Reference, Idolatry, and Worship

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Toward the end of his essay "Referring to God," William Alston asks: "What … practical religious or theological … difference does it make what determines reference in religion?" Alston's answer is that it may make a significant difference. For, if theories of "direct reference" are correct,

> the prospects for taking radically different religious traditions to all be referring to and worshipping the same God are greatly increased. If one's referent in religious worship and discourse is determined by what one takes God to be like, then we, the Hindus, and the ancient Greeks and Romans cannot be credited with worshipping the same being. But if reference is determined rather by the real contacts from which a referential practice stems, then there may indeed be a common referent, in case these traditions, including their referential traditions, all stemmed from experiential contacts with the one God. For that matter, direct reference increases the chances of a common referent across major differences within a single religion like Christianity. There are theological differences within Christianity that threaten religious community, referentially as well as otherwise, on a descriptivist account of reference. But if reference is direct, then persons even as diverse theologically as Tillichians and fundamentalists might be worshipping the one true God, in spite of their radically different ways of thinking of Him.[1]

The last part of this passage put me in mind of early disputes about the person of Christ, especially the Arian controversy. This controversy was bitter; it precipitated deep discord and even considerable violence among the early Christians. Today one wonders if it was misguided. Imagine that the dispute between the Arians and their orthodox opponents had never resolved. The Arian Christians continued to believe that Christ is a created sub-deity, while their orthodox opponents held that Christ is God the Son. If theories of direct reference are true, wouldn't these Christians nonetheless have been worshiping the same God, despite their thinking of Christ in radically different ways? And shouldn't that realization have been enough to forestall all the upheaval the Arian controversy produced? To put the matter anachronistically: had the early church read their Kripke, couldn't all the turmoil have been justifiably avoided?

I'm going to let that question hang in the air for the moment, and simply present the two main claims defended in this essay. The first is that even if Alston is

[1] Alston (1988, 115-16).

right that a theory of direct reference can increase the prospects of there being a common referent of worship, that gets us rather less than it may appear—at least if we take our lead from the early church. For what the early Christian community was most concerned to ensure is that their worship is apt in the sense of being non-idolatrous. And a theory of direct reference, I'll claim, does little to explain that. The second claim is that there are fruitful ways of extending Alston's project which emphasize the role that social facts play in our referential practices. The core idea I'll develop is that a single set of social facts helps to explain not only why Christian worship is non-idolatrous (despite the church's having occupied referentially inhospitable conditions) but also why its participants often succeed in referring to God.

My discussion falls into three parts. The first part concerns the nature of reference. It introduces challenges to direct theories of reference—or what I'll call the 'causal-historical' theory of reference—in order to identify the best version of the view. That version, I claim, is the social theory of reference which states that social facts determine whether the use of a name refers. The essay's second part takes up the topic of idolatry. Though idolatry has been of considerable concern in the Abrahamic religions, it has received little discussion in contemporary philosophy of religion. So the aim will largely be to gain a better understanding of what it is, and how it connects to issues concerning reference. The third part of this essay is about worship. It contends that enactments of the church's liturgies help to address the two explanatory questions mentioned just above, namely, why Christian worship is non-idolatrous (despite the church's having occupied referentially inhospitable conditions) and why its participants often succeed in referring to God.

This essay's project, then, is to recruit topics central to philosophy of liturgy in order to address issues at the intersection between philosophy of language and philosophy of religion. Before diving into the issues, I should mention one respect in which the discussion is partisan. It does not endeavor to remain impartial regarding Christological issues. Instead, it simply assumes the truth of the orthodox conception of Christ, according to which Christ is the second person of the Trinity. (Those who reject this assumption may, I hope, find ways of appropriating the discussion for their own purposes.) Unless context suggests otherwise, I'll use the phrase "reference to God" to concern reference to the second person of the Godhead and the locution the "divine names" to concern names for Christ. So the task will be to present a view according to which features of the church's worship help to explain both why worship of Christ, the second person of the Godhead, is non-idolatrous and why uses of the divine names secure and sustain reference to Christ so understood.

I. Reference

You and I use names to refer to a wide variety of things, such as persons, pets, and places. Since it is not a brute, inexplicable fact that we refer to these things, it's appropriate to ask:

> In virtue of what does the use of a name refer to something?[2]

As Alston notes, two types of answers to this question have shaped the contemporary discussion.[3]

The first answer, provided by descriptivist positions, can be stated compactly: a speaker's use of a name refers to a thing in virtue of the fact that she has (or is disposed to have) in mind a description that the thing uniquely satisfies. The second answer, championed by the causal-historical theory, is more complex. It appeals to different kinds of name use. A *derived* use of a name refers to a thing because it belongs to a chain of use-transmission that originates from an original use of that name. In order for any subsequent use of a name to be a member of such a chain, it must be explanatorily connected in the right way to those other uses. An *original* use of a name, in contrast, can secure reference in a variety of ways. According to founders of the causal-historical view, an original use can secure reference by ostension coupled with a dubbing; by the performance of an illocutionary act such as a baptism; or by the employment of a definite description in which an individual is the referent of the use of a name because she uniquely satisfies a descriptive condition associated with the original use of that name.

In his essay, Alston suggests that descriptivist views have come under enough philosophical pressure that, when explaining how we refer to God, we're better off embracing the causal-historical view. The advantages of doing so are numerous. For one thing, descriptivist views face the worry that reference to God is difficult and rare, since there probably are no descriptions that uniquely identify God and that their users (such as small children) have in mind when speaking of God. The causal-historical view completely sidesteps this concern. In addition, the view meshes nicely with an approach according to which original uses of the names for God are grounded in experiences in which God presents Godself to human beings. According to such an approach, so long as the object of these experiences (namely, God) is tagged by a name such as "God," "Allah," "The Almighty," or the like, derived uses of this name merely need to stand in a chain of use-transmission to these original uses. Their belonging to such a chain is not only compatible with many harboring

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[2] In keeping with established practice, most of my examples of uses of names are uses of name-words. Of course we use things other than name-words to refer to individuals, including sign language and pictures. My presentation of the causal-historical view draws from deRosset (n.d.).

[3] Other answers have influenced the contemporary discussion, such as the one articulated by Lewis (1983). For issues of presentational economy (and the desire to mirror Alston's own discussion), I am not going to engage with the Lewisian view here. See, however, n.8 below.

mistaken ideas about God, but also with speakers from very different traditions using a wide of variety names to refer to one and the same God.

But it hasn't been all smooth sailing for the causal-historical theory. Those familiar with discussions about reference know the view faces significant challenges of its own. The challenges focus on whether the position, with its appeal to explanatory connections between uses of a name, has the resources to explain how reference is sustained over time. The primary worry is that even if reference is locked in at a given point, the view fails to explain why it will be in the future.

Two types of case make the problem vivid. The first involve *reference shift* in which a name acquires a new referent. The canonical example is Gareth Evans's case of Madagascar.[4] According to a simplified version of the case, Marco Polo's use of the name "Madagascar" was derived from a use of that name by Arab or Malay sailors.[5] Polo mistakenly thought that the sailors' use referred to a large island off Africa's east coast when it actually referred to a portion of the African mainland. Interestingly, Polo's use of "Madagascar," which concerns not the African mainland but the great island, is the one from which our present-day use of the name is derived. Somehow, thanks to Polo's use of the name, the referent of "Madagascar" switched. According to this telling of the story, Polo inadvertently originated a referential use from which our present use of "Madagascar" is derived—a use that not only failed to preserve reference to a portion of the African mainland, but also generated a new referent for the name.

The second type of case involves *reference slide* in which a name that once referred fails to refer (or determinately refer) any longer. The phenomenon can take different forms. Here is one: Imagine the name "Jack Jones" was bestowed on two men in a given community. But suppose that rather quickly information about them merged, so that there is a single name-using practice with no single referent. Evans maintains that, given the widespread confusion about who the referent of "Jack Jones" is, uses of the name fail to refer.[6] Or consider a variant of this sort of case that Evans also floats. Originally, uses of the name "Robin Hood" referred to the bandit during the medieval era who used a long bow and robbed from the rich in order to benefit the poor. But a massive mythical lore about Robin Hood developed over time. When enough lore accumulated, people regularly said things using the name "Robin Hood" that appealed only to what is in fact myth. Evans suggests that in such a case speakers eventually lost referential contact with the historical individual; a new referential practice, trafficking only in myth, had taken root.[7]

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[4] Evans (1973, 30).

[5] Burgess (2014) presents the case in its actual historical detail.

[6] Evans (1992, 374).

[7] Evans (1992, 394-7). See also Kripke (1980, 93 and 163) on Santa Claus, as well as Sullivan (2015), who discusses the relevance of these cases to the problem of divine hiddenness.

The phenomena of reference shift and reference slide do not show that the causal-historical theory is false. But they reveal that it needs to explain why a use of a name counts as original, and why some uses of a name are reference-preserving, while others are not. How best, then, to supplement the theory so that it can explain these things? While there are standard maneuvers for doing so, such as appealing to associated descriptions, referential intentions, and referential dispositions, there is good reason to believe that none will do the trick: either speakers will fail to have them, there may be too many in play, or it's unclear why some do explanatory work while others don't.[8] For example, in the Madagascar case, even if Polo intended to refer to the great island, many others did not; it is wholly unclear why Polo's referential intentions (or dispositions) would be the relevant ones. Interestingly, in Chapter 11 of *The Varieties of Reference*, Evans gestures at a different and promising way to handle the issue. The fundamental idea is that we shouldn't think of reference in the way we often think of beliefs, namely, as a cognitive relation between an individual and some object (say, a proposition). Nor should we think about reference in the way we typically think of intentional actions, namely, as something over which we can exert direct control. Rather, we should think of reference, whether original or derived, as something that occurs within the context of social practices of certain kinds in which social facts of particular sorts help to determine whether a name's use refers to a given object.

Let's call any version of the causal-historical view that appeals to social facts in its explanations of why uses of a name refer a 'social theory' of reference.[9] What social theories tell us is that an original use of a name is referential in virtue of its standing at the headwaters of a particular referential practice. For example, an original use of the name "Morning Star" is referential in virtue of its standing at the beginning of a social practice of using "Morning Star" to refer to the planet Venus (which it may be worth remembering is not a star). That practice is one in which participants by and large take assertive Morning Star utterances to refer to Venus (rather than Mars); mark some uses of "Morning Star" to be deviant, unorthodox, or non-astronomical in virtue of the fact that they could not refer to Venus; by and largely defer to experts who know enough of the astronomical facts to single out Venus as the referent of "Morning Star," and so on. As for derived uses of names such as "Morning Star," they refer to one and the same thing in virtue of the fact that they occur within a referential practice in which its participants by and large take assertive Morning Star utterances to refer to Venus (rather than Mars); mark some uses of "Morning Star" to be deviant, unorthodox, or non-astronomical in virtue of the fact that they could not refer to Venus; by and large defer to experts who know enough of the astronomical facts to

[8] See deRosset (n.d., 25) and Alston (1988, §I). deRosset canvasses and rejects other maneuvers, including the views articulated by Devitt (2015) and Lewis (1983).

[9] deRosset (n.d.) introduced me to the social view; my presentation is indebted to his discussion. See also Michaelson (2023).

single out Venus as the referent of "Morning Star," and so on. In short, the same kinds of social facts help to explain both why an original use is referential and why derived uses are as well. In what follows, I'll call a social practice whose elements help to explain why the use of a name refers, its 'associated' referential practice.

In its anti-individualism, social theories are within the spirit of the causal-historical view. When developing a version of that view, Hilary Putnam famously quipped that "Meaning just ain't in the head."[10] Advocates of social theories insist that when it comes to reference, "Reference ain't all about you." For when an agent's use of a name refers, that is determined not primarily by facts involving her, such as her referential intentions or dispositions, but by the activities of those who belong to the relevant referential practice (many of which are wholly outside her ken). It follows that the referential success of an individual's use of names such as "Morning Star," "Madagascar," or "Napoleon" is explained by the cognitive and referential successes of other members of the relevant linguistic community to which she belongs. In this way, social theories are congruent with important movements in social epistemology that emphasize how social facts determine the transmission of information or knowledge.[11]

While the above represents just the barest sketch of what social theories affirm, I hope their attractions are apparent. By appealing to social facts of certain kinds, these theories are poised to diagnose and explain the problem cases described above. Social facts of a certain range are what explain cases of reference shift, such as in the Madagascar example. Specifically, Polo inaugurated a new referential practice in which (inter alia) agents by and large took uses of the name "Madagasacar" to refer to not the African mainland but a large island off Africa's east coast. Social facts of a similar range also explain cases of reference slide, such as in the Robin Hood example. For a certain stretch of time, we can assume, uses of the name "Robin Hood" referred to the historical figure (even if there were many mistaken ideas about him). As more time passed, legends grew around the man to such an extent that it became nearly impossible to distinguish history from legend. Arguably, at that point, there was no fact of the matter as to whether uses of "Robin Hood" were referential. Yet at a still later point, when legend had blossomed into myth, a new referential practice regarding the use of "Robin Hood" took root. This practice, which is intact today, is such that participants by and large do not take assertive Robin Hood utterances to refer to the historical figure. That is (in part) because there are no experts (or anyone who is reasonably believed to be such an expert) whose role it is to distinguish what is true of the man and what is not. Because of all this, uses of the name "Robin Hood"

[10] Putnam (1975, 227).
[11] For example, Greco (2021).

in this practice do not refer to the historical figure.[12] The referential bond has been severed.

Let me now add an important detail. In the Madagascar case, when Polo used the name "Madagascar" to refer to an island, there was no entrenched social practice of using the term in that way. And there may not have been for some time. Still, we regard Polo as having inaugurated a referential practice in which uses of the name refer to not an area of the African mainland but to the great island. How could this be? The answer, according to social theories, is that when a use of a name is original, that is a "soft fact."[13] That is, Polo's use of the name "Madagascar" is original because there is at some later time(s) social facts of the following sort: there is a community whose members by and large take assertive uses of the name "Madagascar" to be true or false depending on features of the island; there are experts who identify Madagascar with that island; and so forth. Were there no such facts at these later times, then Polo's initial use would've failed to count as an original use. According to social theories, these social facts (in addition to other facts, such as there being an eligible referent for Polo's use) fully ground the fact that Polo's use of "Madagascar" is original.[14] Now take a derived use close in temporal proximity to Polo's original use. Assume, furthermore, that this use occurs within the relevant referential practice. Whether that use is derived is also a soft fact, as these same social facts explain whether this later use stands in the proper chain of use-transmission to other uses of the name. It follows that whether an original or a derived use of a name refers is like the fact that a goal in a soccer match is the winning score or that spending billions of dollars to develop a vaccine was shrewd. Whether these facts hold at a given time is determined by facts that hold at later times.

II. Idolatry

In this section, I turn from issues foundational in the philosophy of language to broadly theological concerns specific to the Christian community. I do so by returning to questions of Christology with which the early church grappled.

As Christians view things, a couple thousand years ago, the person of Jesus was tagged by use of the name "Jesus" ("Yeshua"). Gradually, Jesus's identity emerges, and it is strange: authoritative rabbi, healer of the sick, prophet, charismatic leader. Jesus becomes the object of special devotion, as one who bears a special relation to

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[12] Contrast this sort of case with that of Christopher Columbus. Like Robin Hood, Columbus has been the subject of an extensive lore containing many falsehoods, such as the claim that he discovered that the earth was round. But unlike Robin Hood, there are recognized experts regarding Columbus who have separated myth from fact. That helps to explain why we take assertive utterances regarding Columbus to refer to the man rather than a fictional character.

[13] This is terminology widely used in the literature on freedom and foreknowledge; see Adams (1967) and Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (1984). deRosset (n.d.), to my knowledge, is the first to appeal to soft facts when explaining why original uses of a name refer.

[14] It is easy to imagine a variant of the Madagascar case in which there is 'reference splintering': one community continues to take uses of the name "Madagascar" to refer to the African mainland, while another community takes uses of the name to refer to the great island. In such a case, different uses of the name refer to different entities.

God. Specifically, the Christian community endorses the claim that, as the Christ or the Anointed One, the salvation of every human being is tied to his life, death, and resurrection. The church's liturgies reflect this, as Jesus becomes an object of worship, being addressed as God. Over time, a constellation of different names (what I've called the divine names) are introduced in order to refer to him: "Christ," "Lord," "God the Son," "Lamb of God," "Savior," "Prince of Peace," "Only begotten of the Father," and so on.

But with time different, incompatible understandings of Christ emerge. The Docetists challenge the assumption that Christ was human by advancing the broadly gnostic claim that Christ only appeared to have a body. The Arians reject the assumption that Christ is God, identifying Christ with a created sub-deity or an angelic being of some kind. (In the words of Jaroslav Pelikan: "A Christ suspended between man and God, identical with neither but related to both."[15]) These challenges were typically put forth not as the product of divine revelation or special spiritual insight, but as the fruit of sustained reflection on the person of Christ, often inspired by texts in circulation, including the scriptures themselves. Curiously, views such as Docetism and Arianism were not directed toward changing the Christian community's *worship*; their advocates seemed content to let the church's worship remain more or less intact (including the baptismal practice of invoking Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Rather, these views were promulgated in order to fundamentally alter the Christian community's understanding of the person who is given special devotion in enactments of the church's liturgies. Opponents of the Arians, such as Ambrose, charged that their theological position was irreconcilable with their liturgical practices, calling "upon the Arians to stop worshipping one whom they regarded as a creature or else to call him a creature even when they worshipped him."[16]

These disputes, as I indicated earlier, were bitter and violent. There is a narrative according to which the early Christians were wound up too tight about Christological issues. While pagans were happy to be religious pluralists and syncretists, the early Christians were keen to stamp out just about everything that rivaled their views, including rival views about the person of Christ. Sometimes these narratives are supplemented by the claim that all this was driven by personal and political ambition, or alternatively that the early Christians worried that believing falsities regarding God would block salvation. But there is arguably another deeper, more powerful motivation coursing through the tradition that explains why the early Christians who rejected Docetism and Arianism reacted so strongly to them. That is their horror of idolatry.

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[15] Pelikan (1971, 198).
[16] Pelikan (1971, 207).

Idolatry is a topic that, while present in Christian circles, is discussed and theorized about rather less than one might've thought.[17] The notion is inherently theistic. Calling an activity idolatrous makes sense only given the assumption that there is a being (or beings) worthy of worship who is divine. It is because of this that most atheists wouldn't describe religious worship as idolatrous, since they reject the assumption that anything is worship-worthy. Monotheistic traditions go further, claiming that the only being worthy of worship is the Highest One. Accordingly, most polytheistic religious believers wouldn't describe worship of a god as idolatrous, since they reject the assumption that only the Highest One (if any such being exists) is worship-worthy.

While these observations help us to understand features of the concept IDOLATRY, they do not shed much light on what idolatry is. Is there an illuminating way to characterize the phenomenon? As a first pass, I propose that

Idolatry is worship not fittingly directed toward God.

As for worship of God, I'll understand that (for present purposes) along the lines proposed by Nicholas Wolterstorff in *The God We Worship*: it is awed, grateful, reverential adoration of God, who is of unsurpassable excellence.[18] Let's say that worship is *directed* to God if and only if the terms for God used in worship refer to God. This is what I'll call the 'directedness condition' on worship. Likewise, let's say that a community's worship of something is *fitting* just in case were the dominant understanding of it operative in worship correct, then it would be worship-worthy. I'll advert to this as the 'fittingness condition' on worship. Worship is unfitting in case it fails to satisfy this condition.

The characterization just above implies that a community's worship may be idolatrous in two ways. According to the first, worship is idolatrous insofar as it fails to satisfy the directedness condition. That may be because, though there is a God, the terms for God used in a community's worship refer to something other than God or to nothing at all. So, for example, if uses of the term "God" in a community's worship refer to a fictional being, a creature of our own imagination such as Zeus, then that worship is idolatrous. According to the second way, worship is idolatrous insofar as it fails to satisfy the fittingness condition. Such worship is unfitting in the sense that,

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[17] It is true that the church was accused of idolatry during both the iconoclast controversy and the Reformation. But those controversies and discussions of them tend to focus on the use of images in worship. It is much more difficult to find within the Christian tradition sustained treatments of what idolatry is. The only philosophical treatments of the phenomenon among Anglo-American Christian philosophers I know of are Adams (1999, ch. 8) and Leftow (2025)—though see Cavanaugh (2024) for a wide-ranging discussion. In the Jewish tradition, by contrast, the topic occupies a central place; idolatry functions as an "anti-ideal." Halbertal and Margalit (1992) provide a fascinating exploration of it from a Jewish perspective, exploring different ways in which it's understood within the tradition.

[18] Wolterstorff (2015, 26). Rea (2020, ch. 9) proposes an alternative characterization with which I have sympathy. See also the essays in Segal and Lebens (2025).

though there is a God, the dominant understanding of what is worshipped is such that, were it correct, that thing would not be worship-worthy. For example, suppose a community's use of "God" refers to God (perhaps thanks to members having had an experience of God) but its authoritative texts ascribe to God all the features of Zeus: fickle, petty, murderous, vengeful, lustful, and so forth. Imagine, furthermore, that the received interpretation of these texts has it that God is as the texts say: fickle, petty, murderous, vengeful, lustful, and so forth. This understanding would qualify as the dominant understanding of God operative in that community's worship. It would also render its worship unfitting.[19]

With this characterization of idolatry in mind, consider a scenario of the following sort:

> The early Christological controversies are resolved in favor of a view that blends together Doceticism and Arianism. This view is substantially enriched by depictions of Jesus borrowed from Gnostic writings, such as the *Gospel of Thomas* or *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, which are mere myth. Over the centuries, an amalgam of these views is overwhelmingly endorsed by theologians and widely expressed in the church's hymnody. Ordinary Christians by and large take assertive utterances regarding Christ to be true depending on whether Christ has features such as being a bodiless, created angelic being who only appeared to die. The Nicaean understanding of Christ, according to which Christ crucified is God the Son, is gradually forgotten.
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> Yet important elements of the church's worship remain intact. Christ is worshipped.

Were these conditions to hold, the Christian community would've fallen into idolatry. This might be because Christian worship fails the directedness condition: over the centuries, so much noise and misinformation had been introduced into the referential practice that the community has found itself in a Robin Hood-type scenario. Whereas early uses of names like "Jesus" and "Christ" had referred to Christ, later uses do not determinately refer, as they neither determinately refer nor determinately fail to refer to Christ. Alternatively, it might be that the community's worship satisfies the directedness condition but fails to satisfy the fittingness condition: The community

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[19] This is only an initial characterization of what it would take for an understanding of God to be dominant in a community's worship; providing a more nearly adequate characterization would be both complicated and difficult. That said, let me register three points. First, the characterization makes no appeal to what is going on in the minds of ordinary worshippers. That is at it should be, in my view (though compare Halbertal and Margalit [1992]'s discussion of Maimonides' understanding of idolatrous worship). Second, the characterization leaves open the possibility that a community's worship is idolatrous but an individual's engagement in it is not—perhaps because she explicitly disavows unfitting characterizations of God dominant within it. Third, the characterization allows for cases in which it's indeterminate whether a given understanding of God is dominant in a community's worship.

remains in referential contact with God the Son insofar as its use of terms such as "Christ" and "Only Begotten One" refer to God the Son. But the dominant understanding of Christ operative in worship is that he is a created sub-deity. Were this understanding correct, it would guarantee that the object of their worship couldn't be the Highest One. And so the community's worship could not be fitting. To which it's worth adding that the community's worship might simultaneously fail both the directedness and fittingness conditions.

Though there is much more to say about cases such as these and their permutations, let me head for a conclusion that I draw about (what I'll call) the 'simple' causal-historical view of reference, which Alston advocates. It may be that this view is superior to descriptivist theories. And the simple causal-historical view may also enjoy the theoretical and practical advantages that Alston identifies: if correct, it increases the prospects that diverse religious traditions and sects of Christianity worship the same God. Yet these attractions may be more limited than they seem if we take seriously the concerns of the early Christian community. For if these concerns are legitimate, that worship enjoys a common referent is not the key issue when it comes to assessing it. The more pressing issue is whether worship is apt in the sense of being non-idolatrous. And so the question to pursue, it seems to me, is whether the simple view helps to explain why Christian worship is non-idolatrous.

I believe it offers rather limited aid on that front. After all, if what I've said thus far is correct, the simple causal-historical view does not identify the key factors that explain why an original use of a name is referential. Accordingly, it is not well-positioned to explain why original uses of divine names such as "God," "Christ," "God the Son," "Only Begotten One," and "Most High," are referential. Nor does the view explain why derived uses of a name continue to be so—why chains of use-transmission preserve reference—especially in referentially inhospitable conditions in which a lot of confusion or misinformation has been introduced. And so the simple view doesn't itself explain why, when members of the Christian community use the divine names in worship, their uses are referential, especially in contexts in which massive amounts of confusion or misinformation have over time been introduced into its referential practices. Accordingly, the view doesn't itself explain why the Christian community's use of the divine names over time has succeeded in keeping that community in referential contact with God and, so, whether it has avoided idolatrous worship. In addition, the simple view doesn't help to explain whether worship satisfies the fittingness condition. Indeed, by all appearances, it looks as if a community's use of the divine names could satisfy the conditions for reference specified by the simple causal-historical view and yet be idolatrous. For the dominant understanding implicit in the community's worship might render God unworthy of worship.

The general worry I am raising is that the simple causal-historical view does little to explain what the Christian community has wanted to (and, arguably, ought to

have wanted to) explain: namely, that its worship is not idolatrous. The view is not theoretically *robust* in the sense that it doesn't do much to answer questions about the most important features of the domain under investigation, which in this case are fixed by the community's concerns.[20] Ideally, however, a theory of reference would do better. It would help to answer not only questions about why the Christian community's worship is not idolatrous, but also ones regarding why uses of the divine names in both devotional and non-devotional contexts refer to God. A version of the social theory, I am going to suggest, can do these things.

III. Worship

I said earlier that I would defend two primary claims in this essay. First, the simple causal-historical view of reference gets us rather less than we might hope, as it does little to help explain why Christian worship is not idolatrous. Second, there are fruitful ways of extending Alston's project which emphasize the role that social facts play in determining and sustaining referential contact with God. These facts not only play a powerful idolatry inhibiting role, but also help to explain why uses of the divine names refer to God. Having addressed the first issue in the previous section, I now turn to the second.

At one point in "Referring to God," Alston appeals to social facts when explaining reference to God:

> [i]nitially we learn to refer to God (in praying to God, praising God, etc.) by being exposed to the practice of worship, prayer, confession, reception of the sacraments, and so on … we learned by doing, what it was like to come into contact or communion with God. By being initiated into the practice, we picked up the sub-practice of referring to God, of referring to the object of worship our predecessors in the community had been referring to.[21]

This passage states that participation in social practices such as communal worship is that by which we learn how to refer to God. This may be correct, although I doubt that any version of the causal-historical view has much room for the phenomenon of *learning* to refer. For according to the view, the process of using a name to refer is not like gaining mastery of a concept; rather, it's about being *positioned* in the right way in a

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[20] I've raised the worry that Alston's discussion doesn't connect with questions that the Christian community has rightly concerned itself. But that is not quite right. In his polemic with rival descriptivist views, Alston asks us to imagine a case in which some malevolent being, perhaps Satan himself, presents itself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In such a case, Alston asks "would we not have to admit that our religion, including the referential practices involved, is built on sand or worse … and that we are a Satan-worshipping community, for all our bandying about of descriptions that fit the only true God?" Alston's answer is Yes, the community would have fallen into idolatry. That, Alston contends, is a strike against the descriptivist view, for even if our referential practices were to satisfy some of the view's conditions for reference, that would do little to explain why the Christian community's worship is not idolatrous. I've pressed the point that simple causal-historical views don't do much better.

[21] Alston (1988, 109).

chain of use-transmission.[22] When it comes to reference to God, the task is to explain how we can be so positioned. The social theory can help explain why. Let me set the stage for the development of this claim by providing further context.

The Christological controversies that so agitated the early church have a common pattern. In nearly every case, a view was advanced that challenged widespread and often implicit assumptions about who Christ is. These controversies were not short-lived. For example, church history teaches us that when the Arian controversy came to a head, the first Council of Nicaea council failed to settle it. The dispute raged on for more than half a century afterward, as the Christian East became largely Arian. Yet wholesale slide into idolatry didn't occur then or any time thereafter. The proposal I will develop is that the character of the church's worship plays a crucial role in explaining why. (While this claim may seem uninformative, I'll contend that it is far more substantive than it may appear.) As I indicated earlier, the factors that help to explain this are identical with those that help to explain how uses of the divine names refer. So, by appealing to a single set of social facts, I'll address two explanatory questions: 'Why is Christian worship non-idolatrous, despite the church's having occupied referentially inhospitable conditions?' and 'In virtue of what do uses of the divine names to refer to God?'. If the discussion is on target, we'll see that the social theory of reference can explain what the simple causal-historical view cannot.

The proposal starts with the idea that there is a socially entrenched referential practice with regard to the use of the divine names within the Christian community. The church's worship, which is a component of this more general practice, plays a crucial idolatry inhibiting role insofar as it has features that

> (A) function to block the incursion of ideas, commitments, and practices that threaten to render the church's worship idolatrous,

and:

> (B) fortify referential connections between uses of the divine names and the person of Christ, thereby also protecting against idolatry.

These claims state different though complementary ideas, which an analogy can help illustrate. Imagine that a musical instrument you own has been split open and subsequently repaired. One way to ensure that the instrument remains intact is to protect it from forces that might break it apart again. If you are successful, even a weak bond between its halves will keep it intact for many years. Another way to accomplish the same goal is to fortify the instrument with additional bonding or

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[22] The simple view may, of course, hold that learning to use a name competently is a substantive cognitive achievement. But learning to use a name competently and learning how to refer by using a name are distinct activities, the former often being more demanding than the latter.

bracing that would help it to retain its integrity when exposed to potentially damaging forces. Things are similar when it comes to the referential bond. One way to ensure that a referential bond remains intact is to protect its associated referential practice against influences (such as the introduction of a lot of misinformation) that might induce reference shift or reference slide. Another way to do so is to fortify the practice in such a way that it can withstand such influences. Claims (A) and (B) state that facts concerning the church's worship play each of these roles, helping it to satisfy both the directedness and fittingness conditions.

Worship satisfies the directedness condition because it has features that help protect against both reference shift and reference slide. That is, it has features that protect against new referential practices taking root that supplant the one in which uses of the divine names refer to Christ (as in cases of reference shift). And it protects against extant referential practices devolving to the point at which it is indeterminate whether uses of the divine names refer to Christ (as in cases of reference slide). Worship satisfies the fittingness condition because it has features that play a fittingness-sustaining role, attributing to Christ characteristics that render Christian worship apt. It may be helpful to add that claims (A) and (B) do not assert that facts regarding the church's worship are sufficient to play an idolatry inhibiting role; they are neutral on that matter. Nor do these claims assert that facts concerning the church's worship uniquely play such a role, as there may be other practices within or features of the community that play a similar role.

The question I would like to pursue is why the church's worship plays these roles. That is, I wish to identify the features in virtue of which the church's worship plays the roles specified in (A) and (B). To do that, we'll need to take a closer look at the character of worship.

In the previous section, I glossed worship of God as awed, grateful, reverential adoration of God, the unsurpassably excellent One. And I indicated that communal Christian worship (or simply "worship") consists in the enactment of the church's liturgies or services. However, those familiar with the liturgies of the early church (and those continuous with it) know that they are multidimensional: their enactment includes the performance of a wide array of gestural actions, verbal actions, uses of representational art, uses of music, and so forth. In principle, all these things could play idolatry inhibiting roles. But in order to keep things manageable, I am going to narrow the discussion in a couple ways. First, my discussion will focus on the church's use of liturgical texts in its worship. Specifically, it will focus on the use of these texts in its worship in order to perform illocutionary acts of various kinds, such as petitioning, praising, thanking, and so forth. Given the character of the authority structure of worship, in which certain agents act on behalf of the community, I'll assume that in worship multiple entities perform these speech acts, including individual worshippers as well as the communities themselves. Second, taking into consideration anything like the full range of liturgies in use would prove to be

unwieldly. So, for reasons that are both historical and theological (and will become clearer as the discussion continues), I'll focus on eucharistic liturgies that are deeply continuous with Nicene commitments. These are the liturgies of the Roman Catholic church, the Anglican churches, (some of) the Lutheran churches, and the Eastern Christian churches. For ease of reference, I'll refer to the first three as the 'Western' churches and the last as the 'Eastern' churches. When I speak of the church's worship, then, I'll have the worship of the Western and Eastern churches in mind.

Since I can't assume familiarity with the liturgical texts these churches employ, let me point to some representative passages that involve the community performing different prescribed verbal actions. These passages overtly express the conception of God that emerged in the early ecumenical councils. Begin with that range of illocutionary actions in whose performance worshippers proclaim (or otherwise commit themselves to the claim) that Christ is God the Son. Both the Western and Eastern liturgies begin with variants of the following trinitarian proclamation:

> Blessed is the kingdom of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the Western liturgies, the Gloria follows soon thereafter. In the Roman Catholic liturgy, for example, the text runs:

> Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,
> Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
> you take away the sins of the world,
> have mercy on us…
>
> For you alone are the Holy One,
> you alone are the Lord,
> you alone are the Most High,
> Jesus Christ,
> with the Holy Spirit,
> in the glory of God the Father.
> Amen.

In the Eastern liturgies, there is no close analogue to the Gloria. Instead, expressions of praise of this sort are interspersed though out their eucharistic liturgies. For example, in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, what follows the initial invocation of the Trinity are litanies and antiphonal responses, the latter of which include passages such as:

> Only begotten Son and Word of God, who, being immortal … became a man … and were crucified. Being one of the Holy Trinity, glorified with the Father

> and the Holy Spirit: O Christ our God, trampling down death by death, save us!

What is interesting about these passages is that they do not proclaim Christ to be God the Son, as the Nicaean Creed does (which is recited or sung in every enactment of the Western and Eastern eucharistic liturgies). Instead, they directly address Christ as God the Son. More accurately, they directly address Christ by use of a wide array of divine names: 'Only begotten Son,' 'Lamb of God,' 'Son of the Father,' 'Word of God',' 'Holy One,' 'Most High,' 'Christ God,' among others. Experience teaches us that not every name of an individual is apt for use by people in general. Terms of endearment are like this. They are apt for use only when particular people, such as loved ones, use them. But the liturgical text signals that the divine names are all apt modes of addressing God. In doing so, they forge connections between the divine names, making it explicit that the community is using all of them to refer to Christ, who is (among other things) the Highest One.

I've just noted ways in which diverse liturgies both invoke trinitarian theology and address Christ by use of the divine names. This is not meant to suggest that there aren't interesting differences between the ways different liturgies do this. The Western liturgies tend to be fairly sparse in their invocations of the Trinity, typically not addressing God as Trinity. The Eastern liturgies, in contrast, are replete with invocations of the Trinity and trinitarian theology. Nearly every prayer, whether it is one of praise, thanksgiving, or petition, invokes or is explicitly directed to the Trinity. As just one example among many, the following hymn of praise overtly does both:

> Blessed are you, Christ our God, who revealed the fishermen to be most wise by sending down to them the Holy Spirit, and so through them catching the whole world in a net. Lover of humankind, Glory to you!
>
> Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity one in essence and undivided.
>
> Glory to you, Christ God, our hope, Glory to you.

As this last passage indicates, the Eastern liturgies tend to be more poetic and effusive in their ascriptions of love, compassion, and goodness (as well as power and glory) to God. For reasons that will emerge in a moment, it will be useful to have some of these passages before us. Here is just a sampling from the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom:

> For you, O God, are merciful and love humankind, and to you we give glory, to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

> Again and many times we fall down before and pray you, who are good and the lover of humankind … that you will cleanse our souls and bodies…
>
> Lord our God, whose might is beyond compare and whose glory is beyond understanding, whose mercy is without measure and whose love for humankind is beyond all telling, look upon us and upon this holy house. Master, according to your loving kindness, bestow upon us and on those who pray with us your acts of rich mercy and compassion.

A theme that emerged earlier is that a referential practice may be vulnerable in various respects. The cases we've focused on are ones in which a lot of noise, misinformation, or confusion enters a practice, thereby derailing (determinate) reference. But there are other ways by which reference can be derailed. For example, a name may cease to be used or used referentially very sparingly over a long stretch of time. In the first case, the practice may die; in the second, use of a name may cease to be linked in the right way to its original use and, so, function instead as the reintroduction of a name. I call attention to these possibilities in order to clarify what I wish to claim about the church's liturgies. The claim being made is not: given the mere fact that speech acts of the sorts just described are performed during the enactments of the Western and Eastern liturgies, these enactments are positioned to play the idolatry inhibiting roles specified by (A) and (B). After all, it could be that worship services are like presidential inaugurations in the US, typically occurring only once every four years. Or it could be that while worship services are regularly performed, they do not regularly use liturgical texts such as those just quoted; instead, they nearly always use brief texts stripped of theological content. Moreover, it might be that other parts of these liturgical texts are in deep tension with those quoted such that, when you consider them side by side, it's unclear what the church's view of Christ is; there is deep and systemic ambiguity or confusion. If these possibilities were actual, it is wholly unclear that the enactment of the church's worship services would play an important role in the tradition's referential practice.

But these possibilities do not reflect the actuality. Unlike presidential inaugurations, eucharistic services in the Christian traditions under consideration are performed weekly. Indeed, depending on the parish and location in the liturgical calendar, such services are performed more frequently. (This observation doesn't take into account non-eucharistic services, which in an ordinary parish may be performed daily.) Indeed, that is to understate things: these services are enacted week after week, year after year, century after century—for nearly two millennia. In other words, when it comes to the enactments of these liturgies there is temporal regularity and continuity.

Not only is the regularity with which these enactments take place over time significant, so also is their continuity in content. To be sure, there have been changes

in the liturgical scripts of the liturgies under consideration, some of considerable import. In the West, the changes have been mostly truncations; in the East, the changes have been significantly less pronounced. These changes notwithstanding, the theological continuity in post-Nicaean liturgies is very substantial. And, as the passages above reveal, that continuity lies in their affirmation of trinitarian theology. There is no counter narrative regarding Christology expressed in these texts. Indeed, some services go to great lengths in order to clearly express their trinitarian commitments. In the Christian East, the trinitarian commitments aren't lying in the background as an interpretational guide to the church's worship for those "in the theological know." Instead, they are explicitly and repeatedly woven into the tapestry of the liturgical script, and used in the church's proclamation regarding and address of God. In this respect, the worship is theologically contentful, enjoying continuity of content.

That these commitments are woven into worship in this way reflects the history of these communities, which has been deeply shaped by the views of their leading figures. Though these traditions would be uneasy talking about theological or spiritual "experts," they are considerably more comfortable talking about leading lights or authorities with regard to issues of theology. In the West, these would include familiar figures such as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and much more controversially, some of the Reformers, such as Luther. In the East, it is figures such as Athanasius, Basil, Nyssa, Nazianzus, Chrysostom, John of Damascus, Maximos the Confessor, and the like, who are singled out for special attention. These figures of course disagreed with each other on some important issues. But they did not disagree about broadly Nicaean commitments. Most importantly for present purposes, the trinitarian views expressed in the church's liturgies are not out of step with but instead express the views of the tradition's luminaries or authorities. In this regard, the church's worship enjoys both internal and external integration**:** the trinitarian contents of these liturgies are not only integrated, but also fit with and express the views of the tradition's luminaries.

Let's call a referential practice that enjoys temporal regularity and continuity, rich theological content and continuity of content, and internal and external integration of the sort just described 'theologically robust.' We can now spell out the explanatory structure of the proposal under development.

Return to the two explanatory questions raised above: 'Why is Christian worship not idolatrous, despite the church's having occupied referentially inhospitable conditions?' and 'In virtue of what do uses of the divine names to refer to God?' I said that these questions can be answered by appeal to a single set of social facts. An answer to the first question consists in explaining why the church's worship satisfies the directedness and fittingness conditions. The core thought is that the church's worship satisfies these conditions partly because features of its worship

> (A) function to block the incursion of ideas, commitments, and practices that threaten to render the church's worship idolatrous.

And:

> (B) fortify referential connections between uses of the divine names and the person of Christ, thereby also protecting against idolatry.

The features in question are those that make the church's worship a theologically robust referential practice. Somewhat more precisely, they are

> (i) The frequency with which the Western and Eastern liturgies are enacted over time in which both their members and the community themselves perform speech acts of the sorts described above.
>
> (ii) The continuity and specificity in theological content of these liturgies over a long period of time; and
>
> (iii) The internal integration of these liturgies and fit with the views of authorities in the broad tradition.

Together these features help to explain why uses of the divine names in the church's worship satisfy the directedness condition. Note that these are exactly the sorts of social facts that a social theory of reference tells us determine whether a use of a name belongs to a chain of use-transmission. The referential practice is one in which, over a long stretch of time, the community by and large has taken assertive utterances involving the divine names to refer to Christ; mark some uses of the divine names to be deviant, unorthodox, or non-referential in virtue of the fact that they could not pertain to Christ; by and largely defer to experts who have known enough to single out Christ as the referent of uses of the divine names (and whose knowledge has been reliably transmitted to the community), and so on. Finally, the social facts captured in (i)-(iii) involve the church's liturgies committing themselves to a view according to which Christ is eminently worship worthy in virtue of his status as God the Son, "whose mercy is without measure and whose love for humankind is beyond all telling." These commitments, which are expressed in enactments of the church's liturgies, help to explain why the church's worship satisfies the fittingness condition. The God in question is one of power, glory, mercy, love, and compassion—the sort of being that would deserve wholehearted devotion.

As for the second question stated above, the social facts just enumerated address it as well. For they help to explain how, in devotional contexts, uses of the divine names refer to Christ. They protect against the dissolution of, and also fortify,

the referential bonds that bind uses of the divine names to the person of Christ. Given what social theories say about original uses of a name—that they are soft facts—the social facts just catalogued may also help to explain why some original uses of the divine names (such as "God the Son") refer to Christ. Moreover, because the church's worship is theologically robust, it is fitted to function as a 'referential anchor' in two respects. First, in both the Western and Eastern churches, the divine names are used widely in non-devotional contexts, such as ones in which agents engage in ordinary discussion or theological reflection. The social facts under consideration are well-placed to help explain why these uses of the divine names also refer to God the Son. Second, the divine names are used in Christian communities that lie outside of the Western and Eastern churches. In some of these contexts, it is unclear whether a community holds (or rejects the claim) that Christ is God the Son. But if uses of these names are historically connected in the right way to their uses within the Western and Eastern churches, such as being parasitic on these uses, then these uses would also refer to God the Son. And there is good reason to believe they are. If all this is correct, features of the church's worship are fitted to help explain not only non-devotional uses of the divine names refer but also their uses in Christian communities outside the Western and Eastern churches.

IV. Conclusion

The well-known Latin phrase 'lex orandi, lex credendi' states (roughly) that the church's worship determines what the church believes.[23] The phrase expresses a plausible thought, provided that the determination relation can run in both directions: worship determines what the church believes and vice-versa. This essay has, in effect, recommended a different slogan: 'lex orandi, lex designandi.' This slogan means (roughly) that the church's worship determines reference to God. The goal of this essay has been to contend that, properly understood, this phrase also expresses a plausible idea: worship is doing a lot more theoretical work than we might've suspected.

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[23] The phrase is an abbreviated alteration of *ut legem credenda lex statuat supplicandi*, which is attributed to Prosper of Aquitaine.

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