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The Questionable Nature of Religious Testimony

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Religion is something which has been prominent throughout history and modern times, with many different kinds and denominations. From Hinduism to Christianity, religion has a wide reach across the globe. Within many religions, there are individuals who others learn from. This idea was popularised more so within Western organised religions such as Christianity. At the forefront are those deemed as experts - perhaps not in the traditional sense of the word - such as the Pope, priests, and other leaders in worship. Congregations will frequently look to these individuals for guidance, and to assist in the formulation and development of religious beliefs. These religious beliefs, however, also have the capacity to shape other kinds of beliefs. The religious beliefs of an individual - or rather, an epistemic agent - have the capability to be reflected in various behaviours and actions outside of worshipping a higher power. The question is, should there be reliance on the testimony of these supposed religious experts? I will aim to argue against this idea being a valid or beneficial way of developing beliefs and knowledge, largely from a local reductionist perspective.

Epistemic experts are individuals in a particular field whom others believe as trustworthy due to their experiences. The experiences of experts tend to fall in line with things such as having conducted research, maintaining a particular standard of education, and/or holding a job within a specific area. In realms such as medicine and science, there is relative ease in identifying the credentials of supposed experts. One would more readily be inclined to listen to medical advice from their general practitioner who has spent years acquiring a knowledge base, and typically more years applying this knowledge, over an acquaintance employed in an area such as the culinary arts. Individuals in areas like medicine and science can study things that can be readily observed and reaffirmed through means pertaining to the senses; their focus is derived from what can be perceived and supported by others in their field and a variety of technologies. In these instances, we are given justifiable reasons to listen to the testimony of others. In these situations, "the layman is the epistemic inferior of the expert (in matters in which the expert is expert)" (Hardwig, 1985, p. 336). An individual may not have acquired information through their objective pursuits, but there is little to no reason not to believe in what is being relayed by those with proven credentials.

Those deemed to be experts within the scope of religious institutions are somewhat different in that they do not appear to follow the traditional definition of what an expert truly is. There may be a reason to believe that there may be no true experts, only reputational ones. Goldman (2001) defines a reputational expert as "someone widely believed to be an expert (in the objective sense), whether or not he really is one" (p. 91). Followers of Catholicism, for example, are led by the Pope, cardinals, archbishops, priests, and deacons. Congregations will look to these individuals to assist in formulating and developing their religious beliefs. However, these religious beliefs will also play a significant role in shaping beliefs in other areas. These religious beliefs can extend to how an individual behaves, the things they value, and how they treat others.

How some churches are structured reinforces the idea that the formation of a belief system is best served without counterarguments present. Children are taught to follow the Bible's teachings or various scriptures. These teachings may be presented through pre-determined forms of media and by particular religious community members. Many churches offer Sunday School or other youth groups. Through these groups, youth are encouraged to follow a righteous, religious path and may even be encouraged to direct inquiries to particular individuals within their community. These specific individuals - typically pastors and other leaders - are deemed to be experts, and as such, their testimony may be viewed as more valuable and trustworthy. There may even be instances where community members, especially younger ones, may acquire testimony pre-emptively. According to Zagzebski, pre-emption is, "the fact that an authority has a belief p is a reason for me to believe p that replaces my other reasons relevant to believing p and is not simply added to them" (2012, p. 107). Frequently, in cases where pre-emption occurs, the speaker is regarded by the listener as a type of authority of whatever domain they are discussing. In terms of religiosity, it may prove more beneficial to adopt a model proposed by Jennifer Lackey. Lackey has discussed the expert-as-advisor model, where the speaker "does not give authoritative testimony or pre-emptive reasons for belief; rather, her testimony provides evidence for believing a proposition and, in this way, offers guidance" (2018, p. 238).

The American Civil Liberties Union, a non-profit organization, has acknowledged that "individuals and institutions are claiming a right to discriminate - by refusing to provide services to women and LGBT people - based on religious objections" (n.d., para 1). While the ACLU does not state which religious sects, in particular, have been involved in these claims, a number have historically been critical of select groups of people. While it is clear that non-epistemic harm is

present, it can be argued that there is likely to be epistemic harm in these situations as well. There is reason to believe that if an individual were to utilize their religious beliefs to discriminate against an individual, this would result in cases of not only the application of a credibility deficit to that individual but also be directly connected to testimonial injustice. In this case, there must be testimonial injustice as "we are committed to a definition of testimonial injustice as necessarily involving prejudice, with the central case involving identity prejudice" (Fricker, 2007, p. 41). What this statement means is that at its core, there is prejudice against the individuals' identity; in this case, the identity would be related to sexual orientation and/or gender. Within her 2007 work, Fricker details epistemic harm because there is an unfair inability to contribute to a societal pool of knowledge, which serves as a detriment to both the speaker and the hearer.

Testimony can be a valuable method of obtaining knowledge in the right circumstance. There is justified reason to doubt those who are not experts in a particular field, and one would be justified in acknowledging the knowledge base of those who are. Nevertheless, it may be argued that social factors can play a role in determining the credibility of a speaker and their testimony. This view lines up with the idea that testimony can be reduced locally if there is a compelling reason unrelated to the testimony itself to believe the speaker is trustworthy in a particular instance (Fricker, 1995). Reductionism appears to open the door for the hearer to acknowledge the value of testimony but still maintain some form of skepticism. For reductionism, it is essential for the hearer to "trust in his or her own powers of observation (as well, perhaps, as his or her own powers of inductive reasoning from those observations)" (Coady, 2012, p. 34).

Perhaps there is a reason for an individual within a church to trust the words of their pastor when they preach about scripture. If the individual perceives this expert within their community to be trustworthy, what reason would there be to disregard their testimony? When one looks at situations such as receiving medical advice from a doctor, or even a friend relaying information that they got a new pet, there are verification methods. However, when it comes to belief in a God, the same verification methods are absent. Also notable is that many different denominations exist, meaning that there is some form of deviation in the belief system. Because of this deviation, there is reason to believe that, at minimum, some aspects of religion may be based upon interpretation by the institution or the individual. Various members of one congregation can hold differing views, despite hearing the same testimony. If one were to rely upon the expert's testimony within their church regarding religious teachings, is this truly a form of knowledge?

While not all religions or churches make efforts to dissuade their members from pursuing knowledge and information that may conflict with or contradict their teachings, it is within reason to state that there exist instances of this occurring. These efforts and cases of reinforcing the pre-emptive belief of testimony by experts - or perhaps, even reputational experts - are questionable. Replacing a belief with those expressed by another, based on perceiving this second person as being substantially trustworthy or more well-versed in a particular area, may prove damaging if one neglects to follow a local reductionist view of trusting one's observations. Overt skepticism could prove problematic in its attempts to explain why we should not trust the testimony of experts, yet a global reductionist view may prove too grand in its claims. Assessing the legitimacy of individuals' status as experts may prove beneficial, and treating experts in some areas as advisors compared to authorities like Lackey may result in a positive outcome. Maintaining awareness of the possible epistemic harm that can come from some religious beliefs, especially beliefs developed from testimony, may assist in the reduction of pre-emptive beliefs in that particular area.

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