

## Ignorance and the Religious Life

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**Abstract:** How does ignorance affect the religious life? There is good reason to think that the religious life is shaped as much by what we do *not* know as by what we do. This paper offers a broad taxonomy of the various roles that ignorance plays in both religious theory and religious practice. It shows that ignorance can be marshalled as evidence both for and against theoretical conceptions of the divine, but it is not decisive in either case. Furthermore, ignorance appears compatible with a life of religious virtue and a life of religious faith. The broad conclusion of the paper is that our current religious ignorance need not paralyze us.

**Keywords:** ignorance, religion, faith, God, knowledge, evidence, virtue

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## Ignorance and the Religious Life

*For Life is a fire burning along a piece of string—or is it a fuse to a powder keg which we call God?—and the string is what we don't know, our Ignorance, and the trail of ash, which, if a gust of wind does not come, keeps the structure of the string, is History, man's Knowledge...*

~Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*<sup>i</sup>

### 1. Ignorance and Religion

There is debate over the nature of ignorance. Some philosophers argue that ignorance is a lack of knowledge (e.g. Le Morvan 2011, 2012, 2013). This is the Standard View of ignorance. On this view, ignorance is compatible with true belief. Others argue that ignorance is a lack of true belief (e.g. Peels 2010, 2011, 2012). This is the New View of ignorance. On this view, ignorance is incompatible with true belief. Since a lack of true belief entails a lack of knowledge, any mental state that counts as ignorance on the truth view will also count as ignorance on the knowledge view. But it is possible for a mental state to count as ignorance on the knowledge view but not on the truth view. For example, one might have a true belief but have arrived at the truth in a Gettier case.

Which of these two conceptions of ignorance we employ will affect our thinking about the relation between religion and ignorance. For example, on the truth view, if it is true that God exists, then it will follow that many religious believers are not ignorant of that fact. Indeed, it will be the non-theists who are ignorant for they shall lack true beliefs about divine reality. Many of these believers may not *know* that God exists, but if that's not required to avoid ignorance, then they can meet the test.

There is more likely to be a deep and pervasive religious ignorance on the knowledge view. This is because there are more conditions that have to be met to avoid ignorance. For this reason, this essay assumes the more traditional, knowledge view of ignorance. Ignorance is a lack of knowledge. On this conception, it is at least initially plausible that many religious people are ignorant: they believe a great many religious propositions that they do not know. These propositions may be true. The religious likely have faith that these propositions hold. The believers might even have some justification for the religious propositions in question. But, given the presence of defeaters, the reliance on untrustworthy testimony, etc., it is likely that a great many of these beliefs will fall short of the non-accidental true beliefs required for knowledge.

How does this ignorance affect the religious life? A careful investigation would reveal the role played by ignorance in both religious theory and religious practice. The point of the paper is not to offer an argument for a particular thesis but to sketch a broad taxonomy of the various roles that ignorance plays in the religious life. This is important since the religious life is shaped as much by what we do *not* know as by what we do.

### 2. Ignorance and Religious Theory

Plato's cave is an image of ignorance. We live underground and confront the mere shadows of reality. Enlightenment requires a painful and difficult struggle of breaking free and seeing the light of day for the first time. The questions investigated by philosophy are not prone to easy answers, leaving us in ignorance much of the time. This is even more so the case with philosophy of religion. If there is a

supernatural reality, it is plausible to assume that it would be far removed from our everyday experiences. As such, our theoretical grasp on the divine is bound to come up short. For example, if there is a God, it is plausible that we would be deeply ignorant of many of his reasons for acting in the world. This section surveys the role that ignorance has played in theorizing both about the *existence* of a divine reality, the *nature* of divine reality and the *relation* between humans and divine reality.

## 2.1 Ignorance and the Existence of Divine Reality

Is there a supernatural reality or is the natural world all that there is? Not surprisingly, human ignorance plays a key dialectical role in the evaluation of arguments both for and against the existence of the divine. This is especially clear in the development of philosophy of religion in the West where philosophers have been pre-occupied with arguments for and against the existence of God. Without making a claim to a comprehensive survey, here are two examples of ignorance being invoked in favor of theism or atheism and two examples of ignorance being invoked to block arguments for theism or atheism.

*Example 1: From ignorance to theism.* Historically, one of the most common ways of justifying the existence of the divine has been through what has been derogatorily called the “God-of-the-Gaps” strategy. This strategy finds some data that cannot be explained (e.g. lightening, the seasons, the existence of life, etc.) and then posits God as the explainer. It’s obvious how ignorance plays a role in this sort of justification for the divine. It’s also obvious that this strategy will commit an illicit appeal to ignorance unless the inference is framed in a careful way (more about this below with regard to fine-tuning arguments).

However, ignorance also plays a key role in “making room” for one of the most contentious arguments for theistic belief, namely Pascal’s Wager (e.g. Jordan 2006). Pascal’s Wager (and similar prudential arguments for theistic belief) purports to show that it is in our best interest to believe in God regardless of the available evidence. While there are many ways to read the cryptic passages that give rise to the Wager, a standard rendering of the argument is in the form of a utility calculus:

	God exists	God does not exist
Believe that God exists	Infinite gain	wash
Do not believe that God exists	Infinite loss	wash

The idea is that if God exists, theists will receive all of the goods of the afterlife whereas non-theists will not. On the other hand, if God does not exist, there is no substantial difference between the goods secured by a theist vs. a non-theist. And even if we are in no position to tell whether it is likely that God exists, as long as there is a finite chance that he exists and infinite rewards to be gained, it makes sense to bet on God. So even in the absence of evidence for the existence of God, there is still a powerful, prudential reason to be a theist.

*Example 2: From ignorance to atheism.* Some philosophers seem to think that human ignorance renders atheism the dialectical *status quo*. In other words, they think that our ignorance is a reasonable basis to deny the existence of the divine (e.g. Flew 1976, Mion 2012). However, this kind of move would not be accepted in many other contexts. For example, the status quo should not be to disbelieve that

there is life elsewhere in the universe until we get evidence otherwise. In our ignorance, the most reasonable position is to be agnostic on whether or not there is life elsewhere in the universe. For this reason, most philosophers seem to think that agnosticism about the divine is a more reasonable *status quo* and that the dialectical burden is on those who would either affirm or deny the existence of the divine.

The argument from divine hiddenness is the most sophisticated argument that invokes human ignorance as a premise in an argument for atheism (e.g. Schellenberg 1993). The gist of the argument is that the absence of evidence for God constitutes evidence for the absence of God. A very basic version of the argument proceeds as follows:

1. If there were a God, reasonable people would not be ignorant about his existence.
2. But reasonable people ARE ignorant about the existence of God.
3. Therefore, there is not a God.

The defense of premise one rests on the idea that a relationship with God would be among the very highest goods achievable and a relationship with someone requires belief in that person's existence. So given that God is both perfectly loving and perfectly powerful, he would ensure that all reasonable persons would have enough evidence so that belief in God is reasonable. The defense of premise two appeals to the apparent fact that there are many, many reasonable, thoughtful people who are capable of belief in God and yet are ignorant about his existence due to a shortage of evidence. These people may even have true belief concerning God, but this belief doesn't amount to knowledge and hence is ignorance. And according to the argument from divine hiddenness, this ignorance about the existence of God provides us with a reason to think that there is no such being.

*Example 3: Using ignorance to block an argument for theism.* Not only can ignorance be invoked as a reason to be a theist or atheist, it can also be used as a defensive maneuver in the face of arguments for theism or atheism. One prominent example in the current literature concerns cosmic versions of the argument from design (e.g. Swinburne 2004, chapter 8). Sometimes called the fine-tuning argument, this argument starts from a premise about the fine-tuning of the universe and concludes that a powerful designer like God is the best explanation of the fine-tuning data. Very roughly, the fine-tuning data is a collection of all of the facts discovered by scientists working in cosmology regarding the life-permitting parameters of the physical cosmos. It appears that there are many, many variables that, had they been any other way, would not have allowed for life in the universe. Robin Collins (1999) provides a standard example of this sort of data:

If the initial explosion of the big bang had differed in strength by as little as one part in  $10^{60}$ , the universe would have either quickly collapsed back on itself, or expanded too rapidly for stars to form. In either case, life would be impossible. (p. 49)

How can we explain the fine-tuning data? Only three possibilities are salient: chance, necessity, or design. The fine-tuning argument attempts to show that design is the best option.

However, design arguments of this sort are often countered by appeals to human ignorance. The idea is that we know too little about the basic structure of the universe or about the conditions for life to make any grand pronouncements about how best to explain the fine-tuning data. Here are two

examples of this strategy. First, the design argument relies on the claim that the parameters of the universe could have been different. But perhaps this appearance of contingency is really just our ignorance of deep facts about the parameters of the universe. If it turns out that the parameters of the universe could not have been different, then the design hypothesis is undermined. Second, the design argument relies on the claim that only a handful of universe parameter combinations are life-permitting. But perhaps we are not entitled to this assumption. If it turns out that radically different life forms are possible, perhaps the range of universes that is life-permitting grows substantially. In either case, our ignorance of the deep facts about the universe and life offer avenues to undermine fine-tuning arguments.

*Example 4: Using ignorance to block an argument for atheism.* One of the most common arguments for atheism is the argument from evil (e.g. van Inwagen 2006). Suppose the world is governed by a perfectly good and perfectly powerful deity like God. It would be surprising to find that world occupied by the amount, kind and distribution of evil that we find in the actual world. A very basic version of the argument proceeds as follows:

1. If there were a God, the world would not contain gratuitous evil.
2. But the world DOES contain gratuitous evil.
3. Therefore, there is not a God.

While the argument can be made more sophisticated, something very much like this underlies the atheism of many people in the West.

However, theists have responded to the argument in a number of ways. Relevant to our purposes here is a family of responses termed ‘skeptical theism’ (e.g. McBrayer 2010). In brief, the skeptical theist is a theist who thinks that no one is justified in believing that any given instance of evil is gratuitous. The idea is that we are simply ignorant of too much of moral reality to draw an inference as to whether an evil is necessary for some compensating good. Skeptical theists sometimes rely on analogies to make this point: just as a novice chess player watching a match shouldn’t assume that a particular chess move is worthless, so, too, humans looking around at the world shouldn’t assume that a particular evil is pointless. In both cases, if there is a master in control of the pieces, there would be many moves/evils that seemed pointless that were not. And if this general line of thought is correct, it appears to undermine the second premise of a general form of the argument from evil.

## **2.2 Ignorance and the Nature of Divine Reality**

The previous section canvassed attempts to invoke ignorance in premises for or rebuttals to arguments for divine reality, specifically God. Just as ignorance plays a key role in arguments for the *existence* of a divine reality, so too does ignorance play a key role in theorizing about the *nature* of that divine reality. For example, in the Christian tradition, St. Paul acknowledges our current ignorance of divine reality when he writes that “for now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face...” (I Corinthians 13:12). This section explores four prominent examples of the role of ignorance in shaping our thought about either the nature of divine reality or the relation between divine reality and the human world.

*Example 1: The Apophatic Tradition.* Virtually every major world religion includes a strand of theology known collectively as apophatic theology (*‘apophanai’* is Greek for ‘to say no’). The basic idea

is that human concepts fall short of the true nature of the divine. As a result, we cannot speak (or believe) truly about what the divine IS. Instead, we are limited to saying what the divine is NOT. In short, our ignorance of the true nature of the divine is utterly complete. The best we could ever come to know is what the divine is not. However, just as dust might show the form of an invisible man, so, too, might our claims about what the divine is not illuminate the form of the divine. We know indirectly through our ignorance.

Several Western religious thinkers turned toward apophatic theology in the wake of what they saw as blatant anthropomorphism in the theology of the Greek pantheon. Prominent examples of early church fathers include Pseudo-Dionysius, Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, and the Cappadocian fathers. For example, Gregory of Nazianzus wrote that “the only thing that could be comprehended about the incomprehensible divine nature was its ‘boundlessness’—what it was not rather than what it was,” (Pelikan 1993, p. 42).

The pendulum away from affirmative theology reached a peak in the Medieval period where apophatic reasoning was termed the *via negativa* (Latin for ‘the negative way’). While those working in the *via affirmativa* tradition attempt to say what God is really like, thinkers in the *via negativa* tradition demur and restrict themselves to claims about what God is not. The idea is that God in his true form is ineffable, and the application of finite concepts to an infinite being only results in confusion.<sup>ii</sup>

This negative tradition claims a grounding in the Jewish scriptures at least as early as Moses and the burning bush. When Moses asks who is sending him back to Egypt, the answer is “I am who I am” and nothing more. Maimonides, perhaps the greatest Jewish thinker in the medieval period, writes that:

Know that the negative attributes of God are the true attributes: they do not include any incorrect notions or any deficiency whatever in reference to God, while positive attributes imply polytheism, and are inadequate....[w]e cannot describe the Creator by any means except by negative attributes. (1956, p. 81)

And while many mystical strains of Christianity are obviously apophatic, the *via negativa* can still be found in contemporary theology (e.g. Marcus Borg’s *The God We Never Knew*). Despite this presence, it’s also probably fair to say that it plays a larger role in Orthodox Christian theology as compared to Roman Catholic or Protestant theology.

Apophaticism shows up in Eastern religions, too. Hindu philosophers are cagey about their descriptions of Atman and Brahman. On the one hand, Brahman is recognized as the ultimate reality. But what that reality is like becomes hard to say. Those working in the Advaita Vedanta tradition of Hinduism explicitly endorse our ignorance of divine reality by naming reality ‘Nirguna Brahman’: reality indescribable by human predicates. Similarly, philosophers working in Taoist tradition insist that our understanding of the divine is shrouded in ignorance. The first lines of the *Tao Te Ching* are as follows:

The Tao that can be told of is not the eternal Tao;  
The name that cannot be named is not the eternal name.  
The Nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth;  
The Named is the mother of all things. (Chan 1963 p. 97)

As soon as you apply a human concept to the divine, you're guaranteed to have gotten it wrong. Ignorance is at the heart of our theorizing about the nature of the divine.

*Example 2: Divine Reality as the Noumenon.* Kant famously argues that we cannot have unmediated metaphysical knowledge. Thus we are ignorant of reality as it exists outside of our own concepts. While we can know a great deal about how the world *appears* to us (the phenomenal realm), we know next to nothing about the world *as it is in itself* (the noumenal realm). In short, Kant insists that a perceived situation owes as much to the perceiver as to the world outside of the perceiver.

Several philosophers of religion have applied this insight to our understanding of divine reality. John Hick is the foremost contemporary example to have exploited this comparison (Hick 1989). According to Hick,

...the realization that the world, as we consciously perceive it, is partly our own construction leads directly to a differentiation between the world *an sich*, unperceived by anyone, and the world as it appears to, that is as it is perceived by, us. (p. 241)

As applied to divine reality, we might say that the divine being as it exists *an sich* may be different from the divine being as it appears to us. The result is that "...the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine reality which transcends all our varied visions of it," (pp. 235-6). Divine reality is the noumenon. The perceptions of the divine are the phenomena. In each case, the Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist are responding to the same ultimate divine reality, albeit this reality is perceived in radically different ways. So on the one hand, our grasp of the divine is steeped in ignorance. Our knowledge of the divine *as it exists in itself* is restricted to logical or formal properties like "exists." On the other hand, our grasp of the divine *as it is perceived* by humans is much deeper, although obviously relative to different religious communities. In this sense, our knowledge of the divine-as-perceived will include the attribution of a range of substantive properties like "is good," "created us," etc.

### **2.3 Ignorance and the Relation between Humans and Divine Reality**

The last two sections canvassed major roles that ignorance plays in arguments for the existence of a divine reality and arguments about the nature of divine reality. This final section on ignorance in religious theory will highlight two prominent cases in which ignorance plays a theoretical role in the relation between humans and divine reality.

*Example 1: The Freedom & Foreknowledge Debate.* The first two examples illustrate the role of ignorance in theorizing about the nature of divine reality. The following two examples illustrate the role of ignorance in religious theory more generally. At least in the West where the divine is portrayed as a person, the question of human freedom looms large in the face of divine foreknowledge. If acting freely requires the possibility to do otherwise and if infallible foreknowledge eliminates the possibility of acting otherwise, how can humans ever act freely given an omniscient being like God? Many philosophers, both historical and contemporary, have agreed that foreknowledge threatens genuine freedom (e.g. Hasker 1985).

While there are many purported solutions to the problem, one of the most serious contenders in contemporary philosophy of religion is a view known as open theism (e.g. Hasker 2004). According to open theism, God is ignorant of our future actions that are not necessitated by current states of affairs

plus the laws of nature. In other words, there are a great many things about the future that God does not know, and since he does not foreknow these things, all possibilities remain open for the human actors in question. Of course, it would be a very good thing to know what would happen in the future, so open theists owe an explanation for why a perfect, omniscient being would fail to have this knowledge. One standard explanation is that an omniscient being will know all that there is to know. However, when it comes to future actions, these facts are contingent upon human choices and so there is no fact yet to be known. To use Aristotle's example, it is neither true nor false that there will be a sea battle tomorrow. But since knowledge implies truth, there is nothing to be foreknown about the sea battle. Other open theists grant that future contingents have a truth value but insist that God remains ignorant of these truths in order to preserve the possibility of free action. This is a perfect example of ignorance being invoked to solve problems in religious theorizing.

*Example 2: The Nature of Salvation.* While European explorers of the New World undoubtedly had many different motivations, chief among them was a desire to evangelize the native peoples. This religious drive continues to the present day. For example, the Mormon (LDS) Church claims to have almost 100,000 missionaries in the field at any time.<sup>iii</sup> Why?

Theories of salvation vary widely among world religions, but historically a centerpiece in many of these religions is the view that ignorance is inimical to salvation. To be truly saved, one must truly believe. As long as one remained ignorant of divine reality, salvation was impossible. Thus the chief good that a missionary could deliver is the information needed to reach salvation. Knowledge (or at least true belief) is a requirement for avoiding damnation or achieving the beatific vision. And so ignorance plays a major theoretical role in religious theories of the afterlife.

In Christianity this understanding is motivated in no small part by "the Great Commission" in the gospel of Mark:

And [Jesus] said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned." (Mark 16:15-16)

This verse, among others, has been used to argue that true belief is necessary for salvation. This explains the preeminence of creeds and the attendant importance of orthodoxy in many religious traditions: heaven or hell hang in the balance.

However, just as some philosophers have defended the necessity of true belief for salvation, others have criticized it. The core critique is that praise and blame are typically reserved for features of one's life that are under one's control. For example, it makes sense to praise someone for his hard work but not for the color of his hair. Paired with the uncontroversial claim that we do not exercise direct voluntary control over our beliefs, this commonsense moral principle implies that we cannot be praised or blamed for our religious ignorance. Of course, this is not to deny that we often have *indirect* control over our beliefs. If I want to learn the capital of Kenya, I can consult an authoritative source. But whether my experience of the source gives rise to a belief about the capital of Kenya is beyond my control. The same goes for religious propositions: perhaps we can be held accountable for whether we carefully considered the evidence available from religious authorities. But whether these experiences give rise to religious belief is out of our control. And so, according to some philosophers, it is problematic to give ignorance a prominent role in determining afterlife goods.



On a related issue, just as ignorance of certain propositions might bar one from heaven, it might also be required to remain in heaven. For example, on the Christian conception of the beatific vision, the saved experience eternal bliss in the presence of God. But many philosophers of religion have wondered whether this eternal bliss were possible in the face of certain kinds of knowledge (e.g. Talbott 1990). For example, how could one be happy and content in heaven on the assumption that many of one's former friends and relatives suffered the torments of hell? One popular response to this objection is that the saved are purposefully kept ignorant about the fates of those consigned to hell (e.g. Craig 1991). And so while ignorance may play a theoretical role in determining where one exists in the afterlife, it may also play a theoretical role in determining the quality of that afterlife.

### **3. Ignorance and Religious Practice**

We have seen that ignorance plays many key roles in religious theory. How might ignorance affect religious practice? As with religious theory, ignorance is important both for the communal lives of religious people and also the lives of religious individuals as these individuals attempt to live out their faiths.

#### **3.1 Ignorance in Communal Religious Life**

Religious communities have often employed the ignorance of others to their advantage. In some cases, ignorance is essential for the survival of the communities in question. Easy examples include the early Christian church's efforts to keep the Roman authorities in ignorance and 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century efforts by Jewish communities in Europe to stay under the radar of anti-Semitic governments.

But in at least some cases, religious communities inculcate an ignorance even among their own congregations. Again, the early Christian church is an obvious example. Like something out of the *Da Vinci Code*, early church leaders sought to keep both outsiders and newly initiated Christians in the dark about many of the church's rituals and practices. This practice was much later termed the *disciplina arcani*: the arcane disciplines. According to the Catholic encyclopedia New Advent, the practice has its roots in the Christian scripture<sup>iv</sup>: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and turn and tear you to pieces," (Matthew 7:6). Some scholars have argued that this practice of concealing certain rituals and services led rather naturally to the growth of Christian mysticism in the early medieval period (e.g. Stroumsa 2005).

#### **3.2 Ignorance in the Individual Religious Life**

What role might ignorance play in the life of individual religious people? It is initially plausible that ignorance is an impediment to living a religiously virtuous life or a life of genuine religious faith. The virtuous religious person is not a person of doubt. The faithful religious person, it might be supposed, is a knower, not a doubter. But this initial presumption is too quick. This final section canvasses the role of ignorance in a life of religious virtue and a life of religious faith.

Regarding religious virtue, the *pro tanto* case against ignorance is based on an isomorphic case against ignorance with regard to moral virtue. In ethical theory, it is commonplace to assume that knowledge is a pre-requisite for exercising the moral virtues. Aristotle claims that, "[the virtuous agent] must be in a certain condition when he does [the virtuous action]; in the first place he must have knowledge; secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes; and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character," (*Nicomachean Ethics* II.4.1105a 31-34).

So it appears that knowledge is a necessary condition for virtuous action. Since religion is at least partly a normative endeavor, it is inevitable that there are certain character traits that function as virtues and others that function as vices. And just as ignorance is bad for the practice of ethical virtues, so, too, is ignorance bad for the practice of religious virtues.

But philosophers have challenged this picture of moral virtue as overly-intellectualized. Julia Driver (2001) argues that not only is knowledge not required for the exercise of all moral virtues but in fact knowledge is inimical to certain moral virtues. She argues for an entire class of virtues that she terms “virtues of ignorance” that include things like genuine modesty, blind charity (roughly seeing the best in others while ignoring the faults of others), impulsive courage, and a sort of forgiveness. In each case, she claims that full disclosure would eliminate the virtuous disposition. At least some recent experimental philosophy backs up this picture (e.g. Feltz and Cokely 2012). It turns out that ignorance does not rule out the attributions of virtue in many cases, and, even more surprising, ignorance can boost the odds of ascriptions of virtue in certain cases. Especially regarding cases of modesty and impulsive courage, respondents to surveys are somewhat more likely to attribute the virtue in question to an actor when it is stipulated that the actor is ignorant of certain facts.

Perhaps the same goes for religious virtues. As recounted in the Jewish and Christian traditions, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God had created them with an ignorance that rendered them better off to at least some extent. A loss of that ignorance left them shamed and homeless. Is that true for religious virtues in general? A full examination of the topic would require an account of what counts as a religious virtue or vice and a discussion of whether ignorance pre-empts the “activation” of such virtues. For present purposes, a brief illustration is sufficient. In the Christian tradition, there are three theological virtues that have traditionally been offered as primary religious virtues: faith, hope, and love (sometimes termed ‘charity’). Since faith is considered separately below, does ignorance impair the exercise of hope or love?

It is quite clear that religious belief can be a *source* of hope. For example, empirical research suggests that religious belief in those who are ill boosts a hope in recovery (e.g. McBrayer 2014). And there are famous examples of religious believers whose belief sustained almost unbelievable efforts in the face of dismal odds. As a singular example, recall the trials of Father Trocme and his fellow villagers in the French town of Le Chambon as they struggled to locate and save Jews from the Nazis during World War Two. The townspeople managed to save literally thousands of lives over the course of the war. Philip Hallie, the philosopher who chronicled the effort, concludes that “in all certainty...[father] Trocme’s belief in God was at the living center of the rescue efforts of the village,” (1979, p. xxi).

But can this sort of hope obtain in the absence of religious belief? It seems so. Louis Pojman’s famous paper “Faith, Hope, and Doubt,” argues that faith does not require belief (see below) and further that something like hope could serve as a substitute for belief. In his description of hope, he makes a persuasive case for the claim that we can hope for things that we do not believe. As an easy example, I can hope that I win the lottery even though I do not believe that I will win the lottery. There is no apparent reason why religious hope would be any different than hope *simpliciter*. And if so, then it makes perfect sense to conclude that religious people might be able to exercise the virtue of religious hope even in the presence of a deep and abiding religious ignorance. The religious individual might have to believe that P in order to know that P, but she doesn’t have to believe that P in order to hope that P.

The same might be said of charity. Take an example familiar to anyone who has spent time in a large city: panhandling. When faced with a destitute stranger asking for money, what would the virtuous person do? There is ample evidence that in at least some cases the donated funds are used for illicit purchases like drugs that harm the stranger's welfare in the long run. But this is not always the case. And so we are left in ignorance about a great many things that would help us to make a wise decision. Does that ignorance eliminate the possibility of true charity? No. While the ignorance may function as an excuse that counters the duty of beneficence, it need not do so. The truly charitable person may give even in the presence of ignorance.

As applied to religious individuals, the amount of charity given by those who practice a religion is staggering. Aside from the often significant support that such religious individuals provide to their own religious communities, the religious often give more to secular causes as well (e.g. Brooks 2007). In many of these cases, the givers are ignorant not only about the relevant religious propositions but also about the full uses of the funds in question—how many supporters of the local mosque know the local budget? So it is difficult to see how any sort of general ignorance blocks the activation of religious virtues. Furthermore, the correlation between religiosity and certain virtues suggests a causal connection.

Leaving the virtues aside, what is the relation between *faith* and ignorance? Many people are religiously faithful and practice their faith on a daily basis. Does ignorance hamper their effort, aid their effort, or neither? Answering this question requires a clear conception of the nature of religious faith, and that is highly-contested ground in which contemporary philosophers of religion are expending enormous amounts of effort. Still, it is possible to give a quick survey of the field.

Some philosophers have argued that ignorance hampers faith. This view has deep roots in the development of Christian thinkers in the west. For example, John Calvin wrote that faith is “a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us,” (*Institutes* III, ii, 7, 551). For Calvin, faith isn't just identified with knowledge but with certainty! Similarly, John Locke describes divine testimony as follows:

This is called by a peculiar Name, *Revelation*, and our Assent to it, *Faith*: which as absolutely determines our Minds, and as perfectly excludes all wavering as our Knowledge it self...so that Faith is a settled and sure Principle of Assent and Assurance, and leaves no manner of room for Doubt or Hesitation. (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book IV, Chapter XVI §14; Nidditch 1975 p. 667)

And so for Locke, faith excludes doubt and ignorance in the same way that knowledge does. At least some prominent contemporary philosophers endorse this view that faith is either identical with or presupposes knowledge (e.g. Plantinga 2000).

Other thinkers claim the very opposite: faith requires ignorance. St. Thomas Aquinas writes that “you can't know what you simultaneously put faith in, because knowledge sees and faith doesn't,” (*Summa Theologiae* p. 329). Bishop 2010 makes a similar point by citing Kant: “I have ... found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*” (preface to the second edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*). Additionally, William James' work on what he calls the “will to believe” presupposes a great deal of ignorance (e.g. James 1912). For James, we can be within our intellectual rights in endorsing one hypothesis over another even if we are ignorant of which of the two hypotheses

holds. And, in fact, it's only in the face of such ignorance that the will to believe "kicks in." In other words, without ignorance, there is no will to believe. There are contemporary philosophers who endorse this incompatibility. Clegg 1979 opens with what he takes to be an obvious admission: "...we all recognize that we can have faith only in what we do not know—in an uncertain future, for instance, but not in an obvious past," (p. 225). For philosophers in this camp, faith that X precludes knowledge that X.

Finally, some philosophers reject both the views just explored. These philosophers deny both that faith requires knowledge and that faith requires ignorance. Faith is compatible with either. Many of these views of faith are non-cognitive in the sense that they do not require the faithful to endorse a specific cognitive content. While there are many, many such non-cognitive views, what follows is a brief sample. According to Clegg 1979, faith is the emotional inverse of fear. It's an affective state that is manifested only in ignorance. Like other emotional states, "a faith may be shaken, crushed, dashed, lost, or abandoned, but not falsified," (1979, p. 232). Other philosophers think of faith as a kind of acceptance that is different from belief (e.g. Alston 1996, Howard-Snyder 2016). The idea is that one can accept a claim and act in accord with it even though one does not yet believe the claim. The acceptance model of faith is similar to a view sometimes described as a practical commitment model of faith (e.g. Kvanvig 2013). On this view, having faith is having a disposition to act in accord with an ideal even when one's evidential situation falls short of justifying a belief that the ideal will obtain. On any of these views of the nature of faith, true faith is compatible with ignorance.

While perhaps at odds with everyday intuitions, the view that faith is compatible with ignorance gains traction when we examine the lives of role models in the faith. San Juan de la Cruz writes powerfully of his "dark night of the soul" in which God deliberately pulls away from the converted Christian:

...spiritual persons suffer great trials, by reason not so much of the aridities which they suffer, as of the fear which they have of being lost on the road, thinking that all spiritual blessing is over for them and that God has abandoned them.... For the more a soul endeavours to find support in affection and knowledge, the more it will feel a lack of these... (Peers 1951, p. 71 and 74)

During the dark night, ignorance reigns, even when the faithful follower wishes it would go. A contemporary example is Mother Theresa who confesses that her knowledge of God ebbed and flowed leaving her at times with the challenge of living a faithful life in her ignorance. At one point, Mother Theresa sets her goal "to live by faith and yet not to believe," (Kolodiejchuk 2009, p. 248). While it is probably true that Mother Theresa was a religious believer for much of her life, it seems equally clear that she was not a religious believer for all of her life. She wrestled with extreme periods of doubt, and hence she is an example of someone living a life of faith not just in ignorance but even without belief.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the end, the relationship between the religious life and ignorance offers a lesson of hope. Ignorance can be marshalled as evidence both for and against theoretical conceptions of the divine, but it is not decisive in either case. Furthermore, ignorance appears compatible with a life of religious virtue and a life of religious faith. While it is surely worthwhile to struggle against the darkness and work diligently to improve our knowledge of the world and whatever supernatural elements it may contain, our current

ignorance need not paralyze us. We can live, hope, and even worship despite, and perhaps because of, our ignorance.

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<sup>i</sup> Warren 1946, p. 151.

<sup>ii</sup> There are, of course, theologians in the Medieval period who draw from both the *via affirmata* and *via negativa* traditions. One anonymous reviewer suggests that St. Thomas is an example of this blend.

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-stats>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05032a.htm>