

# THE PRACTICE OF ASSERTION UNDER CONDITIONS OF RELIGIOUS IGNORANCE

**AARON RIZZIERI**

YAVAPAI COLLEGE

**Abstract.** The knowledge and attendant justification norms of belief and assertion serve to regulate our doxastic attitudes towards, and practices of asserting, various propositions. I argue that conforming to these norms under conditions of religious ignorance promotes responsible acts of assertion, epistemic humility, and non-dogmatic doxastic attitudes towards the content of one's own faith. Such conformity also facilitates the formation of the religious personality in a healthy direction in other ways. I explore these ideas in relation to the Christian faith tradition, but my reflections generalize.

## I. INTRODUCTION

One fundamental dimension of religious practice is communicating one's doxastic attitudes towards religiously significant propositions to others for various purposes. Such purposes include making oneself more fully known in the context of one's spiritual community, engaging in discussion on how to process reality through the lens of one's faith commitments, acting on a spiritually grounded moral conviction, and expressing the content of one's faith in conversations with those who do not share one's own leanings. If we extend the paradigmatic use of 'assertion' we can also recognize a form of

assertion which is a private mental event. Within the context of one's spiritual life one sometimes has occasion to meditate on the propositional content of one's own faith, and declare to oneself propositions which one either believes, hopes, or accepts in an attempt to either achieve clarity regarding such content or to reinforce one's ability to act in accord with such content.<sup>1</sup>

Assertion is of course a sub-species of action. But, unlike most of our actions, when one asserts one has the ability to qualify one's assertions in various ways which enables one to convey not only the content, but also the degree of confidence one has in regards to the content which is expressed. In contrast, many of our actions, spiritually relevant or otherwise, do not clearly reveal either the beliefs which drive those actions, or the degree of confidence we have.

For example, when one attends a church service part of the significance of one's attendance may be a public affirmation of, and identification with, a broadly Christian set of commitments. Yet, it is only in one's speech acts where the subtle nuances of one's commitments can be effectively revealed.<sup>2</sup> This raises a host of questions regarding the habits we ought to form around the practices of portraying our beliefs, hopes, and commitments to others and to ourselves. Should we assert spiritual beliefs which we lack knowledge of without qualification? Or, is it beneficial to get into the habit of qualifying our assertions so that they match the levels of epistemic support which ground

---

1 I take believing that  $p$  to be more or less identical to judging that  $p$  is true. Such a judgment may either be latent and dispositional or occurrent. I take hoping that  $p$  to entail believing that  $p$  has a non-negligible probability of being true, and desiring that  $p$  is true. Hoping  $p$  is incompatible with both knowing  $p$  and knowing  $p$  is false. (Rizzieri 2013) Finally, I think of accepting that  $p$  along the lines marked out by Jonathan Cohen. Consider, "...to accept that  $p$  is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that  $p$  - i.e. of including that proposition or rule among one's premises for deciding what to do or think at a particular context." (1992, 4).

2 Consider these words from C.S. Lewis regarding the significance of his original decision to attend worship services, "As soon as I became a theist I started attending my parish church on Sundays and my college chapel on weekdays; not because I believed in Christianity, nor because I thought the difference between it and simple theism a small one, but because I thought one ought to "fly one's flag" by some unmistakable overt sign. I was acting in obedience to a (perhaps mistaken) sense of honor." (1955, 220-221) The casual observer of Lewis' actions would assume that Lewis had converted to a form of Christianity and not merely to theism. Yet, Lewis had made the choice of declaring his theism by undertaking a course of action which would naturally cause one to suspect he had embraced Christianity.

them? The goal of making an assertion is typically to express whatever hopes, beliefs, desires, and commitments one has. To assert is to speak one's mind. (Bach, 2005, McGrath, 2010) Therefore, we cannot address questions regarding whether it is appropriate to express unqualified assertions such as "God exists", or "Jesus is the son of God" under conditions of epistemic ignorance without also discussing whether it is appropriate to flat-out believe such assertions under conditions of ignorance.

The meaning of the word "appropriate" is indeterminate in this context as one could have in mind questions of purely epistemic appropriateness, or a kind of practical appropriateness which bears a complex relationship to both moral and epistemic appropriateness. Let me state at the outset that the type of appropriateness I have in mind is this practical type which has moral, sub-moral prudential, and epistemic dimensions.<sup>3</sup> I do not desire to provide a rich characterization of this notion of practical appropriateness, but my meaning will be sufficiently clear as we proceed given the types of advantages I allude to in regards to qualifying one's assertions and hence molding one's underlying noetic structure in a particular direction. More specifically, I want to paint a picture of some of the advantages of merely hoping, as opposed to believing outright, that a variety of *unknown* religiously significant propositions are true and regulating one's assertions accordingly. The advantages I focus on surround the fact that such hope guided assertions are likely to develop the spiritual dimensions of one's personality in a healthier, because more realistic and existentially invested, direction. Furthermore, such hope-guided assertions are far less likely to be irresponsible.

---

3 Terence Cuneo has recently argued that there are distinctly epistemic norms which either are or generate categorical reasons to believe in accord with the levels of epistemic support one has for a proposition. By 'categorical' he has in mind the idea that such norms do not depend on the beliefs, goals or desires of either particular agents or social groups of which they are apart. (2007, esp. ch. 2) I agree with Cuneo regarding the existence of *sui generis* epistemic norms, but I do not have a well-formed opinion on the authority such norms possess in isolation from the prudential and moral norms which they partially constitute, and if aspects of the recent literature on pragmatic encroachment is correct, are partially constituted by. My arguments will focus on the claim that we have good practical reasons to follow the dictates of various knowledge and justification norms of belief and assertion. Hence, I need not take a stand on whatever authority to regulate belief and assertion such norms have as distinctly epistemic norms.

For the purposes of pursuing this exploration of religious hope, belief and assertion let us note the following assumptions:

(A1) Many historically orthodox Christian beliefs which form the core content of many a person's faith are neither known to be true nor known to be false.

(A2) Knowledge is the norm of belief and assertion in the sense that ideally we would only believe propositions which we know to be true when the goal of doing so is to believe or assert that which is true.

(A3) Justification of a broadly internalist type is the norm of belief and assertion in the sense that it is the most effective way to pursue the knowledge norm of belief and assertion.

The first assumption regarding the epistemic status of core Christian beliefs is what motivates this essay. If we were to possess knowledge that God exists, that Jesus rose from the dead, and other religiously significant propositions then the question of what our doxastic attitude towards such propositions should be would be a settled matter. Firm and fixed belief, and the corresponding unqualified assertions of those beliefs, would be the appropriate response in all but very anomalous circumstances. Even though my focus is on propositions which state tenets of the Christian tradition, the points I make about religious assertion should generalize.

Assumption two is a statement of a "knowledge norm of belief and assertion." The epistemological literature on this and related norms is rather robust. (e.g. Hawthorne, 2004, Hawthorne and Stanley, 2008, Lackey, 2007, Williamson, 2000) I do not have space to do anything more than briefly describe the content of such norms by giving examples, and note my own convictions regarding a practical dimension of what motivates norms of this type.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the content of such norms, consider the following statement of a knowledge norm of assertion which is both common in the literature, and is one I find plausible under a variety of widely instantiated conditions which I note below:

---

4 I have a lot more to say in regards to these norms in my (Rizzieri 2013).

KNA: One should assert that  $p$  only if one knows that  $p$ . (Lackey, 2007)<sup>5</sup>

As I have tried to capture in my statement of (A2), the knowledge norm of assertion is a norm only in the sense that knowing is the highest ideal for asserting when the goal is to express what is true. Of course, some of our assertions are geared towards other purposes such as inducing laughter, deceiving a foe, or providing emotional comfort. Yet, when the goal of assertion is to communicate true information, it is an ideal to assert only what one knows for a variety of reasons.

First, as Peter Unger has argued, when one asserts that  $p$  one typically represents oneself as knowing that  $p$ . (Unger, 1975) If someone were to ask you where the nearest gas station is, and you respond “just around the corner”, they would naturally take you to know it is just around the corner. Second, as Gilbert Harman (1980) has argued, knowledge that  $p$  marks the cessation of active inquiry concerning the truth of  $p$ .

Hence, when we assert an idea to others, and are hence presenting ourselves as knowing the idea is true, we are implicitly communicating to that person that they need inquire no further. Hence, asserting what one does not know when one knows one does not know, both misrepresents one’s own cognitive state and causes others to rely on information which is not as well-grounded as they may think. This is why asserting without knowing (when one knows one does not know) is deceptive, and when important ideas are in play, negligent. Now, of course one can only judge whether or not one has knowledge that  $p$  by attending to the level of epistemic justification one has for that  $p$ . This is why I have labeled KNA a norm which states an ideal

---

5 Lackey argues that this norm is not quite right as there are cases in which one fails to know that  $p$  because one fails to believe that  $p$  even though her evidence supports that  $p$ . Under such conditions one should assert in accord with her evidence even if one does not believe what one is asserting. I agree with Lackey that if there were to be a split between what one believes and what one’s evidence indicates that it would be better to assert what one’s evidence indicates. This is one reason why I don’t think this norm is regulative. There is a more specific norm, the justification norm of assertion, which both overrides the knowledge norm whenever they come into conflict, and is the proper norm to follow when one is attempting to follow the knowledge norm. Yet, I still hold that it ought to be everyone’s goal to assert only what they know when the goal of making an assertion is to convey the truth. This follows from the idea that knowledge is also the norm of belief, and that when one asserts one is making the content of one’s mind known.

outcome, and the justification norm to which we will now turn a regulative norm.<sup>6</sup>

Assumption three is a statement of a “justification norm of belief and assertion.” We can state the justification norm as a close parallel to the knowledge norm:

JNA: One should assert that  $p$  only if one is justified in believing that  $p$ .

As I have stated, the justification norm is what Alvin Goldman has called a regulative epistemic norm in that it guides our behavior (see n. 5). (1978) Given fallibilism about knowledge, one can have knowledge level justification that a belief is true and yet fail to have knowledge because that belief is in fact false. Yet, when this happens, it is still the case that the agent in question has either believed or asserted responsibly if she has done so in accord with her evidence. I am focusing on an internal justification norm here because, especially when we are dealing with questions which we have had the opportunity to reflect on at length, we typically discern whether or not we know the answer to such a question by assessing our evidence for the various possible answers. Hence, the justification norm which I have stated is one which involves an internal rationality requirement.

In what follows I shed some light on why these norms are especially important in spiritual contexts where maximally important questions are being entertained. As we shall see acting in accord with the justification norm of assertion, in pursuit of the knowledge norm, promotes epistemic humility, promotes responsible acts of assertion, and increases one’s awareness of the role her passionate nature is playing in regards to the various religiously significant commitments one holds.

## II. HOPE, BELIEF AND RESPONSIBLE ASSERTION

Consider the following list of statements:

---

6 The relationship between KNA and JNA is a lot like the relationship between a utilitarian principle which states a good action (ideal outcome), and a related principle which states a right action (responsibly undertaken one). Whereas a good action is one which maximizes good consequences, a right action is one which is most likely to achieve those consequences. Hence, the principle stating the right action would be the regulative one.

(S1) I *believe* God exists.

(S2) I *believe* God is more concerned with the right of the Jewish people to live in Israel than God is with the welfare of the Palestinian people.

(S3) I *believe* God disapproves of homosexuality.

(S4) I *believe* God wants me to serve the world as a doctor in a third world country.

(S5) I *believe* God wants all of us to pursue economic justice for the poor.

Now compare (S1)–(S5) with these parallel propositions:

(S1') I *hope* God exists.

(S2') I *hope* God is more concerned with the right of the Jewish people to live in Israel than God is with the welfare of the Palestinian people.

(S3') I *hope* God disapproves of homosexuality.

(S4') I *hope* God wants me to serve the world as a doctor in a third world country.

(S5') I *hope* God wants all of us to pursue economic justice for the poor.

These two sets of propositions which concern the doxastic attitudes one has towards five different religiously significant ideas feel very different when contemplated. A brief phenomenological comparison reveals that having a spiritual or religious hope essentially involves a personal investment in the form of a desire for what is hoped for to obtain, whereas belief does not. This renders hoping that *p* a more vulnerable and invested state of affairs than believing that *p*. This shouldn't be surprising once we get clear on what hope is. If common speech is to be our guide, hoping that a proposition is true is incompatible with either knowing that proposition is true or knowing that it is false. When one discovers she has just been accepted to the college of her

choice she can no longer hope to be accepted. Similarly, she cannot hope to be accepted once she knows she has been rejected either. Hope also has a desire component. When we hope that either a specific idea is true or that a state of affairs will obtain, we want that idea to be true or desire the obtainment of that state of affairs.

Consider (S2) and (S2') in particular. A North American Christian whom accepts an interpretation of the relevant Biblical passages which entails that Israel belongs to the Jewish people until the second coming may sincerely believe that this is the case, and act and speak accordingly, even if she does not have strong feelings on the matter either way. Alternatively, one may have strong feeling on the matter, but feel fully entitled to such feelings because one is convinced her beliefs are true. If such a person retains an unfettered belief on this topic, it would be easy for her to fail to feel the full import of acting in accordance with such beliefs given what is at stake for both Jewish and Palestinian persons. This in turn could lead to many missed opportunities for peace-making activities, and spiritual growth which often accompanies encountering moral ambiguity. Such unfettered belief can also lead to irresponsible acts of assertion.

Regarding irresponsibility, if one really does not know either that the Bible is generally authoritative or that one's interpretation of the relevant passages is correct due to a deficiency in one's epistemic position regarding the veracity of one's interpretation then one should qualify one's assertions accordingly. Failure to do so could cause one to persuade others to (for example) vote for a political candidate whose agenda is actually harmful to both Jews and Palestinians in that it promotes the goal of total victory for one side and hence encourages an ongoing state of war. Practicing the ancient philosophical art of taking stock of how likely it actually is that one's beliefs are true, and regulating one's actions which stem from that belief accordingly, is a form of acting responsibly when acting on a belief has morally significant consequences. Notice that even if one cannot help but have an over-weening felt sense of confidence that the belief in question is true, one can still attend to one's evidence and see if there is a disconnect between one's level

of confidence and that evidence. One can then choose to regulate her actions accordingly. Assertion, unlike belief, is under our direct voluntary control.<sup>7</sup>

### III. HOPE, AMBIGUITY, AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

When one fails to attend to the warrant they have for acting on spiritually and morally significant beliefs, one misses out on an opportunity to struggle with the moral and factual ambiguities inherent in any complex social justice issue such as those involved in the ongoing Jewish/Palestinian conflict. The sense of having the moral high ground which comes with simply thinking one is right often causes one to fail to struggle with the very sorts of ambiguities which enable us to escape our own dogmatic slumbers. This can lead to complacency and shallowness. Continuing on with our example, it is the recognition of the presence of legitimate competing interests which almost forces one who is operating from within the Christian tradition to bring Christian teachings concerning the importance of reconciliation between divided cultures, and the role of the follower of Jesus as a peacemaker, to bear on how one should respond to this issue.

This move towards compromise and reconciliation is most often instigated by just such a recognition of competing claims. The individual who follows JNA, and over time cultivates an intellectual character which is such that her degrees of belief are more responsive to her evidence, grows in her ability to empathize with those who she is inclined to disagree with on important matters. This humility is one root out of which a peacemaking mentality can grow. If Thomas Merton is correct when he consistently identifies charity as the essential component of the Christian duty to love one's neighbor, and if it is the self-satisfied and triumphalist attitude which a certain type of religious person often has which stifles such charity, then learning to follow the dictates of the justification norm of assertion (which we can control) is

---

7 Steven Reynolds and John Bishop have argued that we can make sense of judging others for believing what they should not, even though they lack significant voluntary control over such believings, by interpreting such judgments as primarily pertaining to the assertions and other actions which flow from their misguided beliefs. This is because one does typically have control over one's actions in response to her own beliefs. (Bishop 2006, ch. 2, Reynolds 2011) I also argue in defense of this and related ideas in my (Rizzieri 2013).

the strong medicine such a person needs to reform her inner cognitive life (which we have less control over) in the direction of humility. (Merton, 1955)

In a passage of Merton's which I can no longer locate, Merton quotes Karl Jaspers to the effect that one potentially negative consequence of having knowledge regarding an existentially significant proposition is that one can in a sense *hide* behind such knowledge. The relevant sense of "hiding" involves having an objective and impersonal basis for one's convictions which does not require the subject to struggle with that which is believed and does not afford the individual an opportunity to take stock of a non-cognitive ground which reveals significant dimensions of one's personality.

Earlier I mentioned hoping that  $p$  entails both believing that  $p$  is to some degree plausible, and desiring that  $p$  is true. It is this desire component of hope which Merton and Jaspers may have had in mind when they speak of a more subjective (in the sense of deeply personal) ground of one's commitments that reflects deeper dimensions of one's character.

That there are existential advantages, in regards to one's personality development, of living in partial ignorance is predicated on the idea that when we realize our convictions are not grounded by sufficient epistemic reasons, we are forced to attend to non-rational factors which nourish those convictions. This can, and indeed often does, lead to an increase in self-knowledge. More specifically, when we realize we do not believe an idea simply because that idea is true we become aware of the value assumptions, associations, desires, and fears which may or may not be partially responsible for our action guiding beliefs. In contrast, a self-acknowledged mere hope that an idea is true is much more likely to cause one to come to grips with these passional grounds of belief which emanate from deeper parts of the human personality than one's intellect.

Perhaps there are some resources for theodicy, especially in regards to the problem of divine hiddenness, in these comments. To be partially in the dark and partially in the light, and to acknowledge that one is in the shade, is a powerful impetus for the development of a healthy religious personality

which is complex enough to interact with the complexities and ambiguities of our current world.<sup>8</sup>

Similar thoughts apply to (S1) and (S1'). An invitation to explore one's belief that God exists is an invitation to explore reasons which may or may not be deeply personal in the existential sense. In contrast, an invitation to explore one's hope that God exists is an invitation to explore the desires, values, and ultimate set of concerns that one grapples with in relation to the divine.

(S4), (S5) and their counterparts are interesting because they concern attitudes towards propositions and actions which are widely considered to be noble and good whether or not there is a God who is actually leading one to pursue those actions. One's attitude towards propositions of the form 'God wants me to X' can have a profound effect on how one goes about deciding the course of one's life. Once one believes outright God is leading him or her to be a doctor or pursue economic justice in a specific setting, this belief has a way of dominating, psychologically speaking, whatever other reasons and motives one has. One may feel a duty to obey that sense of conviction and run the risk of shutting down reflection on one's other values and experiences which have led to the conviction that one must act in such a specific way. Regarding assertion, if one conveys with full confidence that God is leading one to pursue a specific course of action to others, this has the potential to silence their much needed feedback.

We all too often, especially when we are young, act on strong convictions which may just as easily have arisen in the soul as a compensation for a wounded ego, as they may have arisen from either God's leading or the legitimate discovery of a vocational direction which was latent in one's personality. Premature belief regarding what courses of action in life God wants one to pursue can lead to adopting a pattern of life which is ultimately disillusioning and unfulfilling because it fails to cohere with one's unique personality and skills.

In contrast, if a person has a hope that God may very well be leading her to pursue a specific course of action, she is likely to pursue additional support

---

<sup>8</sup> John Hick's notion of 'epistemic distance' in the context of his own theodicy explores some of the possible roles which ignorance may play in character development (1966). See also Poston and Dougherty (2007).

that this a good decision by exploring one's personal strengths and weakness, getting feedback from other persons, or seriously considering alternative courses of action.

### III. CONCLUSION

This contrast between hope and belief in religious contexts in terms of how these two attitudes are likely to affect one's decision making and exploration of the grounds (epistemic and non-epistemic) one has for accepting a religiously significant proposition serves to highlight the importance of various knowledge and justification norms of belief, action, and assertion which have been proposed in the contemporary literature. As we have seen, obeying the justification norm of belief and assertion in regards to propositions which concern both general truths about God and specific truths about one's own vocation can have the effect of promoting the goods of epistemic and moral humility, promoting responsible acts of assertion, and increasing one's level of self-knowledge.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bach, Kent. 2005. "The Emperor's New Knows." *Contextualism in Philosophy*. eds. G. Preyer and G. Peter. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).
- Bishop, John. 2007. *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).
- Cohen, Jonathan. 1992. *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance*. (New York, NY: Clarendon Press).
- Cuneo, Terence. 2007. *The Normative Web*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).
- Goldman, Alvin. 1978. "Epistemics: The Regulative Theory of Cognition." *Journal of Philosophy* 75, 509-523.
- Harman, Gilbert. 1980. "Reasoning and Evidence one does not Possess." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5:1, 163-182.
- Hawthorne, John. 2004. *Knowledge and Lotteries*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).
- Hawthorne, John and Stanley, Jason. 2008. "Knowledge and Action." *Journal of Philosophy* 105:10, 571-590.

- Hick, John. 1978. "Evil and the God of Love." (New York, NY: MacMillan Press).
- Lackey, Jennifer. 2007. "Norms of Assertion." *Nous* 41:4, 594–626.
- Lewis, C.S. 1955. *Surprised by Joy*. (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books).
- McGrath, Matthew. "Contextualism and Intellectualism." *Philosophical Perspectives* 24 (1) 383–405.
- Merton, Thomas. 1955. *No Man is an Island*. (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books).
- Poston, Ted and Trent Dougherty. 2007. "Divine Hiddenness and the Nature of Belief." *Religious Studies* 43, 183–198.
- Reynolds, Steven. 2011. "Doxastic Voluntarism and the Function of Epistemic Evaluations." *Erkenntnis* 75:1, 19–35.
- Rizzieri, Aaron. 2013. *Pragmatic Encroachment, Religious Belief and Practice*. (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan Press).
- Unger, Peter. 1975. *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).
- Williamson, Timothy. 2000. *Knowledge and Its Limits*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).