts of God then
becomes the question whether belief in God according to any God-concept other than that of omniGod is fit to play this functional role.

7. Let me explain further just what kind of functionalist proposal I am here making, by distinguishing it from other kinds of functionalist proposals.¹

One widely current kind of functionalist proposal is the idea that some of our concepts are functional-role-concepts, in the sense that they are concepts of that-which-plays-a-certain-functional-role, where that role is implicitly specified by the theoretical laws of a theory or by the platitudes at the core of a body of discourse and practice. My present proposal, however, is not the proposal that the content of the concept of God be analysed in terms of that which plays a certain functional role implicitly specified by a set of theological platitudes. (This proposal would, I think, founder on the difficulty of identifying a set of genuinely platitudinous platitudes about God. Anything any given theologian offers as a theological platitude will either be so vague or ambiguous as to be useless for specifying the God-role, or else will turn out to be significantly theologically contestable. For example, many theists would take it that God’s having the defining properties of omniGod is the central “platitude” of theism—yet, of course, this will be contested by anyone who thinks that it remains open whether the God of theism is indeed omniGod.)

Since I seek to leave the way open to an alternative concept of God, I resist the idea that there is such a thing as the, uncontested, “God-role” and that it’s then a factual question what it is, if anything, which fills this role. I want to suggest that the concept of God as omniGod can have competitors—and so I want to get a grip on what these competing concepts may be understood as competing for. My proposal that the belief that God exists plays a certain functional role is intended to indicate what they are competing for: namely, the status of being a specifier of the concept of God under which belief that God exists plays the functional role which that belief plays in the psychological economy of theism.² There is, so to speak, something which the belief that God exists is supposed to do for you (or, at least, for the theist), and potentially more than one specific concept of God might be such that belief in God according to that concept does that something for you. And—my proposal then is—what it is for a God-concept to be religiously adequate is for it to be such that believing that God exists according to that God-concept does that something for you, plays that functional role.

I do not exclude the possibility that, once we have established the criteria for religious adequacy, it may then be appropriate to analyse a given God-concept which meets those criteria as a functional-role concept—to hold that what it is to be God is to be that which fills “the God-role” according to that concept. The burden of my present point is to emphasise that, while we are still seeking to develop criteria for religious adequacy, our focus needs to be on the functional role which is played by the belief that God exists, or—and this is merely a terminological variant—by the concept of God in virtue of the role played by the belief that the concept is instantiated.
Finally—in case this isn’t already obvious—I should add that what I mean here by the functional role of the belief that God exists is distinct from what a functionalist in the Philosophy of Mind would mean by that: namely, the causal role, specified in terms of actual and potential inputs, outputs and relations to other intentional states, which something has to fill in order to count as a belief with the content “God exists”.

8. Suppose it granted, then, that belief that God exists does play a certain functional role in the psychological economy of the theist. Three questions then arise:

(1) What is that functional role?
(2) Why should that functional role be regarded as a role which needs to be played within theism?
(3) Is it plausible to suppose that belief in anything other than omniGod might be fit to play this functional role?

9. To comment further on question (2): this question arises because it might be denied that the belief that God exists needs to play any functional role in the psychological economy of the theist. That is, it might be alleged that one can be a theist and yet not believe that God exists at all (not only not according to the concept of God as omniGod, but not according to any concept of God whatsoever, putative alternatives to omniGod included).

This “eliminativist” challenge to my functionalist move may seem perverse. Even if there might be some scope for theism without belief in omniGod, surely it’s absolutely clear that there’s no properly so-called theistic position which dispenses with belief in God altogether? The fact is, however, that within the Christian branch of theism, anyway, there have been those who have called themselves “Christian atheists”. But how can Christian atheism count as a variety of theism? Isn’t that just a sheer confusion?

10. There could in principle be a Christian atheism which denies that belief in God is necessary for Christian belief, and cleanly removes the air of paradox by going on to claim that Christianity, properly understood, is—surprisingly—not a theistic religion at all. This form of Christianity would claim that all the God talk is a mistake, and simply needs to be dispensed with. Perhaps some who have taken Christianity to be a precursor to Marxism hold this view.

In fact, most self-styled Christian atheists don’t come clean in this way. They hold themselves to be within the theistic tradition because they hold that the God-talk (or a significant part of it, anyway) is vitally important. But they are “atheists” because they understand the God-talk in an anti-realist fashion. The most popular form of contemporary Christian atheism regards God-talk as providing or constructing a symbolical, mythological framework within which adherence to certain shared fundamental values can best be affirmed and honoured: we construct the God we believe in so that God appropriately symbolises the
values of our tradition. (This would seem to be a “projectivist” or “fictionalist” variety of anti-realism.) Christian atheists of this ilk can dispel the air of serious paradox about being atheists within the theistic tradition by calling themselves Christian anti-realists or non-realists. What makes anti-realist theism a genuine form of theism is that it couples adherence to theistic values with a continued commitment to express such adherence through the spiritual, liturgical and theological culture of some historical theistic tradition. But it is anti-realist because it concedes only an anti-realist interpretation of God-talk as the traditional, mythical, vehicle for affirming the worth of both individual and social commitment to those values.

11. Now that the distinction is made between belief in God realistically understood, and belief in God according to some anti-realist construal, I can make it clear that my functionalist proposal is that belief in God realistically understood plays a certain functional role for the realist-theist. What is that “certain functional role”? And how might it be specified in such a way as to leave it open that some alternative to the concept of God as omniGod might fill it?

Working with a comparison between the commitments of the realist and the commitments of the anti-realist theist offers a way forward here. In order to specify the functional role which the belief that God exists plays in the psychological economy of the realist theist, and to appreciate why a filler for this role might be thought to be needed, I shall focus on what the realist theist would regard as deficient in the position of the anti-realist theist. Of course, the realist may trivially describe the deficiency just as lack of realist belief in the existence of God. But I propose to consider what this amounts to in functional terms: what more is a realist belief that God exists supposed to do for you than can be done by anything admissible by the anti-realist-theist, for whom theistic belief amounts to a mythic vehicle for affirming a certain set of values?

12. I shall try to answer this question just for the case of Christian theism. I suggest that the clue to the function of realist belief in God within Christian theism is to be found in the fact that Christian realists maintain that there is more to the “good news” proclaimed in the Gospel than is contained in the value affirmations shared with the Christian anti-realist. Christian realists hold that the Gospel-proclamation goes beyond affirming the supremacy of certain values, and the worth of commitment to them. It is thus reasonable to suppose that the function of belief in God in Christian theism is related to this richer construal of the Gospel message. Plausibly, Christian realist belief in God grounds or justifies the acceptance of whatever it is which makes the content of the Gospel-proclamation more than just the affirmation of certain values and the worth of commitment to them. That, in any case, is the idea which I shall now pursue: realist belief in God is needed either to constitute or to justify whatever the Gospel’s “extra content” is over and above its affirming and honouring certain values and the worth of commitment to them. If this idea can be sustained, then it should
yield a specification of the role of realist belief in God, and also indicate what reason the Christian realist might give for thinking that Christian theism does indeed require that some belief should fill this role.

13. But what is this “extra content”? What more could there be to the Christian Gospel beyond the affirmation of certain values and the worth of commitment to them? What more could there be beyond the claim that—to use a slogan which needs to be filled out through a developed Christian ethic—the best kind of life is a life lived lovingly and that it is supremely worthwhile to commit oneself to living such a life?

To see what this extra content may be, I continue with my functionalist approach, by asking what function believing that extra content might fulfil. And I want to suggest that, as well as functioning to secure acceptance of certain values and the worth of commitment to them, belief in the Christian Gospel also functions to resolve certain predicaments in which Christian values are genuinely accepted, and yet are experienced as, so to say, existentially remote. In such predicaments, though the value of a life lived lovingly is discerned as an ideal, concrete commitment to such a life is nevertheless felt somehow to be unmotivated, unattractive, pointless or absurd. My suggestion therefore is that the extra content at issue here amounts to the claim that the value of seeking to live lovingly is not really existentially remote at all: to commit oneself to such a life is a realistic and well motivated project, with as much meaningful point as there could possibly be. I suggest, that is, that the extra content has something to do with securing the motivational basis for commitment to Christian values. Caution is needed, however, in spelling this out: if the Gospel proclamation has content which supplies the antidote to experiencing Christian values as ideally valid but existentially remote, then to just which kinds of experiences of this general sort is it specifically addressed?

14. One kind of experience of existential remoteness is to fail to be motivated to act lovingly until assured of a guarantee that it is in one’s own best interests to do so. Appeal to a God who rewards good actions and punishes bad ones may supply just such a guarantee: but it is doubtful whether a Gospel which made such an appeal would be worthy of moral respect. Arguably, anyone who needed an externally imposed system of incentives in order to be motivated to act lovingly would not yet properly have grasped the value of such action. So, arguably, no additional content (beyond what is anyway available to the Christian anti-realist) is needed to overcome this sort of lack of motivation for commitment to Christian values: genuinely to accept that the life lived lovingly is the most worthwhile kind of life is eo ipso to be committed to the attempt to live such a life.

15. Yet it is still legitimate to ask, as a theoretical question posed from a standpoint of disengaged reflection, whether living life lovingly does in fact promote a person’s own fulfilment. When we reflect on what kind of a world this is, we
must surely agree that the world would be better if loving action did indeed promote the agent’s own true welfare? There is thus the possibility of a more sophisticated kind of experience of Christian values as valid but existentially remote: one may succeed, sometimes at the cost of serious suffering, in bending one’s will to the task of living the life of love, motivated purely by the recognition that it is, indeed, the best kind of life, and yet do so cheerlessly, without any confidence or hope that such a choice is the path to ultimate fulfilment. And this cheerlessness need not, of course, be confined to the consideration of one’s own case: one may experience it at least as acutely in contemplating the virtuous suffering of others. So, perhaps, the Gospel’s extra content might be understood as offering the cure for this kind of experience—that is, as proclaiming the happy news that this is indeed a world where, despite appearances, the virtuous always ultimately flourish.

16. Suppose (for the present) that this is the extra content we are looking for: the question is then whether its inclusion requires realist belief in God. The Christian anti-realist might argue that it doesn’t, by maintaining that the claim that the virtuous always ultimately flourish can be secured by holding that virtue is its own reward: that to act Righteously is ultimately to flourish, no matter what may befall one. But accounts of human flourishing which uphold this claim are unappealing, and are reduced close to absurdity (or do I mean obscenity?) by their having to say, for example, of the dying Jesus on the Cross, that here we have an exemplar of true human flourishing.

17. If an intrinsic link between virtue and fulfilment is rejected, what then would be needed to secure the claim that the virtuous are in fact always ultimately fulfilled? Given the facts of human history, it seems that this claim could be made true only if all persons belonged within an overall context wider than the historical order, and someone or something ensured that in this wider context, ultimate happiness is enjoyed by all and only those whose virtue makes them deserving of happiness (to put it a Kantian way). Now, this clearly does require that the Gospel proclaims much more than the worth of certain values and of commitment to a certain kind of life. It must further proclaim the reality of some after-life or transcendent order, and the existence of an agency (to which everyone gives the name, God) capable of ensuring that within that transcendent order the virtuous are ultimately fulfilled. It won’t be enough to construe such talk (anti-realist style) as merely the symbolic expression of adherence to Christian values.

18. If Christian theistic belief does have the function of securing the claim that the virtuous ultimately flourish, then it does indeed seem that the resources of a fully-fledged Christian realism will be needed to secure this function. But what is needed may turn out to be altogether too fully-fledged a Christian realism—from the perspective of someone seeking leeway for a genuine alternative to omniGod, anyway. For one thing, the appeal to an after-life or transcendent order is, of
course, highly problematic: it badly skews the significance of historical existence, and rests on metaphysically contentious claims about personal identity. But, more to the point, the sort of real God which is needed has to be either an omniGod or near enough to it for the difference not to make much difference. On the traditional theistic picture, a real omniGod does guarantee that sub specie aeternitatis the virtuous are fulfilled—the only (and considerable) difficulty being to find a theodicy which at least renders it entertainable that omniGod might be justified in, so to speak, waiting until the hereafter in order to make the virtuous happy. But an agency other than omniGod could provide this guarantee only if, despite not being both omnipotent and omnibenevolent, it was nevertheless good and powerful enough to ensure that the injustices of historical existence are overturned in some transcendent “realm of ultimacy”. And, in general, doubts about the existence of omniGod (or about the religious appropriateness of construing the Christian God as the omniGod) tend to transfer to the existence (and religious appropriateness) of any agent good and powerful enough to fill this role. In particular, any version of the Argument from Evil which is thought to rule out belief in an omniGod will also be thought to rule out belief in a good God who, though not omnipotent, is still powerful enough to make sure that all finite agents do get their just deserts. This analysis of the extra content of the Gospel-proclamation, then—though it does go beyond anything the Christian anti-realist can accommodate—is unlikely to provide a route to any viable alternative concept of God. If this is the functional role which realist belief in God plays, then it seems that no belief significantly different from belief in omniGod is going to be able to play it, and my functionalist approach to the search for an alternative concept of God adequate to Christian theism will have yielded meagre fruit.

19. I believe, however, that the prospects for a viable alternative concept of God may be kept open through an analysis of the Gospel’s “extra content” which rejects the notion that it consists in a belief whose function is to provide a comforting guarantee that the virtuous will ultimately be fulfilled. If comfort of that kind is not to be found—and, perhaps, ought not to be sought—the point of the Gospel may yet be to provide a different kind of comfort. For, even though it’s accepted that the world is not the nice kind of place in which virtue is always ultimately rewarded, there yet remains a further issue about just how starkly nasty the world is: is this or is this not the kind of world in which virtuous sufferers (and those who contemplate virtuous suffering) can justifiably be hopeful, even though they cannot count on any final compensation for unjust suffering? Let me now suggest, then, that the Gospel proclamation affirms that this world is not so nasty that there is no basis for hope or consolation in the midst of suffering and evil. This is the extra content of the Gospel—the content that goes beyond the affirmation of the worth of certain values.

20. But exactly what is it which the truth of the extra content of the Gospel proclamation is supposed to justify us in hoping for, even in the midst of virtuous
or innocent suffering—if it isn’t that the virtuous will ultimately flourish? One possibility is the hope that virtuous suffering, though not individually compensated for, will nevertheless advance the cause of justice and liberation from oppression and so contribute to the flourishing of others, including generations yet unborn. This is the hope characteristic of the better kind of, “non-triumphalist”, martyr, who is free of the egotistic belief that his sacrifice opens a direct route to his own ultimate bliss.

21. Here is another possibility: take the intentional object of the hope to be the simple negation of the content of those thoughts of hopelessness, alienation or despair which tempt us to think that, though living life lovingly may indeed be the highest value, suffering, finitude and death—especially as they affect virtuous and vicious alike—make a mockery of commitment to such a life, robbing it of its meaningfulness and point. The content of the hope might then be just that lives lived lovingly (indeed, even fleeting episodes in which this ideal is briefly attained) are not deprived of meaningfulness and point by suffering, finitude and death.5 Hope of this kind arguably depends neither on believing that there is an illusion involved in taking suffering, finitude and death to be real impediments to flourishing,6 nor on believing that these impediments can be seen as merely temporary from the perspective of a realm of transcendent ultimacy in which the virtuous flourish and receive compensation for their sufferings.

22. The content of the Gospel proclamation may then be understood as the claim that “non-triumphalist” hope of the kinds briefly explored above is justified. One may justifiably commit oneself hopefully and cheerfully to right living even in the face of suffering and evil, yet without needing to hold a “triumphalist” belief in an ultimate compensatory dispensation.

I will not here pursue the interesting and difficult question of characterising more precisely the content of non-triumphalist Christian hope, nor of fitting it into a general account of the nature and varieties of hope. The content of Christian hope will, I suspect, have to include both of the types of hope I have mentioned: hope for future good, in the form of liberation from injustice and oppression, and hope that suffering, finitude and death do not rob commitment to the ethic of love of its point. For the present, it will suffice to have shown that there can be forms of Christian hope, which, because they lack triumphalist belief in an ultimate comprehensive compensatory dispensation, could turn out to be justified in the absence of omniGod.

23. The question now is whether beliefs which justify non-triumphalist hope have to include something which goes beyond anything a Christian anti-realist could admit—whether they have to include, that is, some kind of realist belief in God. I shall argue that they do.

It is clear, of course, that Christian anti-realists will be correct to claim that some people who reject realist belief in God are in fact able to maintain non-
triumphalist hope in the midst of injustice and suffering. Evidently, Christian realists don’t have a monopoly on hope.

I would argue, however, that there is nothing in the Christian anti-realist’s position which can supply a warrant for such hope. All the anti-realist can legitimately say is that, as it happens, only some people are fortunate enough to be able to maintain hope in the face of their own and others’ misfortunes. (And this “unfairness”, incidentally, can be made part of the case against the reasonableness of belief in the omniGod variety of Christian realism.)

The Christian realist, however, distinctively affirms that there is something about the real world which justifies non-triumphalist hope in the midst of evil. Such hope is not a valiant absurdity, nor mere benign pathology: it is (the Christian realist claims) an attitude warranted in virtue of a feature of reality. And so my proposal is that a significant function of realist belief in God is to supply the warrant for this kind of hope. Realist belief in God is (inter alia) belief in something real which warrants hope in the midst of suffering—a hope which passes beyond the fantasy of eventual compensation for suffering and evil, yet nevertheless succeeds in making fully “existentially close” the worth of commitment to Christian values.

24. To summarise. It is a criterion of the religious adequacy of a God-concept (at least for Christian theism) that the realist belief that God exists according to that concept justifies hope in the midst of suffering. Of course there is nothing remarkable about claiming that Christian realist belief in God functions to warrant hope in the midst of suffering: that Christians base their hope on God, and on God’s great acts (supremely in the Resurrection of Christ), is beyond dispute. What I have argued is that, if we take the hope that realist belief in God warrants to be non-triumphalist hope, then it remains open that this criterion of religious adequacy might be satisfied by a concept of God genuinely distinct from the concept of omniGod. And I believe that—though much more needs to be said on the subject—I have at least said enough about what the content of non-triumphalist hope might be to make it apparent that taking Christian hope to be non-triumphalist hope is a real option—and, therefore, that a route lies open to a potentially adequate alternative concept of God.

25. I do of course accept that realist belief in God plays other functional roles in the psychological economy of the theist beyond the grounding of hope—and that further criteria for the religious adequacy of a God-concept are associated with these other roles. As already noted (Section 5 above), belief in God will have to be belief in something worthy of worship. Arguably also, realist belief in God will have to provide in some sense an ultimate explanation for all that exists. Yet another criterion may be of an epistemic kind: God must be such that it turns out that everyone believes in God simply as a matter of scientific rationality. A belief could not count as belief in God unless it required a suprarational act of faith—an act of accepting a claim which, while it does not conflict with the
deliverances of scientific rationality, requires going beyond anything that scientific rationality can establish.

Thus, as I envisaged at the outset (Section 4 above), an omniGod conservative might concede that—if we do allow hope to be stripped of its triumphalism—belief in something other than omniGod might warrant hope, and yet argue that it remains very clear that, when we come to these other criteria (worship-worthiness, being an ultimate explainer, needing to be believed in “by faith”—and no doubt others not yet mentioned) only omniGod can measure up.

26. I believe, however, that it may plausibly be argued that any alternative concept of God which satisfies the criterion that belief in God should warrant hope will also satisfy the other criteria—at least on some arguably plausible interpretations of what those criteria mean. (Accordingly, its ability to deliver a God belief in whose existence serves to ground hope turns out to be the crucial test for the adequacy of a God-concept.) Here I shall do no more than sketch some reasons for thinking that the required arguments may be forthcoming in the case of the three other criteria I have mentioned.

Whatever grounds our hope plays such a fundamental ethical role that it may well be appropriate to regard it as an object of worship. Whatever is worthy of worship must indeed be that than which a greater cannot be thought. But this does not entail that only omniGod could be worthy of worship, since there is room for arguing about the kind of greatness that is here relevant: one might perhaps doubt whether the only kind of greatness relevant to worthiness-for-worship is metaphysical greatness qua being, and—even if that is granted—the assumption that the highest greatness qua being belongs to the most conceivably independent substance (i.e., to omniGod) can certainly be questioned.

As well, whatever grounds hope may also count as that in terms of which everything finally makes sense, at least on some acceptable interpretation of what “making final sense of everything” might mean. There is room to hold that causal scientific explanations are not the only kind of explanation. Indeed, as omniGod conservatives themselves recognise, if God is not to be “the God of the gaps”, God’s role as ultimate explainer had better be distinguishable from anything like scientific explanation.

And, finally, it is surely evident that belief in the existence of that which grounds hope could not be established purely as a matter of scientific rationality, since there would be no failure of scientific rationality in taking account of our total evidence and holding that there is no warrant for hope, however “non-triumphalist”.

So, the belief that there is that which warrants non-triumphalist hope—I maintain—might generally satisfy the functions which the belief that God exists plays for the realist theist, yet without amounting to belief that God exists according to the concept of God as omniGod.

27. My aim in this paper was to contribute some philosophical prolegomena to the search for alternative concepts of God. I have now done that. I have argued
that the realist belief that God exists plays a functional role for the (Christian) theist in grounding hope; that it is thus a criterion for the religious adequacy of a God-concept (with respect to Christian realist theism) that belief that God exists according to that concept should ground hope; that it remains open that belief that God exists according to some concept distinct from that of omniGod could satisfy this criterion (granted some “non-triumphalist” version of Christian hope, anyway); and that there are prospects for holding that any alternative concept of God which satisfies this criterion might reasonably be thought to satisfy other central criteria for the religious adequacy of a Christian God-concept. So my overall answer to the question I posed at the outset—how best should one approach the project of trying to decide whether there are any alternative concepts of God?—is that exploring for alternative Christian concepts of God is a matter of exploring for concepts of X such that belief that X exists warrants non-triumphalist hope. I have thus shown how one may identify criteria for the religious adequacy of a realist theistic God-concept in such a way as to leave it open that a concept genuinely distinct from that of omniGod might turn out to be adequate.

28. I have argued that the realist belief that God exists functions to warrant (non-triumphalist) hope. But does hope need to be warranted? Indeed, can it be warranted by a belief about some feature of reality? Perhaps hope in the face of evil, suffering and death is indeed “merely” benign pathology for which there can be no justification. And perhaps it is the highest maturity to live a life in full conscious acceptance of this fact. Perhaps so. To hold this view is certainly a reasonable and honourable position. My claim has been only that this position is not that of realist theists—and is, indeed, the direct contradictory of their view. Realist theists take hope to be open to, and in need of, justification. And realist theists take that justification to be provided by belief in God—and my functionalist suggestion has been that the concept of anything belief in whose existence provides a justification for hope deserves to be seriously considered as a theistic God-concept. On my view, then, there is a real, significant, difference between accepting and rejecting realist theism, but it is not to be characterised outright as the difference between accepting and rejecting the existence of omniGod. Rather, at its deepest level, the difference is over the question whether reality is such as to justify hope—at least hope of a certain kind.

29. So, to make a case for preferring realist theism to its rivals (namely, anti-realist theism and outright atheism), one would need arguments for the claim that reality does indeed have a feature which warrants hope. And to defend an alternative to omniGod realist theism one would need to show that that feature does not amount to the existence of omniGod. I make no claim to have provided any such arguments here. The attempt to provide such arguments belongs to a project in philosophical theology which goes beyond the present prolegomena in the philosophy of religion. Anyone who shares my own desire to remain within realist theism while rejecting omniGod theory will, of course, need to be committed
to this project: they will need (i) to specify a candidate alternative concept of God, (ii) establish that it meets the religious adequacy criteria for Christian realist theism, and (iii) argue that it is reasonable to believe that that concept is instantiated.

30. Can there be adequate alternative concepts of God? I have not answered my title question in the way that would most satisfy the would-be radical realist theist—although I admit that I do myself have in mind a specific candidate for an alternative concept of God, and that my conduct of this prolegomenal inquiry has no doubt been influenced by what I have in mind.7 I do claim, however, that my prolegomenal inquiry has yielded a worthwhile outcome which (a) is bad news for atheists who would like to think that establishing the unreasonableness of belief in omniGod would defeat theism altogether; (b) presents a significant challenge to anti-realist theists who suppose that the only way reasonably to remain within the theistic tradition is to interpret God-talk in a wholly anti-realist fashion; and (c) offers moderately good news to would-be radical realist theists, while yet falling well short of vindicating any specific alternative concept of God. For I believe I have shown that attempts to construct alternative concepts of God are not generally pointless: there is a way of understanding the criteria for the religious adequacy of a God-concept which leaves it interestingly open that the theory of God as omniGod might be abandoned by a position that yet deserves to be regarded as remaining within the tradition of realist Christian theism.8

Notes

1. I am indebted to Ian Ravenscroft for drawing my attention to the importance of this.
2. Note that I say that competing concepts of God are competing to be “a” (rather than “the”) specifier: this is to leave open the possibility that more than one distinct concept of God might be fit to play the role.
3. And, in fact, some contemporary inheritors of the Christian atheist tradition do use these terms: for example, Don Cupitt describes his form of “radical Christian humanism” as “non-realist” in his The Sea of Faith, (2nd edition London, SCM Press, 1994).
4. I owe this point to Michael Tooley in conversation.
5. Note that this suggested kind of hope is not hope for a certain outcome, and in fact consists in a particular belief. Why, then, call it “hope” at all? Because, I think, it is a belief which someone committed to living life lovingly would need to have in order to live hopefully as well.
6. A fuller treatment would need, I believe, to distinguish the way in which suffering is an impediment to flourishing from the way in which finitude and death (itself, of course, a form of finitude) is—or is thought to be. Perhaps the thought that our finitude impedes our flourishing is some kind of illusion, even though the parallel thought about our suffering is mistaken.
7. The candidate concept I have in mind makes revisionary use of three central Christian doctrines, each in historic tension with omniGod theory: the doctrine of the Incarnation, the doctrine of the Trinity, and the doctrine that “God is Love”. From the Trinity, I draw the thought that the category to which God’s being belongs is relation rather than substance. Then I interpret the Incarnation, not purely Christologically, but as a claim about the nature of God as essentially realised within natural human existence. Finally, I take “God is Love” literally—not to mean that God is identical with the universal, Love—but rather to mean that God’s relational being is constituted by (and “emerges from”) loving relationships. This yields a concept of God which is genuinely naturalist, by contrast
with the “God without the supernatural” which Peter Forrest defends in his recent book (*God without the Supernatural, a Defense of Scientific Theism*, Cornell University Press, 1996). Forrest’s God is “without the supernatural” principally in the sense that God does not intervene in the laws of nature, but God is still the external efficient cause of the natural universe, and so to that extent remains supernatural. Defending a genuinely naturalist concept of God does, of course, face a major challenge in the need to show that the concept of a God emergent within the natural universe is not too reductionist to serve the functions which belief in God has to fulfil for it to be religiously adequate to Christian realist theism.

8. I am indebted for helpful criticism and advice on earlier versions of this paper to Bill Lycan, Ian Ravenscroft, Denis Robinson and Roy Perrett, and to audiences at the University of Cambridge Triangle Society, the Australian National University Philosophy Society, the University of Auckland, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Wake Forest University, East Carolina University, and at the 1996 Annual Conference of the New Zealand Division of the Australasian Association of Philosophy held at Massey University.