

PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS UNDERSTANDING

By

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Submitted to Department of Philosophy, Central European University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Philosophy

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Vienna, Austria

2024

Abstract

Even though it is hard to define the concept of religion and to determine what religious belief consists of, the rational desire to legitimize this sort of belief necessarily involves an argumentative assessment of the content of religious belief itself. From this perspective, in my thesis, I aim to conceptualize the term religious understanding by drawing on the recent epistemology literature on the value of understanding. In the first chapter, explaining the distinctive characteristics of understanding, I argue that focusing on understanding rather than knowledge provides fertile perspectives. In the second chapter, building on the discussions in the first chapter, I give a philosophical account of religious understanding that is available to both religious and non-religious people. In the third chapter, I explore the possible benefits of religious understanding in different domains namely religious epistemology and philosophy of religion and theology.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Tim Crane, whose expertise and guidance were invaluable during this research. My sincere thanks also go to CEU Philosophy and Academic Center of Religious Studies professors, especially Professor David Weberman, who provided consultancy and assistance for hours when the project was in its infancy.

Finally, I am deeply thankful to my family and friends, especially my mother for their infinite love and support. Without your support, this project would not have been possible.

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Introduction

Within the last 25 years, there has been an important shift in epistemology, namely from knowledge to understanding. According to some recent philosophical investigations,¹ understanding should be distinguished from knowledge since it entails distinctive characteristics. These characteristics may be generalized as understanding's entailment of having a kind of cognitive map that allows the subject to grasp the matter and intellectually using the pieces of knowledge in certain ways. There are different forms of understanding regarding its content since understanding the meaning of a sentence or what a sentence is about is distinct from understanding a subject which concerns the competence and knowledge of a topic such as mathematics, or physics, which in turn is distinct from understanding why p, that is, understanding the reason for p, understanding why p happens and so on (Hills 2015, 661).

After the emergence of the understanding literature, several philosophers investigated the relevance of understanding in different disciplines e.g. moral, scientific, aesthetic, and so on. The epistemic relevance, implications, and extent of understanding differ from one matter to another. For instance, understanding relativity theory and Aristotle's virtue ethics neither consist of the same principles nor is their understanding epistemically available to the subject in the same way. Therefore, within the literature, there are topic-specific formulations of understanding. Even though there are several accounts regarding moral, scientific, or aesthetic matters (Severini 2021, Regt 2015 and Hills 2017 respectively), and with the notable exception of an appeal to the importance of formulating an account for religious understanding (Scott 2017), the epistemic relevance of understanding religious matters is somehow neglected. As the previous accounts are named as moral understanding or scientific understanding, I shall refer to understanding religious

¹ Some key philosophers for this movement include Linda Zagzebski (2001), Catherine Elgin (2006), and Jonathan Kvanvig (2003).

matters as *religious understanding*. This term might be misleading for people who are acquainted with theological literature because there is a different usage of this term that is used to refer to a specific way of understanding the world or events. I shall clarify that I will not elaborate on religious understanding in the latter way but instead in line with the aforementioned developments in contemporary epistemology. Therefore, drawing on the current understanding accounts, I will elaborate a fuller account of religious understanding. Since different epistemic accounts of understanding come with their own definitions and assumptions, I shall not fully rely on any account but formulate a new account that is tailored for religious understanding. Therefore, I will not delve into any understanding account but select the important characterizations and arguments that are relevant to the sake of this discussion.

My research question in this thesis is the following: *What does a philosophical account of religious understanding entail and is it an epistemically valuable project?* I will break this question into three sub-investigations. In the first chapter, delving into the relationship between knowledge and understanding, I intend to explore the distinctive characteristics of understanding in contrast to knowledge. I will also examine different kinds of understanding and examine how these characterizations of understanding differ one from another. I will argue that even though obtaining the conclusive truth seems hard for some disciplines, understanding provides further benefits than obtaining merely facts about nature since it enriches our conception of reality beyond propositional content.

In the second chapter, I will give an account of religious understanding and investigate what may religious understanding consist of, what may be its object and how religious understanding allows individuals to obtain further perspectives regarding religious matters. I will define religious understanding as understanding religious doctrines that grasp the connections between assumptions and conclusions. I assume that the object of religious understanding is religious doctrine. By religious doctrines, I understand the teachings and concepts of religions that are based on religious sources and can be intellectually transmitted between subjects. These

doctrines could be formulated in the form of premises, although they are usually not. A religious doctrine shall represent a body of information that is connected to each other. Therefore, I acknowledge that religious understanding cannot be applied to all sorts of religious arguments since many of them cannot be expressed in a logical framework and I do not deny this. However, religious understanding may be used to analyze the elements that are used in these discourses, by the doctrines that may be understood in a logical framework. In other words, analyzing religious discourses by dividing them into their concepts/arguments and studying these elements by means of the argumentatively-formulated doctrines may help to understand even dogmatic contents or to eliminate them.

Similar to the difficulty of defining the phenomenon of religion, it is hard to explain what a religious belief in its entirety consist of. I do not deny or omit the literature on the characteristics of religion and religious belief that belong to the sphere of culture, anthropology or psychology. Therefore, I avoid the pitfall of reducing religious belief to argumentative reasoning since further elements such as emotional, ritual, and sacred ones certainly fall within the purview of religious belief. However, in addition to these elements, religious ideas offer themselves in a logical framework to some extent and I limit the scope of my thesis to this content. In this perspective, I shall explain that I conceptualize the term religious doctrine primarily for the scope of the Abrahamic religions.

Even though there may be different influences for the religious believers in their way of understanding such as their subjective experience and worldview, referring to the subject perspectives seems to be very obscure and overly dependent on subjectivity. Therefore, I think these elements do not facilitate intelligibility and are not convenient for philosophical investigations. On the other hand, religious doctrines seem to be the best candidate for epistemic investigations as they are the most refined forms of religious teachings that could be transmitted to others in a complete, coherent way and they are very favorable to be understood both in terms of comprehensibility and to be examined argumentatively.

After conceptualizing religious understanding, I will compare the possibility of religious knowledge and religious understanding and contend that independently from the truth condition of religious arguments, religious understanding can be realized for both religious and non-religious people. In my thesis, I will examine the religious arguments that are available to both religious and non-religious people. From this perspective, I will exclude the religious arguments from testimony and religious experience. There are two reasons for this: 1) Testimony and religious experience arguments are mostly in the form of acknowledging and acknowledging experience does not require remarkable cognitive achievement. 2) They are not agreed or comprehended by everybody but are dependent on the subject's view.

I will hold that achieving faith could be realized in something that cannot be proven in a definitive way e.g., the laws of nature. I do not argue that faith can be realized something towards absurd elements, but neither can it be realized towards the existence of conclusive proofs or what is manifestly the case. When the contemporary epistemology perspectives are applied to religious beliefs, it is widely recognized that if a believer claims that a religious proposition is true, and he claims to know this then he knows the proposition in question and the fact that the believed proposition cannot be proven does not change anything. The proposition in question is accepted as true for the believers. Moreover, even though the existence of God cannot be revealed obviously, this situation shall not prevent the believers from making knowledge claims for their believed propositions. Thus, if one claims that he knows that there is only one God, it is true that there is only one God (according to him). Reformed epistemology emerged as a movement that applied contemporary epistemology perspectives to religious claims and they argued that a subject could have religious knowledge. They do not require any sort of proof that is valid for others and the fact that one cannot prove the existence of God does not mean that he cannot know the existence of God. Thus, the fact that one cannot prove the existence of God and there are disagreements on this topic does not mean that people cannot have religious knowledge because it is about individuals' reasons for holding the belief and the reality. Since there is no objective truth in terms

of the existence of God, one can believe in the existence of God for valid reasons and this belief may count as religious knowledge. This is the contemporary epistemic conceptualization regarding religious knowledge. Since there is a long discussion on to what extent knowledge claims can be adopted in the latter sense for religious propositions and how we can obtain our justifications for knowledge, and my thesis is not about discussing this sort of conceptualization, I do not delve further into this topic. However, for my thesis, my primary understanding of religious knowledge is the former which is knowing religious matters. For instance, according to Christianity, there is a last judgment. Even though one does not believe in the existence of last judgment, they can know that Christianity includes this sort of information. Therefore, in terms of the epistemic context, the difference between a believer and a non-believer may be explained by their *doxastic attitude*² towards the content of religious matters. Thus, both religious and non-religious people can know about religious matters and religious people can accept these as truth while the non-religious do not.

Analogously, I will argue that when it comes to religious understanding, a person can understand a religious doctrine as a sort of idea i.e., obtain a religious understanding even though she does not believe in the religion in question. Thus, both religious and non-religious believers may understand religious claims even though one believes that it is true whereas the other believes that it is not, or is indifferent to it. In the thesis, I will refer to this differentiation by employing the concept of *doxastic attitude*. This term designates the difference between holding positive or negative judgments about the truth of a proposition. While a religious believer may hold a positive truth value to a proposition, a non-believer may hold a negative to the same proposition or abstain from attributing a truth value. However, both religious and non-religious people could follow the reasoning of religious doctrines and both sides could agree on understanding the doctrines to some extent because independently from the attributed truth value, the epistemic content is available to

² I explain this term in the next paragraph.

religious and non-religious people alike. Thus, in the second chapter, I plan to conclude that all people can grasp religious doctrines and have a religious understanding as long as the doctrines are not incoherent or confusing i.e., there is a correct way to understand the religious doctrines.

In the third chapter, I explore the significance of religious understanding in epistemic investigations. Rather than giving a comprehensive account of religious understanding's usage regarding epistemic matters, I will give a brief account of the implications of using religious understanding in its epistemic sense within the area of religious epistemology. I will argue that suspending the truth value and focusing on the logic and reasoning behind the religious doctrines offers a new ground for thinking about religious matters within which both atheist and theist perspectives may discuss could emerge. I believe these endeavors could lead to fertile discussions in at least three respects: 1) There is a strong discontentment in the literature of religious epistemology since the main thought schools (Fideism, Reformed Epistemology, and Evidentialism [Natural Theology]) do not provide a strong argumentation to justify religious belief. I am convinced that introducing religious understanding to the religious epistemology literature will make room for remarkable perspectives. 2) Moreover, conceiving religious understanding in line with the epistemic features not only contributes to philosophical investigations but could also be efficiently used for theological purposes in terms of determining the limits of religious doctrines' epistemic justifications. Today many people prefer science over religion even though very few people invest time in understanding religious doctrines and whether they are comprehensible or not. I believe investigating this area would allow theological investigations to determine the capacity of religious doctrines in the epistemic domain. 3) This investigation could also serve ordinary people to make them aware of their expectations from religious doctrines. Both religious and non-religious people may have dogmatic judgments about the concept of religion and their beliefs, however, educated people may justify their beliefs while preventing dogmatic arguments. By investigating religious understanding, believers/non-believers could defend/reject the rationality of religious doctrines and be aware of their contentment/discontentment about the religious

doctrines. Thus, religious understanding may be used as a tool to refrain from being led to dogmatism.

1. The Shift from Knowledge to Understanding

The main focus of epistemology has been knowledge throughout the history of philosophy as philosophers investigated to reach knowledge in the ensured way. However, according to some, what Plato had meant by the word *episteme* is closer to understanding rather than knowledge (Moravcsik 1979, 53; Zagzebski 2001, 237). Some philosophers argued that understanding should be taken as a main focus of epistemology rather than knowledge because it corresponds to important aspects of epistemic achievements (Kvanvig 2003, 202; Elgin 2009, 321). To understand the background of this journey, I will provide a short history of the recent developments in knowledge. Thereafter, I will explain the value of understanding as a distinctive form than knowledge. Finally, I will explain different and common characteristics of different sorts of understandings.

1.1. Recent Perspectives on Knowledge

In order to explain the differentiation of understanding as a different form of epistemic state than knowledge, I shall firstly sketch the recent positions regarding knowledge: Previously, the definition of Plato was the dominant view i.e., knowledge was accepted as having justified true belief (JTB). This means a subject (S) could claim to know a proposition (p) just in case what he believes is true and he has a justification or legitimate reason(s) to believe in that proposition. Either if what S believes is not true or he does not have a legitimate reason to believe that p, it is not valid to claim that S knows p.

However, Edmund Gettier, in his 1963 paper famously proposed a counterexample to the claim that knowledge consists of JTB. In other words, there might be a case in which a subject has JTB but not knowledge (1963, 122). The problem may be concluded as follows: Let's suppose that a subject (S) relies on evidence E to infer a proposition P. While P is true, the evidence by which

S infers P may be partially false. In this case, having JTB does not seem to be sufficient for knowledge. To illustrate this point Gettier gives the following example:

Smith and Jones applied for a job and Smith has strong evidence for the conjunction proposition that a) Jones is the man who gets the job, and he has 10 coins in his pocket. The reasons for Smith to believe this proposition included the manager's assurance that they would hire Jones and Smith counted the coins that Jones had just now. From this, he infers that b) the guy who takes the job has 10 coins in his pocket. However, it is not Jones who gets the job but Smith himself, and unknown to Smith himself also has 10 coins in his pocket (1963, 122).

In this case, while Smith has a true belief (b), the belief that he relied on is not wholly true which is (a). I think here it is important to realize that (a) is a conjunctive proposition and while one constituent of it is true, the other constituent may be false. In this case, even though (a) is false, (b) may be true but not through the entailment of E. In such a case, S's knowledge that (b) stems from luck as the justification that he had is defective. Gettier's short but groundbreaking paper confused many philosophers and the dominant JTB account started to be questioned. There have been different suggestions to adjust the account of knowledge. Not to digress, I shall not examine the discussions in detail, but I owe sketching different forms of knowledge to compare different forms of understanding with them. These may be categorized in 3 ways³ such as knowing individuals, knowing how and knowing that.

Knowing individuals refers to having a personal acquaintance with people or places. In other languages this difference is clear. For instance, in French to express personal acquaintance with a person, one employs the verb "*connaître*" while to express a fact about a person the verb *savoir* is used. To use *connaître*, one needs to have a relation/interaction with the person in question

³ Characterizing the knowledge wh- as a distinguished form of knowledge, some sources characterize 4 different kinds of knowledge. The reasons why I picked 3 form version are 1) The dominant view is that knowledge wh- might be formulated in the form of knowledge-that 2) The irrelevancy of this discussion for the purposes of the chapter.

while there is no need for that to use *savoir*. Although the verb know is used in both cases in English, knowing someone and knowing a fact about someone is differentiated. Thus, the former is defined more generally as knowing individuals (people or places).

Knowledge-that is factive knowledge or propositional knowledge and refers to the epistemic state of knowing a truth or a fact. In other words, knowledge-that implies the truth of the proposition in question. Therefore, there is no case in which the proposition (p) is false, and a subject (S) knows that p. Moreover, in terms of justification S needs to have a valid reason to know that p because it may be mere luck that S believes that p and p is true.

Even though there are some discussions about the difference between knowledge-that and knowledge-how, it is generally accepted that knowing-how e.g., knowing-how to cycle is different than knowing facts about cycling because even though one knows many facts about cycling, knowing-how to use a bicycle requires a different sort of cognitive grasp and practice. A person who does not know many facts about cycling can know how to use a bicycle whereas a person who has read 10 books and possesses lots of knowledge-that about cycling might not know how to use it. Therefore, it seems that knowing-how is different from knowing-that.

Contrasting knowing individuals and knowing-how with understanding individuals and understanding-how does not seem convenient for conceptualization of religious understanding. Even though there is an epistemic state of understanding individuals, it does not seem that this sort of understanding can be held regarding religious matters. Moreover, including this sort of understanding may cause extra problems in terms of explaining the problems about the possibility of communication. Furthermore, knowing-how is mostly characterized to elucidate the learned abilities, therefore, the difference between understanding-how to do something and knowing-how to do something is not so clear. I will assume that religious understanding is understanding an idea that consists of understanding propositions. Therefore, religious understanding entails understanding-that to some extent.

After Gettier's article, the value of knowledge has been questioned and some philosophers conducted new investigations on epistemology. They defend that understanding is a bigger cognitive achievement since it necessitates not merely assenting to the information or the encountered epistemic data but also requires a mental grasp of the subject and the ability to intellectually play with the epistemic object. In the next section, I will explain these claims in detail and elaborate on the difference between knowledge and understanding.

1.2. The Epistemic Value of Understanding and the Reducibility Problem

In this section, I will sketch recent philosophical characterizations of understanding as distinct from knowledge. While I agree with the broad outlines of the characterization of this issue offered by Catherine Elgin, Linda Zagzebski and Jonathan Kvanvig, I will address a pressing concern regarding reducing understanding to knowledge. Referring to Plato's epistemology, Linda Zagzebski re-conceptualizes understanding with a strong emphasis on aptitude for practical matters. In this sense, she conceives that understanding (at least to some degree) entails practical mastery and argues that one could demonstrate their understanding with their competence in practice. In other words, understanding is not merely a cognitive achievement but in addition requires practical mastery. This is referred to as *techné* in ancient Greek. This sort of understanding is closely related to knowledge-how and, as noted, the resemblance between knowledge-how and understanding-how is not highly relevant for my aim in the second chapter. However, building on the work of other philosophers, I shall sketch different arguments for conceiving understanding as distinct from knowledge and defend that understanding cannot be reducible to knowledge.

According to Catherine Elgin, one of the biggest differences between understanding and knowledge is that, unlike knowledge, understanding occurs in degrees (2007, 36). This idea is coherent with the fact that there are degrees of expertise on any subject. While an undergraduate philosophy student has only a basic understanding of Spinoza's ethics, a Spinoza scholar would have a much deeper understanding. While the undergraduate student could grasp the book from a

very limited perspective, maybe only by the contents of this specific book, the scholar can plumb the depths of the book and also relate its contents to Spinoza's broader project, if not also to the larger philosophical environment Spinoza is a part of. When it comes to knowledge, it is possible to say that both know the content of Spinoza's *Ethics*. Nevertheless, in terms of exploring further dimensions of the book, there is an evident difference between the two.

Zagzebski argues that while knowledge's aim is exactness, understanding aims at comprehensiveness. She formulates a similar idea later: "Truth is a thin epistemic goal, and knowledge is derivative from it, since believing the truth is a component of knowing. Understanding is a thicker goal, and its connection with truth is often indirect (2001, 245)." She argues that understanding enriches our cognitive grasp and enables subjects to see how the individual propositions fit together, i.e., how they are connected to each other (2001, 244). Interestingly, in the case of knowledge, a person can know a few propositions and express a body of knowledge without understanding them (*Ibid*). She argues that apart from *a priori* knowledge, the truth of knowledge cannot be demonstrated within knowledge, but the confirmation of truth needs to come from outside of the body of knowledge. Be that as it may, understanding has its internal structure and one can verify his success of understanding (2001, 246).

Kvanvig also emphasizes the possibility of the internal coherence theory of justification for understanding. This is basically the idea that (when the truth is granted) if the premises do not contradict each other and present a set of coherent relationships in a body of premises, then they may be justified by the verification of their coherence and holding together. When it is contrasted with knowledge, one can know pieces of information but if he cannot accurately relate them, then understanding is not achieved (2003, 192). In other words, understanding requires an internal grasping or appreciation of the relationships of different components within a body of information whereas knowledge does not require this sort of capacity (*Ibid*). It is important that this capacity cannot be explained as a sort of knowledge but there needs to be a sort of awareness about how all the information fits together (2003, 202). Thus, Kvanvig defends that one of the distinctive

elements of understanding from knowledge is the awareness of grasping the connections between the components within a body of information.

A similar point includes the case of *epistemic luck*. As long as I consult a reliable source, I can obtain knowledge and this situation is sometimes related to luck. Say I am lost and trying to find my way back home and even though there are plenty of people in the street, only one of them knows the way to my home. In this case, if I ask the right person, I will obtain the relevant piece of knowledge⁴. If not, the other people either admit ignorance or (mistakenly) give me wrong directions. Therefore, our capacity to obtain knowledge can depend to some extent on luck. In stark contrast – and herein lies the crucial difference – obtaining understanding by luck does not seem possible: If I am not able to connect the relationships between the components of a body of information, I cannot understand the case in its entirety. Hence, understanding does not depend on luck as it requires one to necessarily relate the pieces of information in the correct/coherent way.

Let us extrapolate our previous thought experiment to the case of understanding. When I receive the correct directions without an adequate grasp of how one direction leads to another, it is not clear to me, say, I will see a supermarket after passing the bus station on street X (because I do not remember any supermarket on street X). Now consider this in addition: imagine a flatmate who does know the details of street X but he is also lost. When I see my flatmate who is also lost, I give him the directions that I have. If my flatmate knows that the supermarket on street X is followed by a bus station, then he will be able to verify whether the directions are correct or not and perhaps he can even offer a shorter way to arrive at that supermarket than the directions that I know. In this case, while I know the directions but do not understand them, my roommate

⁴ I eliminate the possibility of taking advantage of technology.

understands the directions and how they are related to each other⁵. Zagzebski summarizes this point simply as follows “one may know without knowing that one knows, but it is impossible to understand without understanding that one understands” (2001, 246). She conceptualizes this situation as *transparency*. This implies that if one understands something, they can verify whether others understand it or not. On the other hand, knowledge does not entail this sort of capacity. In other words, knowledge can be obtained merely by testimony but for understanding, one needs to be able to see how the propositions (the directions in this example) hang together and by this capacity, one can verify whether the other person also genuinely grasps the content or not. Thus, understanding evades the possibility of epistemic luck.

Contrary to the position sketched above, some philosophers hold that understanding is reducible to knowledge. A representative stance here is that of Paulina Sliwa, who defends the claim that knowledge is necessary and sufficient for understanding. She explains that her target is mainly to account for understanding-why and knowledge-why but it also encompasses other sorts of understanding and knowledge e.g., understanding-that and knowledge that. Consequently, Sliwa seems to be committed to the view that all understanding is propositional because understanding-why and understanding-that are in the forms of propositions. On this position, understanding can be characterized as having more knowledge. For instance, when someone understands that Stalin killed millions, she needs to know that Stalin killed millions (2015, 60). Moreover, she argues that understanding comes in degrees because it is the accumulation of knowledge, and the amount of knowledge corresponds to the amount of understanding (Ibid., 71). On this issue, neither Zagzebski nor Kvanvig seem to deny that when someone understands something, they know it. Rather they defend that knowledge is not sufficient for understanding as it requires more cognitive

⁵ There may be a possible objection to this example that the flatmate understands the directions because of the knowledge of the supermarket and in this case, his understanding comes from additional knowledge. I acknowledge this point in this example; however, as I will explain, it cannot be generalized.

effort. For instance, if a child does not know that killing innocents makes people evil and says that Stalin is evil because he killed innocents, there is a high chance that she does not understand what makes Stalin evil⁶.

Sliwa probably would argue against this example because the child did not "know" that killing innocents makes people evil and in this case, she would argue that understanding is just having more knowledge such as knowing that killing innocents makes people evil. However, this position omits the idea that understanding does not need to be propositional: Zagzebski argues that the grasp of the content does not need to be in the form of propositions, but it may be in the forms of "maps, graphs, diagrams and three-dimensional models in addition to, or even in place of, the acceptance of a series of propositions (2001, 241)". This means that grasping how the different components fit together is not propositional. Take an example from daily life. When we read something complex, even though we remember the whole content and are able to express it, we may not understand how some parts are related to each other. Later, we stop studying on that issue but with the passage of time, a different sort of awareness comes, and we come to understand the relations between different propositions. Even though we may not express how we grasped how the different propositions fit together, we now become aware that we have understood it.

Moreover, as noted, Kvanvig also appeals to the fact that understanding requires an *awareness* of how the different components are connected to each other. For this capacity, one needs to make an effort and notice the relations between the propositions. This is not necessary for knowledge. In this perspective, Sliwa's analogy between knowledge and understanding in terms of being relied on testimony (2015, 72) is also undermined because testimony is not sufficient for a person to ensure seeing how the propositions fit into each other. Therefore, testimony is not sufficient for understanding and understanding and knowledge are not the same thing. Thus, on

⁶ This example was employed by Sliwa (2015, 59) and she refers to Hills (2009, 204).

the discussion of reducibility, I agree with Zagzebski and Kvanvig because the mechanism that allows a subject to understand does not merely consist of knowledge. Therefore, Sliwa's characterization of understanding as the accumulation of knowledge is inoperative.

Thus, in terms of reducibility, the qualities that understanding possesses on top of knowledge (such as including cognitive effort, not being dependent on luck, coming in degrees, and requiring the grasp (or awareness) of relations between different constituents) render understanding indeed a different sort of epistemic form than knowledge and annihilate the hesitations regarding the reducibility problem. In the next section, I will elaborate on different sorts of understandings and point out some of their similar and different characteristics which could help conceptualizing religious understanding.

1.3. Various Forms of Understanding

Despite the recent character of the understanding literature in analytic philosophy, there are a variety of definitions and classifications with slight but often significant differences. I will not discuss all the different conceptualizations of understanding but only sketch the most relevant ones. Analogous to how there are different kinds of knowledge such as knowing individuals, knowing-how, or knowledge-that, there are various sorts of understanding. This includes understanding-why, understanding-that, and understanding a subject matter such as biology, chemistry, or geography. Allison Hills argues that understanding-why is understanding why p (p is a proposition) is the case (2015, 661). She argues that understanding-why may be conceptualized regarding different subject matters such as moral understanding, scientific understanding, and aesthetic understanding (2015, 661). She argues that understanding why p is factive and one can understand why p regarding different subject matters such as moral, aesthetic, scientific, and so on, thus she argues that for all these domains one can have truth (2015, 663). I shall argue that even when the truth claims are not conclusive, which is the case for complex issues even in empirical sciences, understanding provides further dimensions. To delve into this topic, I will sketch Thomas Kuhn's theory of paradigm first and then Catherine Elgin's conceptualization of understanding.

To consider the classic work first, Thomas Kuhn argues in his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that scientific improvements are led by *paradigms*. Kuhn argued that our access to the world is not immediate, but rather mediated by paradigms via which the raw data of the observable world is conveyed to that paradigm's scientific categories. In other words, a paradigm is a model for scientists within which they formulate *puzzles* to solve (1962/1970a, 36). When a paradigm starts to be falsified and new empirical data emerges which does not fit into the theory, it needs to be abandoned, and a new paradigm, which coherently embraces the new data, takes the place of the old (1962/1970a, 39). Kuhn thinks that this sort of change is necessary for the scientific development. For instance, Newton's conception of the universe is abandoned for Einstein's theory because the latter's conception is more coherent with the new findings about the nature of spacetime. However, this does not mean that understanding Newton's theory is not grasping the connections between different pieces of knowledge and is not a greater achievement than merely assenting to knowledge claims. Moreover, Newton's theory still helps in many parts of our lives such as in making cars or airplanes whereas Einstein's theory is true when it comes to extreme speeds, and it paves the way for further scientific and technological developments such as the invention of GPS. Thus, scientists base their problems and their possible solutions for these problems according to the data they have. Even though the paradigm changes throughout the years, understanding previous paradigms allows us to discover hitherto unexplored dimensions of nature.

Catherine Elgin points out that when we talk about knowledge, science is one of the most robust disciplines we rely on. Despite its invaluable epistemic status, even in science, it is sometimes not possible to obtain certain truths, nor are certain truths the best benefit of science (2006, 199). She argues that some scientific models are not true in themselves, but they help us to understand a bigger truth (2007, 38). Elgin argues that science aims to provide a unified, evidence-based understanding of phenomena (2006, 202). Therefore, in assessing a theory, the question we should ask is not "Does it express knowledge?" but "Does it convey an understanding?" (2006, 203).

Related to Kuhn's theory, even though scientific investigations do not give a complete truth, the endeavors for understanding nature and formulating an increasingly more encompassing understanding of nature are both epistemically and practically more fertile. In other words, the focus of scientific investigations should not only be true propositions about reality but also understanding how they hang together. Thus, she argues that formulating a better understanding of reality could improve our perspective.

I believe that not only in scientific understanding but also in regard to moral understanding a similar standpoint ought to be adopted. Most of the time it is our principles that guide our actions, and these evolve within the course of time. In some cases, it is possible to encounter situations from which we obtain moral knowledge. For instance, when a person experiences a case in which he felt so broken after being lied to, he could know that lying is wrong. However, even though we could have moral knowledge, moral understanding is not dependent merely on experiencing evil but also on retrospective reflections on moral issues. These reflections and experiences change in the course of time and new moral perspectives/understanding emerge. For example, even though lying is wrong, our moral understanding allows us to lie when lying may save the lives of innocent people. Throughout history, there has been remarkable moral progress in our moral understanding of issues such as slavery, democracy, human rights, and so on.⁷ Thus, even though we can have moral knowledge, it is our moral understanding that guides us to act in the best way possible within our capacity and allow us to investigate further on these issues to obtain a better understanding.

Thus, even though understanding provides more fertile perspectives in cases where obtained knowledge is not definitive, it seeks a true conception of reality. This means that one needs to correctly understand the content. Otherwise, it would be misunderstanding rather than

⁷ For a detailed article on the moral understanding and the development of moral perspective, see Severini, Eleonora "Moral Progress and Evolution: Knowledge Versus Understanding." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 24 (1) (2021):87-105.

understanding. Since religious doctrines are ideas and ideas are things, I will conceptualize religious understanding as understanding a thing. For instance, when one understands the doctrine of prophecy (for the religions that have this concept) they understand the idea of prophecy and how this concept is logically meaningful. In this sense, a person understands the idea of prophecy and when one understands it, she does not need to accept the existence of prophecy as truth but how prophecy as a religious concept is logically held in religious contexts. Since religious doctrines are ideas and ideas are things, I will conceptualize religious understanding as understanding a thing. Thus, also for religious understanding one needs to correctly see how the propositions and conclusion hang together. In other words, understanding an idea implies some understanding-that in terms of holding the correct relationships between the propositions and if one genuinely understands a doctrine, then the propositions must be related in all these ways. Building on the accounts in this chapter, I will conceptualize religious understanding in the following chapter.

2. Religious Understanding

In order to explain the epistemic dimension of religious understanding, I need to elucidate what I mean by religious understanding: As noted, I take the object of religious understanding to be religious doctrines which consist of sets of propositions followed by a conclusion. For a doctrine to be religious, it needs to be based on religious sources in an argumentative way. I shall explain that religious doctrines are variable and a believer of the religion in question may not believe a doctrine for various reasons e.g., the doctrine may depend on the different authorities' conceptions, or it may contradict other more essential doctrines. To understand a doctrine, in this case, one needs to understand the relations between the propositions and how the conclusion follows i.e., the relations between the propositions and the conclusion. It is also possible to formulate that when a person understands religious doctrine, he understands how the conclusion is obtained. In this sense, religious understanding is understanding a religious claim that is followed by a set of propositions. Thus, I accept religious understanding as understanding a religious doctrine since this requires a cognitive effort and is not based on merely memorizing or testimony. Moreover, once a person understands a religious doctrine, she can intellectually draw connections between propositions and conclusions. In the following, drawing on the previous characterizations of understanding, I explore some possible analogies for religious understanding.

2.1. Characterization of Religious Understanding

In general, understanding requires a specific connection between epistemic objects or pieces of information, and epistemic subjects or the receiver of an epistemic object. This is also valid for religious understanding since each person examines the encountered religious doctrine via regnant conceptualizations, interpretations, and convictions. This is not to say that two people who have different backgrounds cannot understand the same thing from the doctrine. On the contrary, given that the propositions of doctrines are self-comprehensible, they can certainly do so. Therefore, I shall acknowledge the full force of the subjective nature of understanding. Even so,

this is not necessarily a constraint for understanding a religious doctrine since people can accept a common terminology e.g., what they understand from the concept of God, prophets, or angels, etc. Thus, two people could obtain and understand the doctrines even though they do not share the same convictions and/or conceptualizations.

Here, my main argument is that both religious and non-religious people can have religious understanding. This raises the following question: How can both religious and non-religious people understand the same thing if one of them believes while the other does not? To explain this, I shall elaborate on the concept of *doxastic attitude* which may be formulated as a subject's persuasion regarding a proposition. It is argued that there are roughly three doxastic attitudes: believing, disbelieving and suspending judgment (Comesaña and Klein 2024). It is possible to say that when a person holds a religious doctrine as truth, she believes it and when she thinks that the doctrine is wrong, she disbelieves it. Finally, she may be granted as a person who suspends judgment when she withholds assent regarding the doctrine.

In this case, there may be a case in which both a believer and a non-believer understand a doctrine and for this, believing is not a prerequisite. Regarding this issue, I shall avoid this possible confusion: There may be a case in which a believer does not believe in a doctrine because different doctrines are not adopted by different sects or groups of the same religion. On the other hand, a non-believer does not need to reject a religious doctrine since she may suspend her judgment on the doctrine in question⁸.

Thus, it seems reasonable to argue that a non-believer may hold a religious doctrine as a sort of fiction or an idea, but this would not prevent them from grasping the relations between the propositions and conclusions. Therefore, to have religious understanding, one does not need to be

⁸ It is also possible that both sides can suspend their judgments regarding religious doctrines. In this case, their religiosity could be understood by the doctrines that they believe or disbelieve e.g., how essential these doctrines are to have religious belief.

a believer. People can understand whether a religious doctrine is reasonable on the basis of its rationality and coherence. These criteria are required to decide whether a doctrine can be tenable or not. If the conclusion is not followed by the premises, it is not possible to understand that doctrine because then the subject in question cannot grasp the relationship between the propositions and their connection to the conclusion (as they are defective).

I shall examine the conception of truth regarding religious matters in order to investigate the epistemic value of religious understanding. Religious and scientific claims do not have the same characteristics as the verification criterion for scientific truths is predicated on empirical data while religious claims stand on different grounds. What I understand from verification is proving the truth of a proposition in a definitive sense. For instance, mathematical propositions are *a priori* verifiable or physical laws are empirically verifiable and so on. Consequently, one's beliefs about religion and science do not have the same features, reasons and consequences. Since the choice of believing in religion depends on a person's convictions, from the argumentative point of view, I think one can choose a religion based on the coherence and rationality of religious doctrines. I assume that a person could have faith in things that there are no obvious grounds for proving. My assumption stems from the idea that if there was a way of truly knowing beyond any possible doubt, there would be no importance of religious belief since according to a prominent line of thinking common to the different strands of Abrahamic theology, people are responsible for their decisions and religious belief is the main conscious choice that they make. In other words, when the truth is undeniable one way or the other, people would not need to *choose* to believe in God. The truth though is not obvious (otherwise there would not be any non-believers) and some people make a conscious choice to believe. In this case, I abstain from attributing knowledge claims regarding religious beliefs in the strict sense that contain truth requirements, and I prefer the term *assent* instead.

For all these reasons, I argue that religious understanding does not necessarily imply a belief in its truth. For a believer, however, since he believes⁹ that the content of religion is true, religious understanding further strengthens his assent. Moreover, he obtains new dimensions regarding the meaning of that doctrine and its connections with other religious doctrines. On the other hand, even though a non-believer does not accept a doctrine, she may nevertheless understand the *idea* according to which believers form their motivations and how these doctrines *rationaly* affect believers' religious convictions. Therefore, religious understanding is equally available for both religious and non-religious people as long as the doctrines do not necessarily violate the facts and rationaliy¹⁰. To illustrate my explanations and elaborate on the reflections of recent characterizations of religious understanding, I shall now formulate an elementary religious doctrine.

As noted in the introduction, I assume that religious doctrines are teachings or concepts of religions that can be intellectually transmitted. This means a doctrine is an epistemic input that can be rationally grasped via explanations. In religious texts, whether primary (holy scripture) or secondary books (exegetical commentaries), these explanations may not always be expressed in an argumentative way via the form of premises. Despite this surface appearance, these explanations can be re-formulated in the form of premises, or it can even be shown that explanations in religious texts are already formulated in these terms. The doctrine that I provide as an example is the concept of prophecy and even though the details may vary across different religions, I aim to present a version that may be accepted in all three Abrahamic religions.

The Doctrine of Prophecy

- 1) God wants to inform people about Himself and the correct way of believing in Him.

⁹ In other words, he is convinced by the religious doctrine and attributes positive truth value to the claim.

¹⁰ Here, I do exclude the religious propositions that contradict certain truths. For instance, when a religious claim contradicts the scientific truth (in its complete sense) or is inconsistent, understanding this doctrine is impossible.

- 2) God does not want to reveal himself to people because in that case people would experience God and having faith presupposes inconclusive evidence.
- 3) To be able to obtain 1 and 2, there needs to be a mediator between God and humanity.
- 4) Related to (2), if this mediator is ultimately superior to human beings, then experiencing this mediator entity would violate the rationale of achieving faith.

Conclusion: God assigned some human creators as prophets so that they could explain to humanity the correct way of believing.

For this formulation, I shall state that there may be different versions of (4) e.g., the position of Jesus is a long-lasting debate that has inspired a range of diverse opinions. Not to digress, I shall not participate in these discussions, but I believe the main lines of thought for the Abrahamic religions are mostly the same in all three religions. I acknowledge that there may be more convincing and conventional formulations of the doctrine, and this is an important point to note that a doctrine may be formulated in many different ways, and their meanings may be different than each other. However, when I argue that both a believer and a non-believer can understand the same religious doctrine, I assume that they assess the same formulation of the doctrine.

Regarding this doctrine, a non-believer may think that God does not exist and all the assumptions about God are not real; however, acknowledging the content, she could understand that the religions in question have this kind of reasoning and the believers understand the concept of a prophet in this way. In other words, she could grasp the idea and see how the propositions are related to the conclusion. Thus, she may obtain religious understanding. On the other hand, a religious person may corroborate her assent to the concept of prophecy. Furthermore, understanding this doctrine, she obtains a possible elucidation about why God may have assigned prophets in the form of humans. The similar thing for both subjects is obtaining religious understanding and the difference between them is their *doxastic attitudes* and ways of benefiting from their understanding: While one of them understands the believer's rationale for believing in

a specific way, the other obtains confidence that he is not irrational in his belief since there is a rational and coherent way of understanding the concept.

When one merely thinks of one specific doctrine, these are the possible outcomes. However, when a subject understands something, she relates this with her previous epistemic state. This means, a person does not only grasp the doctrine by itself but also links it with her previous understanding that includes knowledge and assumptions. Here, I do not argue that there is a subjective point, and everyone can interpret as they please. However, I argue that after understanding a doctrine (that is common, needs to be correctly understood and the same for both religious and non-religious people), the person processes that epistemic content that he obtained from the doctrine by his previous epistemic state. For instance, when a non-believer understands this doctrine, she may connect this to what she studied in the history of religions class about different conceptualizations of prophets. Similarly, a believer may connect this to another doctrine that he understands e.g. about the missions of prophets. Thus, he could build a more encompassing relationship between the doctrines and they could help him to explore further dimensions of his belief. This point is related to the fact explained by Elgin that understanding occurs in degrees: Even though two people could understand the same idea through the doctrine itself, when it comes to having different layers of understanding and connecting the understood content with the other elements, their benefiting from the same understanding may be different. For instance, when a theology professor and an undergraduate student in theology understand a doctrine, it is natural to expect that the professor understands more than the student because he is able to see more connections. However, this is not an obstacle to obtaining the same understanding of the religious doctrine itself.

Perhaps, there may be an objection to my claim that two people can understand the same thing even though one is an expert in the subject while the other is not. I assume that both people have the basic background to understand the same thing by the concepts that are used in the argumentation of the doctrine. A similar case can be obtained in any other form of understanding:

There is no constraint for two people to understand Pythagoras' theorem itself by the basic grasp of the mathematical operations. Despite that equivalence, a mathematics professor can also prove this theorem and employ this theorem in further geometrical investigations whereas the secondary school student is usually incapable of such complex operations¹¹. It is important to notice that I do not grant that a religious person has a deeper understanding of a religious doctrine compared to a non-religious person. On the contrary, a non-religious person may have more background on religious matters and can connect the doctrine more than a religious person. One's choice of religiosity stems from his persuasion (*doxastic attitude*) and by what he has been persuaded. Hence, even though a person has a deeper understanding of religious doctrine, he may not be persuaded by it, while a lesser understanding may satisfy another person. Thus, since believing in religious doctrines eventually depends on one's will, I argue that there is no positive correlation between the extent of religious understanding and being religiously persuaded.

To sum up, I think that for both religious and non-religious people, understanding a religious doctrine could have at least three different consequences: For a religious person, 1) Her confidence regarding her assent in the religious content increases. 2) She becomes confused regarding her previous assumptions, beliefs and worldview because the relationship between the understood doctrine and the previous religious learnings may not be clear. Consequently, she can suspend her judgment about the doctrine. 3) She does not accept the doctrine because it contradicts the previous religious learnings. On the other hand, for a non-religious person, 1) There is no change in her doxastic attitude i.e., she does not accept the religious doctrine yet, but she understands the motivation for religious people to hold in this doctrine, 2) She becomes confused regarding her previous conception of religious doctrines because how this doctrine relates to others may not be clear and she can suspend her judgment. 3) There is a change in her doxastic attitude.

¹¹ A similar example may be found to argue a different point in Grimm, Stephen (2012). "The Value of Understanding". *Philosophy Compass* 7 (2). p. 112

By this, I do not necessarily mean conversion, but she may have sympathy for the doctrine. I shall not speculate on this matter but explain the relationship between religious knowledge i.e., acknowledging religious claims, and religious understanding.

2.2. Religious Knowledge versus Religious Understanding

The concept of religious knowledge is used for religious propositions to which a truth value can be attributed. For example, when one claims that God exists, the proposition that God exists can have a truth value because the existence of God may or may not be a fact. Reformed epistemologists argue that people should not refrain from knowledge claims only because proving the existence of God cannot be conventionally agreed upon. Thus, religious knowledge seems to be a specific sort of knowledge that could be achieved only by religious people who have access to it by adopting religious teachings. As noted, religious doctrines do not obtain their truth value from worldly facts. Therefore, people have faith in something that cannot be proven to others or even to themselves in a definitive way¹². There may be some religious doctrines that correspond neatly to the empirical evidence but in this case, they are already a worldly matter, and their truth condition again is met by empirical methods of justification.

Religious epistemologists defend that people can have religious knowledge insofar as their beliefs are *warranted*. One of the founders of reformed epistemology, Alvin Plantinga defends that a belief is warranted if it ensures the following three cases: The subject does not violate the normal process of belief making i.e., his cognitive faculty needs to be properly working, the belief in question is aimed to be a true belief and there are high chances that the belief produced under these circumstances is true (Plantinga 1993, 46-47). Thus, reformed epistemologists employ a specific conceptualization for the term rationality and argue that people could *rationally* have

¹² In this sense, faith involves and to some extent requires risk. For more on the relationship between faith and risk see Buchak, Lara. "Instrumental Rationality, Epistemic Rationality, and Evidence-Gathering". *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (1) (2010): 85-120.

religious beliefs without relying on satisfying evidence or arguments. Religious claims can take a truth value and in terms of justification, individuals can have personal warrants that do not require proof that are not valid for everyone: As long as the believers do not violate basic forms of believing they may obtain a warrant for their religious beliefs. There is an intense debate about the acceptability of the reformed epistemology account and to what extent the term knowledge can apply to religious claims. Even though religious beliefs can take truth value in their ultimate sense such as the existence of God, in some cases accepting a believed religious claim as truth and the belief in this claim as knowledge seems confusing such as a case in which the opposite beliefs can count as knowledge at the same time¹³.

Therefore, I suggest conceptualizing religious knowledge as knowledge of religious matters. In this respect, both religious and non-religious people can know religious claims such as God exists or that there is an afterlife. Thus, even though a person does not believe the proposition in question, he can express that “according to Islam, Muhammad is a prophet and a human-being”. On the other hand, a Muslim also knows this proposition and he accepts this proposition as true. However, his attribution of truth comes from his doxastic attitude. Thus, both religious and non-religious people know the same proposition (via religious sources for example) whereas some accept it as true while others do not and knowledge claims can be employed for everybody. Again, I refer to the religious doctrines but not religious testimony or experience which are not in argumentative and logical forms. Therefore, I will employ the term religious knowledge to refer to knowledge of religious matters that do not require religious belief. I believe this conceptualization ensures a common ground between believers and non-believers and is more compatible with the conceptualization of religious understanding.

¹³ For a well-structured objection regarding using knowledge for religious belief and to the approach of Religious Epistemology, see Antognazza, Maria Rosa “Knowledge and Religious Belief.” *Think* 20, no. 58 (2021): 39–53. doi:10.1017/S147717562100004X.

Previously, I emphasized that understanding could enable to explore further dimensions than knowledge in different disciplines as it provides subjects with further capacities. In this section, I will explain why this is also the case regarding religious matters. In the religious context, I had formulated religious understanding as understanding an idea. As noted, religious knowledge is knowledge of religious matters which are accepted as truth for believers while it is not the case for non-believers. Thus, I suggest understanding the relationship between religious knowledge and religious understanding as follows: Religious understanding requires knowledge of religious matters; however, this knowledge does not entail assent towards the content. For instance, to understand the doctrine of prophecy, one needs to know that God's existence and desire to inform people about the correct way of believing is a teaching in Abrahamic religions. Another example may be that to understand *Faust*, one needs to acknowledge that a human can have a pact with the Devil. Even though a non-believer does not think religious content is true, she may still know it and understand how its conclusion follows from the premises. Thus, religious understanding requires religious knowledge. However, this does not mean believing in religious claims as it is the case for scientific or moral understanding.

When it comes to the differences between religious understanding and religious knowledge, I shall initially emphasize that when a person understands a religious doctrine, she can see the connections and derive how the conclusion is followed by the premises. However, in the case of religious knowledge, a person merely acknowledges the propositions and the conclusion, and she is not able to see the relationship between them. A possible advantage of understanding a religious doctrine could be the capacity of employing the principle that is inherent in argumentation in different reasonings. For example, when someone understands the doctrine of prophecy, she also grasps the idea that God wants to inform people about himself and the correct way of believing. Grasping this idea will also help in understanding the term *holy book*: Prophets are mortal and the religious teachings must be delivered to people who will live afterwards. Therefore, in order to transmit religious teachings to the next generations, religious teachings need to be written and these

are in the form of *holy books*. If a person did not understand the doctrine of prophecy but merely knew it, she would not be able to see the similarity between the doctrine of prophecy and the term holy book in terms of reasoning and conclusions. This is because understanding requires a sort of awareness about the relations between the propositions while knowledge does not.

Moreover, religious knowledge does not require a reflection on religious matters but entails familiarization with the content whereas religious understanding necessarily involves grasping the connections between different bodies of information. In this sense, religious knowledge depends on epistemic luck and if one does not encounter the correct sources, they will not have the correct version of their religious knowledge. Relatedly, when people do not reflect on the religious claims, they may never notice whether they are coherent and/or rational. Given that there are many religions and religious sects, and many people believe them merely because of the religious environment in which they find themselves, religious knowledge does not seem to be a remarkable epistemic achievement. On the other hand, when a person reflects on religious doctrines and understands them, she can notice which religious teaching has a rational basis. Moreover, she can obtain an awareness of her beliefs and persuasions. Thus, religious understanding provides an awareness to the religious or non-religious people about the religious teachings that they believe or disbelieve while religious knowledge does not require this awareness.

Furthermore, understanding comes in degrees while there is no gradation in the case of knowledge. In other words, it is possible to understand to a greater or lesser degree but when it comes to knowledge, one either knows or does not know. For example, if a person understands the doctrine of holy books a bit more, he could infer another claim, say: the content of holy books is very important, ergo, they must have been written in a very rigorous way. For this proposition, the doctrine of holy books provides good reasons to think about the first part, but the second part is not given in the explanation for holy books. However, this claim is in line with the train of thought in the doctrine of holy books. Thus, a person who understands the logic of the doctrine can apply it to infer another claim which coheres with the earlier one. Therefore, the ability to see

the inherent logic in different doctrines and grasp the relations between them is not the case for religious knowledge. Thus, understanding a religious doctrine provides further epistemic advantages to the subject than knowing a religious doctrine.

I do not deny the possibility that a doctrine may be improperly formulated, and people understand the doctrine in different ways. However, for religious understanding, this is not an unfixable mistake since other better-formulated doctrines and the people who have a deeper understanding can reveal the problem and detect the problematic parts within the doctrine. For instance, in the doctrine of prophecy, a person who understands the doctrine may object or reject to wrong formulations of the doctrine. Similarly, when he encounters a defective formulation of propositions, he will be able to determine where the problem stems from. In the case of religious knowledge, however, the individuals are neither required to grasp the logic of religious doctrines within their context nor their connection to other doctrines. I believe understanding provides a better ground in which non-believers and the opposite views can collaborate and detect which parts of the doctrines are persuasive and which parts are not. For all these reasons, I believe religious understanding is more appropriate to be the main focus of religious epistemology and in the next chapter, I will explain some possible advantages of this shift not only in terms of religious epistemology but also of philosophy of religion and theology.

3. Possible Benefits of Conceptualizing Religious Understanding

In this chapter, building on the previous discussions, I will explain how the philosophical characterization of religious understanding may provide fertile perspectives on discussions in religious epistemology and philosophy of religion, especially concerning dialogue between religion and its other. Before this, I shall clarify some points: I argue neither that all religious content is available to people nor that all religions' contents include satisfying rational content. However, since religious belief cannot be reduced to culture but remains a universalizable idea(l), religions need to offer a logical & comprehensible content to some extent. I believe this content can be formulated in the forms of doctrines and religious understanding corresponds to explaining the grasping of the rational content and employing it to obtain broader perspectives on religious matters. Since religious understanding is not factive, religious understanding does not necessitate truth claims and accepting the understood content. Even though two people can understand the same doctrine in the same way, being satisfied by the content depends on the individual. Therefore, when I talk about religious understanding, I assume that there is a logical/comprehensible religious content that may contribute to one's comprehension of religious matters.

I believe a philosophical formulation of religious understanding can be formulated as a methodology in which the main focus is understanding how religious doctrines present themselves in a logical framework. Thus, one can obtain the logic for a certain religious argument. For instance, the doctrine of prophecy gives a rational account for the question of "Why this concept exists and how God informs people about the religion and the correct way of believing". Understanding the doctrine of prophecy then enables individuals to see the connections and have an awareness of the justification for holding that specific belief.

3.1. New Discussion Ground for Religious Epistemology

Religious epistemology in general may be defined as a discipline that investigates the epistemic value of religious claims. In contemporary debates in religious epistemology, even though there are different versions thereof, there are three main approaches, namely Reformed Epistemology, Fideism and Evidentialism which I shall briefly sketch: According to a reformed epistemologist, legitimization of religious belief is to defend it against common objections, while for fideism it seems that individuals do not need to verify their beliefs (Forrest 2021). Finally, for an evidentialist, one needs to have a solid basis for religious belief that could be valid for everyone. On this point, Natural theologians formulate arguments for the existence of God; however, they can at best provide argumentations for the reasonableness of the existence of God (Antognazza 2021, 42). Therefore, they do not provide an account for differentiating the religions that have a concept of God. As noted above, religion does not correspond to a fact that can be verified definitively. In light of this point, it seems that religious people are somehow individually convinced of religious doctrines by their rational means. Therefore, acknowledging these doctrines and trying to grasp the rational relations between them may be a relevant approach as it directly examines religious contents themselves.

I argue that considering religious understanding as a methodology and examining religious doctrines to grasp their rational accounts by acknowledging the religious arguments may be considered as a form of evidentialism because from a rational point of view, having a coherent and logical body of propositions is one of the main reasons while forming religious convictions. As noted, religious arguments do not correspond to worldly/verifiable facts. In this case, believing logically acceptable propositions seems to be one of the most important requirements for religious belief. Therefore, focusing on religious material itself and grasping how different bodies of arguments hold together logically could be one of the evidentialist criteria for believing in a specific religion.

Moreover, obtaining religious knowledge i.e., familiarization with/acknowledging religious content, by itself does not represent a sort of epistemic achievement since it does not include processing/reflecting religious content. On the other hand, religious understanding helps individuals to grasp comprehensible religious content within a body of information and allows them to become aware of the comprehensible rational account that religion has. This point is crucial regarding epistemic luck. Many people merely acknowledge religious doctrines and do not take the possible explanations or argumentations for these doctrines into account. Thus, most people adopt the religion that their environment practices. This is not only the case for religious people but applies equally to non-religious people since in non-religious environments people also at best learn religious arguments and do not try to understand their inherent logic and coherence. On the other hand, epistemic luck is not applicable to religious understanding, since the people who understand religious doctrines can explain why they favor (or not) one specific religion over another and this may be held as a justification or evidence for their specific beliefs. For all these outlined reasons, religious understanding offers a alternative ground for religious epistemology that shall be further investigated. Therefore, I suggest religious epistemology should focus on religious understanding rather than religious knowledge.

3.2. Some Benefits of Religious Understanding for Philosophy of Religion & Theology

As noted briefly, people want to have a solid basis for their beliefs. Unlike the Kierkegaardian position, I do not hold that believers need to embrace absurdity because once one gives up rational thinking and how things hold coherently, there is no necessity for further investigations to understand the meaning of our beliefs. This situation is the basis of dogmatism and merely acknowledging what has been established by the majority opinion in a given time and place. Moreover, it denies the rational account of religion and omits important aspects of it because even when an act has been realized by religious motivations, a person shall act according to the *principle* that religion provides rather than merely adopting the religious orders because the provided

orders of a religion do not holistically cover all parts of life. Thus, to act completely according to religious teachings, one needs to understand what has been told and what is the main motivation behind religious teachings or doctrine. If one needs to accept the absurdity, why not believe in the most absurd thing but God? Since it is not possible to abandon rational understanding ultimately, the rational accounts of religions shall be studied. One possible objection may be the claim that religion contains both rational and absurd elements so we shall embrace both. Even though this argument necessarily undermines my proposition of studying rational account, in this case, the problem of determining true and false doctrines arises i.e., separating additional religious arguments becomes more difficult. For these reasons, I argue that a rational conception of religious belief and religious content must be sought. When religious understanding is the intended goal, then the focus will be on how different argumentations hold together and what the totality of doctrines offers. Studying these reasons and analyzing them from our perspective of reality will either provide or not provide reasons for believing in a specific religion. These reasons may be convincing for us or not; however, in either case, our *justification* for having a specific belief will increase along with our *awareness* of religious matters. I shall further elaborate on the last phrase in the following paragraphs.

When people grasp the doctrines and connect one to another, they can see the rationality and the motivations behind religious teachings. In other words, if religious knowledge means acknowledging religious teachings, religious understanding will be the justification or coherence for holding religious teachings. For instance, when a person believes that there are prophets in the world, understanding the doctrine of prophecy could serve as a justification for this religious belief. Thus, as argued by Zagzebski and Kvanvig, religious knowledge (i.e., acknowledging religious claims) is necessary for religious understanding because without acknowledging religious claims one cannot understand the relations between them and how one follows another in a coherent way. Nonetheless, as I have argued, this does not mean that religious knowledge is necessary and sufficient for religious understanding since religious understanding requires further epistemic

efforts. Therefore, religious understanding is an essential element that enables religious individuals to legitimize their beliefs. On the other hand, although non-religious individuals do not believe the religious doctrine in question, they can understand the rationale for accepting that proposition as true. Thus, in terms of justification, not only philosophers or theologians but also ordinary people can benefit from religious understanding.

In terms of awareness, as noted, when a person understands a religious doctrine, she realizes the logical aspects of believing in that religion. When a religious person, understands another religion's doctrine, even though unconvinced by the doctrine, she may still appreciate the relations between the propositions. Through religious understandings, people also become aware of the similarities in arguments or reasonings in different religions. A religious person can observe a different way of thinking and they may analyze the different doctrine's arguments by comparing the way of thinking that he is acquainted with. This situation may nourish inter-faith relations in a more tolerant environment. For non-religious people, after understanding the logical account, they can conclude that religion is not an illusion or a cultural entity, but it also contains rational thinking. Thus, religious understanding could support more tolerant and charitable readings of religious teachings and this situation can provide theoretical reasons for being more careful and respectful while making assumptions about different religions.

Related to these benefits, I believe adopting religious understanding as a method of theological and philosophical investigations on religious matters can nourish these studies because ideally the explanations and investigations shall be accessible to everyone¹⁴. For this purpose, understanding religious doctrines and enabling subjects to grasp the relationship between different religious claims can enable them to learn the rational accounts for believing in specific religious

¹⁴ I do not think having a personal faith is not possible and there are no individual dimensions of faith but philosophical and theological investigations need to be comprehensible by everyone.

beliefs. In other words, argumentatively studying the motivations for religious convictions by acknowledging religious arguments could facilitate assessing religious claims within their perspective and enable people to grasp the religious content independently from their backgrounds. Thus, different argumentative approaches interact with each other, and religious studies could be more diverse and systematic in the sense of including different perspectives and examining the rational accounts of religious doctrines.

I acknowledge the individual and social dimensions of religion and religious belief that are formed by emotions, traditions, or psychological elements. However, in addition to these elements, religions offer intelligible and argumentative frameworks that should also be studied to understand both the concepts and components of religions. Therefore, rather than emphasizing religion's psychological or cultural dimensions, its rational account should be studied. I believe understanding the logical material of religions will also offer further insights into cultural and psychological studies since the rational elements of religion provide prospects of conducting a meaningful life (Pouivet 2011; Mawson 2016, 2019) and this fact has psychological and cultural effect (Özkan 2016; Martela, and Steger, 2016). Thus, aiming for religious understanding rather than religious knowledge has many benefits including delving into rational accounts for religious beliefs and being a methodology that helps to assess religious teachings.

Conclusion

Even though it is hard to agree on a complete definition of religious belief, its distinctive character cannot be denied since it is not the same as the belief that I am not in a dream, or my bicycle is locked downstairs. Consequently, the reasons for holding a religious belief differ from other beliefs. Via philosophical investigations, we want to assess the epistemic relevance of these beliefs and formulate satisfying arguments for holding or not holding these beliefs. Related to these purposes, I have given a philosophical account of religious understanding which concerns understanding religious matters, specifically doctrines. What I aimed at by this conceptualization is to provide a method and an epistemic goal that provides a different way of pursuing philosophical investigations regarding religious arguments.

For my conceptualization of religious understanding, I drew on recent understanding literature that emphasizes that understanding is worth pursuing as an epistemic goal in addition to knowledge. I argued that understanding cannot be reducible to knowledge even though understanding is based on knowledge i.e., knowledge is a requirement for understanding. Understanding requires further capacities than knowledge and enables subjects to interact with the epistemic object in a more comprehensive way. These capacities include 1) connecting different pieces of information, 2) occurring in degrees, 3) obtaining an awareness about how things fit together and being able to see the relations between a set of propositions, 4) not being susceptible to epistemic luck and 5) not being in propositional form while knowledge does not require any of these.

I also discussed the issue of facticity regarding different sorts of understanding. Since understanding a moral value is different from understanding a physical law, understanding different matters have different requirements, features, verification methods and so on. Moreover, understanding-why something is the case and understanding-that something happened is factive, as understanding is based on knowledge and it is not possible to understand that *p* or why *p* without

p being true. On the other hand, understanding an idea does not require the idea to be true, as it is not necessarily about a fact. However, when understanding and knowledge are compared, understanding allows individuals to obtain perspectives and invites people to focus on this matter (Kvanvig 2009, 110). Building on these discussions, I philosophically investigated religious understanding that could help to grasp and elaborate on religious doctrines which are argumentative elements that may convince people to believe. In this regard, I excluded religious testimony and experience and only focused on argumentative teachings of religion that are in the form of doctrines because when it comes to experience, the experiences of religious people are individual and cannot be argumentatively explained. Thus, it is hard to philosophically investigate these sorts of religious arguments. For all these reasons, I determined the object of religious understanding as religious doctrines that can be intellectually transmitted.

I argued that religious understanding is understanding an idea and one needs to correctly understand how the propositions and conclusions hang together. However, this does not entail the truth of the understood doctrine. In other words, religious understanding entails some understanding-that in the sense of understanding the propositions. Moreover, being convinced by a doctrine depends on one's *doxastic attitude* which in turn is primarily dependent on a subject's will. Thus, I argued that religious understanding is equally available to both religious and non-religious people. Both perspectives can obtain the same understanding of a doctrine while their benefit from the doctrine may differ. The main reason for this is that within a body of propositions the same relations and grasping can be realized but when it comes to analyzing the understood doctrine with previous background and assumptions, because of the individual differences, they can benefit from religious understanding in different ways.

I argued that religious knowledge and religious understanding shall also be different in terms of their definitions and epistemic relevance. Since the usage of religious knowledge is an intense debate, in order to conceive a ground that does not involve these discussions, I employed the term religious knowledge to refer to knowledge of religious doctrines. In this case, both

religious and non-religious people can obtain religious knowledge and believing in them differs via their doxastic attitude. Thus, religious knowledge is again necessary for religious understanding; however, when one understands a religious doctrine, they understand the logical framework of the doctrine and the rational motivations for assenting to that doctrine. Religious understanding also comes in degrees and when a person understands a doctrine, she can apply the logic to derive another proposition in coherence with the understood doctrine. Furthermore, further investigations allow the subject to draw connections between different doctrines.

In the final chapter of the thesis, I examined the possible advantages of focusing on religious understanding rather than knowledge under two headings. In the domain of religious epistemology, religious understanding can indeed offer a satisfying methodology within which a believer can demonstrate his religious understanding as evidence for holding that specific belief. By investigating different religious doctrines people could assess their satisfactory account and evaluate the potential evidence for holding religious beliefs. In the domain of philosophy of religion and theology, religious understanding offers a framework for delving into argumentative explanation for holding a religious belief to explain the satisfactoriness of the religious beliefs. On the other hand, familiarizations with logical relations in religious doctrines also provide good reason to be more tolerant and charitable regarding others' religious beliefs. Thus, individuals become more precise about their beliefs while acknowledging the motivations for holding other religious beliefs. Therefore, religious understanding offers a ground in which inter-faith and religious-nonreligious dialogues can be realized and lead to fertile discussions. Thus, religious understanding, independently from the discussions of religious knowledge, can be both a theoretical and practical tool for further philosophical and theological investigations.

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