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Holism of Religious Beliefs as a Facet of Intercultural Theology and a Challenge for Interreligious Dialogue

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Abstract: Religious beliefs are intertwined with religion or religious tradition. This article argues for a holistic understanding of religious beliefs and suggests that the formation and maintenance of religious beliefs are holistically sensitive to the background information, which includes the culture's meaning–value system. Beliefs embed appreciation of this background without the believer being explicitly conscious of how it has shaped them. This presents a problem for interreligious dialogue. In an interreligious dialogue, actors rarely recognise that one or more actors have no direct and unmediated access to this background. Any model of intercultural theology must thus understand religious belief holistically if it purports to facilitate interreligious dialogue. Holism is a vital epistemic and pragmatic facet of intercultural theology. Intercultural theology can use several strategies that could circumvent this problem—for example, analogies, metaphors, narratives, and even jokes. These are important for two reasons: First, they allow us to recognise that someone lacks an understanding of a cultural background; second, they effectively convey relevant aspects of a cultural background. The article concludes by outlining the significance of epistemic humility for interreligious and intercultural understanding.

Keywords: religious belief; culture; background information; epistemic virtues; humility; interreligious dialogue



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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the holism of religious beliefs, by which it means a vast body of background information that influences the expression and understanding of these beliefs. Holism of religious beliefs is relevant for both intercultural theology and interreligious dialogue. This is because background information consists of culturally determined contents. The paper offers several arguments. First, it explains the process behind the holistic formation and maintenance of beliefs, including religious beliefs. During this process, background information is not consciously represented, but nevertheless influences one's religious beliefs and their expression. This background information remains indiscernible so that, in communication or dialogue, it is hard to determine when one or more actors do not access, understand, or appreciate it. By revealing the holistic formation of beliefs, cultural influence on religious beliefs becomes apparent and can be consciously acknowledged. If intercultural theology purports to facilitate interreligious dialogue, it should thus acknowledge the holism of religious beliefs as a vital epistemic and pragmatic paradigm. After establishing the importance of holism for interreligious dialogue, this paper proposes several strategies for actively expressing background information, i.e., the use of analogies, metaphors, prompted and guided self-awareness, stories, other narratives, or even jokes. These are important for two reasons: First, they allow us to recognise that someone lacks an understanding of this background; second, they effectively convey relevant aspects of this background. In the conclusion, the relevance of epistemic virtuousness and the virtue of epistemic or intellectual humility, in particular, are emphasised. It is advocated that humility enables one to overcome limitations in the understanding of religious beliefs. It also fosters effective strategies for interreligious and intercultural understanding.

The paper proceeds as follows: The next section discusses the holistic nature of beliefs and explains the mechanism underlying the influence of background information. The third section focuses on how this mechanism operates within the domain of religious beliefs and culture. Cultural background is commonly implicit in religious beliefs, which bears consequences for interreligious dialogue and intercultural theology. A way to address and overcome the lack of awareness of background information in interreligious dialogue is to use different strategies for conveying religious beliefs in a more comprehensive manner. One strategy, which is described in the fourth section, is the use of stories or narratives. The final section investigates the role of epistemic virtues and, in particular, epistemic humility for recognising holism and for establishing an apt understanding of religious beliefs.

2. Holistic Character of Religious Beliefs and Background Information

There are several ways to understand religious beliefs. One can begin by simply bifurcating all religious phenomena into two broad categories, as Durkheim does when he writes that they fall “into two basic categories: beliefs and rites. The first are states of opinion and consist of representations; the second are particular modes of action. Between these two categories of phenomena lies all that separates thinking from doing” (Durkheim 1995, p. 34). According to Durkheim, religious beliefs are understood as representational states, e.g., as genuine beliefs. Some authors argue against this, maintaining that religious beliefs must be approached in terms of other mental states or attitudes, such as hope, commitment, or faith. Some of these are not reducible to beliefs, even if they can be sometimes understood as doxastic and belief-entailing (Audi 2011, pp. 51–52). Another possibility is to understand faith as a mediator between religious experience and religious belief.

I intend to understand belief as an intentional doxastic mental state that includes a commitment towards its contents. This essentially means that the reality is such as the belief represents it to be. Consequently, a belief has a constitutive goal, which is truth; in believing, we are aiming to believe the truth. While belief can also have other epistemic goals, such as knowledge, understanding, avoiding falsehoods, believing in accordance with the intellectual virtues, etc., and while some of its goals might be pragmatic (survival and contributing to the satisfaction of biological needs, survival and reproduction, satisfaction of desires and wants, etc.), not much of what I will say in this paper depends on such an understanding. Even if religious convictions or attitudes are not equated with beliefs, the questions about the relation between culture and religion and its consequences for intercultural theology and interreligious dialogue arises. This makes the proposal in this paper relevant in both cases.

Religious beliefs can be understood as beliefs that pertain to the divine or the sacred. Durkheim claims that such religious beliefs “display a common feature. They presuppose a classification of the real or ideal things that men conceive of into two classes—two opposite genera—that are widely designated by two distinct terms, which the words profane and sacred translate fairly well. The division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane—such is the distinctive trait of religious thought. Beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends are either representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history, and their relationships with one another as well as with profane things” (Durkheim 1995, p. 34). It is not my intention here to reduce religion or interreligious dialogue to religious beliefs in any way. In some understandings of interreligious dialogue, beliefs play a minor role and are subordinate to building relationships and other practices. Nonetheless, it is impossible to disregard the role of beliefs in religious traditions. Since cultural context—on which I focus in this paper—clearly impacts religious belief, I am structuring my arguments in this vein. I am aware that this, in itself, is not a proposal for prosperous cultivation of interreligious dialogue or its sensitivity to cultural context, for that matter. However, religious beliefs are a vital part of interreligious dialogue and, therefore, deserve attention. While research—especially research focusing on religious identity—

sometimes does reduce religion, religious orientation, or other religious phenomena to beliefs, this is not my position; nor do I claim that cultural tenets of one's identity are always in alignment with religious ones (Edwards 2018, pp. 202–4). What I argue is that religious beliefs are interrelated with other aspects of religiosity and culture.

The central thesis of this section is that beliefs (including religious beliefs) are sensitive to background information. They are sensitive to background information because it impacts them during their formation and maintenance. Consequently, this impacts the understanding of beliefs and their expression as well. Another important aspect is that this background is present only implicitly.

Let me illustrate this mechanism with an example of understanding a joke. To understand a joke, one must appreciate relevant background information even if very little of it is explicitly present in the process of telling and understanding the joke. What is also relevant is that in getting the joke, one can form beliefs that enable the joke to be understood. The process of forming these beliefs is, and must be, equally sensitive to the relevant background information.

Consider an example of a cartoon that was published in the *New Yorker* magazine (I will only describe it here, but the punchline should be clear). The cartoon depicts two older women at a graveyard in front of a tombstone with the inscription "RIP—James Frost; 1969–2014 'Loving son'". One woman is holding the other in a supportive gesture around her shoulder. The other woman despondently says: "He finally called, and it did kill him." Various items of background information need to be appreciated to understand this joke. If one would want to explain the joke to someone who does not understand it, they would need to mention that mothers usually encourage their grown-up children, and sons in particular, to contact them more often by saying: "Would it kill you to call sometimes?" Nevertheless, this is just the first piece of pertinent background information needed to understand the joke. Who are those women depicted in front of the tombstone? How old are they? Who was James Frost—the "loving son"? Who called whom? What is the "it" that killed the person? Why would a call kill a person? What is the family relation between the person lying in the grave and the person mourning? In the moment of getting the joke, very little of this information is consciously present, but it is needed to understand the joke. Moreover, it needs to be appreciated in that moment because getting a joke is an instantaneous experience. This means that one needs to instantly appreciate a wide range of pertinent background information, and one needs to understand why and how all of this background information combines holistically.

Fixation (i.e., formation and maintenance) of a belief usually happens in such way that it accommodates a vast amount of relevant background information. This must be done automatically and implicitly, and not by explicitly finding, fetching, and manipulating representations. Such accommodation is highly holistic, i.e., it may draw on any part of the background information available to the cognitive system and on global epistemic commitments (e.g., coherence, simplicity, plausibility). However, what mechanism enables this? This mechanism, framed for beliefs in general, was first described by Horgan and Potrč (2010) and termed the phenomenon of chromatic illumination. Here is a brief elaboration of what is meant by this term by using an analogy of a painting.

Imagine a visual scene that is illuminated by light sources that are not directly visible from the observer's perspective, but nonetheless significantly affect the overall appearance. Think, for instance, of the famous 1892 oil painting by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, "At the Moulin Rouge". Figures in the scene are illuminated in strikingly different ways. The women, for example, are more illuminated than the men: One woman is illuminated by lighting from the left, but outside the scene, another woman's face is illuminated by lighting from the lower right outside the scene, some faces by a peculiar light-induced greenish tint that blends with the green of the scene's background, etc. The light sources—they are of various kinds, at various places in the wider environment, and produce light with different chromatic characteristics—are not depicted. Nonetheless, they are implied by the figures and other elements in the scene that are illuminated. The visible scene presented

in a painting can be taken as representative of one's conscious experience, including the different ways in which items are illuminated. By contrast, the light sources represent that which is in conscious experience appreciated not by being directly represented, but rather by virtue of how it affects the character of what is there overtly (Horgan and Potrč 2010; Henderson et al. 2021).

Given introspective reflection, conscious experience often exhibits chromatic illumination by background information that is appreciated. Before turning to beliefs, let me return to our initial example, getting a joke. Consider again the cartoon from the beginning of this section. Getting this joke, or any joke for that matter, is an instantaneous experience. The background information must, therefore, be appreciated if one is to understand the joke. In the moment of getting the joke, very little of this information is represented, but it is nonetheless appreciated consciously via chromatic illumination that it exerts upon one's overall experience.

Getting a joke also includes the formation of certain beliefs. These beliefs are part of the background information that needs to be appreciated to understand a joke, e.g., beliefs related to the questions that I listed above. In general, fixation of a belief must accommodate a vast amount of relevant background information and must do so automatically and implicitly, not by explicitly fetching and manipulating representations from the cognitive system. This holistic character is relevant for the formation of beliefs, their understanding, and for communicating them to other individuals.

Most ordinary beliefs are formed in such a way that they are sensitive to pertinent background information, including expectations and epistemic commitments. Such fixation of beliefs is often overlooked because the process is usually common and unapparent. Consider the following example. Audi (1993, p. 130) writes that I, working in my study in the evening, see a headlight beam through my window. This supposedly induces in me a belief that the "car's light is moving out there" and that "someone has entered my driveway". These perceptually induced beliefs seemingly arise directly as a result of a perceptual state. However, to form beliefs (and even to move from the initial perceptual experience of light to a belief about the moving car lights), I must be sensitive to background information and must operate within a field of pertinent expectations. Reflecting on this example, one recognises the relevance of background information that the cognitive system possesses for forming a belief. Information that I need to appreciate is, for example: I need to know what time in the evening it is, how likely it is that a member of my family just returned with a car, recognition that the sound accompanying the light pattern is the sound of a car engine, etc. Antecedent information, it seems, influences the transition from a perceptual state, such as perception of a light patch, to a belief, such as that a car has entered the driveway (Henderson and Horgan 2011, p. 268).

Consider an even more elaborate example of the holistic character of belief fixation, an episode about the famous detective Sherlock Holmes from the story *The Red-Headed League* (which I quote at some length here for the purpose of demonstration).

The portly client puffed out his chest with an appearance of some little pride and pulled a dirty and wrinkled newspaper from the inside pocket of his greatcoat. As he glanced down the advertisement column, with his head thrust forward and the paper flattened out upon his knee, I took a good look at the man and endeavoured, after the fashion of my companion, to read the indications which might be presented by his dress or appearance. I did not gain very much, however, by my inspection. Our visitor bore every mark of being an average commonplace British tradesman, obese, pompous, and slow. He wore rather baggy grey shepherd's check trousers, a not over-clean black frock-coat, unbuttoned in the front, and a drab waistcoat with a heavy brassy Albert chain, and a square pierced bit of metal dangling down as an ornament. A frayed top-hat and a faded brown overcoat with a wrinkled velvet collar lay upon a chair beside him. Altogether, look as I would, there was nothing remarkable about the man save his blazing red head, and the expression of extreme chagrin and discontent upon his features.

Sherlock Holmes' quick eye took in my occupation, and he shook his head with a smile as he noticed my questioning glances. "Beyond the obvious facts that he has at some time done manual labour, that he takes snuff, that he is a Freemason, that he has been in China, and that he has done a considerable amount of writing lately, I can deduce nothing else".

Mr. Jabez Wilson started up in his chair, with his forefinger upon the paper, but his eyes upon my companion. "How, in the name of good-fortune, did you know all that, Mr. Holmes?" he asked. "How did you know, for example, that I did manual labour. It's as true as gospel, for I began as a ship's carpenter". "Your hands, my dear sir. Your right hand is quite a size larger than your left. You have worked with it, and the muscles are more developed". "Well, the snuff, then, and the Freemasonry?" "I won't insult your intelligence by telling you how I read that, especially as, rather against the strict rules of your order, you use an arc-and compass breastpin". "Ah, of course, I forgot that. But the writing?" "What else can be indicated by that right cuff so very shiny for five inches, and the left one with the smooth patch near the elbow where you rest it upon the desk?" "Well, but China?" "The fish that you have tattooed immediately above your right wrist could only have been done in China. I have made a small study of tattoo marks and have even contributed to the literature of the subject. That trick of staining the fishes' scales of a delicate pink is quite peculiar to China. When, in addition, I see a Chinese coin hanging from your watch-chain, the matter becomes even more simple." Mr. Jabez Wilson laughed heavily. "Well, I never!" said he. "I thought at first that you had done something clever, but I see that there was nothing in it, after all." (Doyle 1995, p. 133)

This example illustrates the role of background information in the formation of beliefs well. Holmes forms several beliefs about Jabez Wilson that draw upon an assortment of background information. One additional thing to notice is that there are perceptually available facts that Watson (the narrator) does not detect, such as the fact that Jabez Wilson's right hand is bigger than his left, that his right cuff is shiny along a portion of the length of his forearm and that his left cuff has a smooth patch near the elbow, the fish tattoo with delicate pink scales, etc. Watson overlooks them because, at that moment, they do not seem relevant to him. Let us suppose that one would point these facts out to Watson, saying "Notice his hand . . . ". He would then more easily form beliefs about these facts, but he would still be missing the relevant interconnections between facts in order to form the same beliefs as Holmes. Conversely, it is also likely that, in forming his predictions, Holmes did not explicitly reflect on all the background information that contributed to the formation of his beliefs—at least not until the moment when he was asked to explain them.

To recapitulate, belief formation typically draws, holistically and abductively, from the believer's pertinent information. The mechanism that enables sensitivity to background information is chromatic illumination, where background information illuminates one's current experience, but is not directly represented in it. Finally, as I will further demonstrate in the next section, this bears important consequences for the formation, understanding, and communication of religious beliefs.

3. The Challenges for Interreligious Dialogue and Intercultural Theology

For the purpose of the argument, I outline the following key ideas about religious belief and culture (as far as intercultural theology and interreligious dialogue are concerned). Culture can be understood as part of the implicit background that affects religious beliefs, predominantly as part of the process of socialisation within a given sociocultural setting. It affects both the content of such beliefs and their epistemic status (e.g., their justification, fundamentality, relevance, etc.). Making the mechanism of chromatic illumination apparent enables us to better understand its influence. Culture can be understood as consisting of deep-seated values, core beliefs, orientations (Geertz 1973), rules, roles, assumptions, etc. It can be assumed that much of such cultural backgrounds cannot be easily accessed, i.e.,

represented and expressed explicitly. Chromatic illumination of religious beliefs, however, does make the cultural background more explicit and, moreover, makes the believer at least partly appreciate its influence when forming or expressing this belief. I will explain how.

There is a growing body of research about the cross-sections between culture and religion, especially concerning the question of how religious beliefs express cultural background. Often noted are modes of intercultural communication that are accompanied by misunderstandings between members of different cultures (Croucher et al. 2017; Wrogemann 2016, p. 13). Some researchers conceptualise this as a mode of mediation in communication. For example, Croucher et al. (2017) emphasise that religions “have relied on mediations through various media to communicate their messages (oral stories, print media, radio, television, internet, etc.). These media share religious messages, shape the messages and religious communities, and are constantly changing. We find that, as media sophistication develops, a culture’s understanding of mediated messages changes. Thus, the very meanings of religion, culture, and communication are transitioning as societies morph into more digitally mediated societies” (Croucher et al. 2017, p. 7). It can be added that such digital and social media sophistications pose an additional risk of depleting contextual communication. Digitally mediated communication excludes much background information.

I mentioned above that culture affects religious beliefs (alongside religious practices and orientation) through an implicit background. If that is true, then understanding of explicitly expressed beliefs depends on this background. Research in intercultural theology offers plentiful evidence to support this (Wrogemann 2021). Consider, for example, an episode described by Wrogemann (2016) in his discussion of intercultural theology and intercultural hermeneutics. He describes an encounter between the Tanzanian Lutheran pastor Willy Samuel Mastai and European visitors, where the latter observed the pastor in his daily dealings with the parish members. Considering how a visitor would describe what he saw, one can see the striking similarity between the example of Sherlock Holmes described above (including the way in which Watson fails to grasp the situation) and the example of the Tanzanian pastor. Here are some excerpts from Wrogemann’s description of the visitor’s observations.

All day long people have been calling on the pastor, looking for advice and help. [. . .] The next person seeking help is allowed to enter. Some of the people outside have been waiting for four hours already, as the pastor briefly explains. The middle-aged woman is smartly dressed; rings and earrings reveal that she probably belongs to the middle class. She takes off her shoes and positions herself in front of the pastor with a touch of bashfulness. A short conversation in Kiswahili follows. We three visitors are invited to stand in a circle and lay hands on the woman, on her shoulders. The pastor says an audible prayer for healing, perhaps two minutes long; a brief exchange of words takes place, and the woman leaves. A young man comes in; after a brief explanation, a prayer for blessing is spoken over him, and he leaves. It seems he did not want anything more than a blessing. [. . .] Then an older woman comes in, poorly dressed, thickset, and corpulent. The pastor already knows the woman. He estimates that this is the fourth time she has come. It seems that she suffers from the indwelling of evil spirits. The woman positions herself in front of the pastor. He instructs her in a few words to look him in the eyes, while he himself stares at her with a very grave expression. Half a minute. One minute. One and a half minutes. The woman repeatedly evades his gaze; she looks at the floor or past him. Abruptly, Reverend Mastai then lifts up his hand and places it on the woman’s forehead and the upper part of her face. The exorcism begins, for only if she had matched his gaze would it have been an unmistakable sign that the spirit had left the woman already. The state of possession is not yet over; the evil spirit is still present within her. Therefore the pastor begins to say the prayer of exorcism. He prays out loud; his voice sometimes grows louder and then softer again. [. . .] The woman’s body is

seized with convulsions; she hugs herself, contorts herself, with her eyes closed or occasionally rolling about. She falls backwards; we bystanders catch her, only just managing to prevent her from hitting the floor. Choking noises ensue; sometimes she emits a loud scream; the woman is again seized with convulsions as if trying to spit something out. She is foaming at the mouth, trembling and contorted. Then she comes to again, takes four steps sideways, bent over, to where a little plastic bowl with sand is ready; she spits. Presumably, this kind of spitting out takes place frequently. [. . .] After a few minutes, the exorcism is over. The pastor asks the woman whether she feels any better; she nods casually, does not say much—and leaves. All of a sudden, everyday normality resumes—or at least, that is how I experience it as an observer.” (Wrogemann 2016, pp. 4–5)

Clearly, the visitor is able to minutely observe the meeting of the pastor and the local inhabitants, but a deeper understanding of its context is beyond his reach. This is even more explicitly revealed in the discussion between the pastor and the visitors about exorcism. Pastor Mastai can answer their questions, explain the roles of these rituals, and explain which members of his society are most susceptible to evil demons and what the people believe about demons. For the visitors, however, much of what goes into the practice remains obscure (the same is true of the situation in which the roles are reversed, that is, when Pastor Mastai visits Germany and observes their religious life). Wrogemann uncovers the implicit presuppositions that guide understanding. One presupposition of the European perspective is that “practically every phenomenon of our realm of experience may be explained scientifically. . . . This way of thinking determines not just everyday life in Western society but also life in the church: in worship services, congregation activities, and diaconal institutions, a ‘rational’ manner of action sets the tone throughout—that is to say, one that does not account for the interference of any evil powers (spirits, demons, etc.)” (Wrogemann 2016, p. 7). This is one example of a background assumption or preconception that affects beliefs, but in an inexplicit manner. There are, of course, other aspects that are influenced by the implicit background and that chromatically illuminate standpoints in this encounter. These aspects could also be brought to the forefront—some by a direct request for an explanation, and others by conveying understanding and comprehension through a story, irony, overtones, analogy, a metaphor, etc. These aspects are part of a gradual process of “understanding in the sense of empathetic inward re-creation . . . the culmination of which is ultimately unattainable” (Wrogemann 2016, p. 43). For this reason, chromatic illumination frames such phenomena and enables us to unearth background assumptions, patterns, beliefs, etc. If the aim is to understand a particular religious belief or a stance, then the background information is vital. Religious beliefs are sensitive to background context. “The idea of God typically comes to people as part of a larger package that conveys some understanding of the place of human life in a wider frame of reference, the ways we can live lives of value in relation to that wider frame, and what fulfilment we can hope for. A response of belief or unbelief is to the total package” (Holley 2010, p. 48). One role of intercultural theology is to emphasise this holistic dependence and to find a way to illuminate the unexplored regions of religious thought. It is very hard to directly access background context in the formation, maintenance, or expression of a particular religious belief, but this is not to say that it is impossible. Moreover, I am not arguing that mediation must always be in a special or indirect mode of facilitation of understanding. Reflective self-awareness, too, might reveal cultural background.

4. Going beyond the Surface and Uncovering the Background

Given the role of the implicit background and cultural dimension in religious beliefs, the following question arises: How can background information be accessed to inform understanding and communication of religious beliefs? In the introductory paragraph, I wrote that there are several ways in which one can access background information, such as different pragmatic and communicative uses of analogies, metaphors, stories, narratives, tales, and even jokes. These are important for two reasons. First, they can effectively convey

background information; second, they reveal if someone has failed to understand them. I argued above that, in order to understand a joke, one needs to appreciate some background information. In telling the joke, this also applies to the intended audience. Someone who lacks awareness and appreciation of the background will not understand it. This also holds for beliefs. “To understand the particular judgments that people make, we often need to know the patterns of thought that lie in the background of their assessments” (Holley 2010, p. 3). Consequently, misunderstanding can be interpreted as a symptom of overlooking background information. This allows one to change one’s communication. The same can be said of religious beliefs. If expressed explicitly, beliefs lack the wider context and can, therefore, become a source of disagreement, conflicts, intolerance, fear, etc. In this section, I suggest that communication of religious beliefs should consider chromatic illumination. For this, I will focus on stories or narratives, but the same applies to the other aforementioned means of communication.

Consider a story or a narrative that is part of historiography. Historical narrative is a form of interpretation, and its truth should be judged differently from the mere correspondence of a set of statements with reality. There are other criteria for the evaluation of historical narratives, e.g., coherence, suitability, aptness, and metaphorical fittingness. A historical narrative is a construction that is indeed based on historical facts, but its meaning greatly surpasses those facts. A historian encounters, e.g., a set of descriptions of events, but these descriptions do not hold the same meaning as they do when placed into a narrative. This is why the same events have different meanings in different narratives. Hayden White writes the following: “Since no given set or sequence of real events is intrinsically ‘tragic’, ‘comic’, or ‘farcical’, but can be constructed as such only by the imposition of the structure of a given story-type on the events, it is the choice of the story-type and its imposition upon the events which endow them with meaning” (White 1984, p. 20). When religious beliefs are conveyed through a story, the meaning of the story surpasses the meaning of particular beliefs. The narrative’s meaning emerges from the entire story and its presupposed background. This makes parts of the story, considered separately from other parts, lose some aspects of their meaning.

All of this, of course, applies to religious beliefs as well. Holley suggests that “belief in God does not arise as acceptance of an isolated proposition. The idea of God is ordinarily understood in relation to a larger story in terms of which people form some understanding of what human life is about and how it should be lived. Accepting the larger story means acquiring a way to interpret the meaning of everyday experiences. A believer views her experiences in the light of the story and evaluates choices in terms that the story makes intelligible. In other words, acquiring a belief in God is inseparable from acquiring a way of life” (Holley 2010, p. 3). Given that the larger story or a way of life cannot be fully elucidated, this makes chromatic illumination especially relevant. “Our stories shape our perceptions at different levels. At the highest level of generality, we have stories about the nature of human life and the world in which we live that I call life-orienting stories. [. . .] They put our lives in a context that enables us to interpret the significance of our choices and develop a coherent mode of life. Religious stories of this sort tend to describe the significance of our lives in relation to dimensions of reality that transcend ordinary empirical observation and verification. They speak of such things as gods or God or karma or Nirvana, invoking these transcendent realities as keys to making sense of our lives” (Holley 2010, p. 4). This raises not only the question of how one understands religious beliefs, but also the question of how one forms them in the first place. “Many of our most important beliefs are acquired not as individual propositions, but in contexts where we respond to an integrated complex of beliefs that come to make sense as a whole. Belief in God comes about as a response to a specific narrative about God, and it is only within such a context that the question of belief can be raised in a religiously significant way. Whatever doubts there may be about the whole complex of beliefs won’t be resolved by breaking it into parts to decide about God in a context that insulates us from the possibility of religious engagement” (Holley 2010, p. 44).

I thus far discussed stories and narratives, but the other aforementioned communicative means share the same characteristics. Here are some reasons why: First, their understanding depends heavily on implicit background. Second, they can be used for testing if this background information has been understood. Third, they can be used to enrich understanding of other beliefs that are part of a larger whole. Fourth, they are explanatory, they transmit understanding, they can build upon the familiar, and they shed light on the less familiar. (For example, narratives have a certain persuasiveness that goes beyond mere logical deduction, encouraging the right understanding.) Fifth, they convey meaning that surpasses the explicitly stated meaning. Sixth, they allow for creativity and individual expression, as well as for efficient transmission of attitudes. Even though they often build upon ambiguity, they retain their inner logic, structure, and mode of understanding. Here is a beautiful example of such a role of a metaphor discussed by Ted Cohen. Suppose that someone says to you, “Miles Davis was a musical genius, and his impact on jazz was tremendous. Miles was the Picasso of jazz”. To understand this statement, you need to understand its broader background context. If you do, the statement is richer in meaning than a more explicit description of Miles’ music would be; even though it is ambiguous to some extent, you can build upon this metaphor. Now, suppose that one would ask: “If Miles was the Picasso of jazz, who is the Rembrandt of jazz?” Given the inner logic and meaning conveyed by the metaphor, not every answer will be appropriate.

Ruparell (2013) claims that the metaphor is a semantic generator and a hermeneutical tool that creates new semantic entities, which can establish an interstitial space between religion and theological horizons. He proposes the creation of such inter-religious metaphors as a basis for a new model of interstitial theology. The relationship between metaphors and narratives is also implied. “Metaphors allow us to refer beyond our own experience to a created narrative world. With this in mind, I suggest that inter-religious metaphors refer to the space in between the poles of the metaphor. [. . .] In the dialectic between the poles of metaphor, a shaky ground of newly created common significations is slowly built up. This ground is always being broken down, patched up, and re-examined by the force and flux created by the dialectic of metaphor. This liminal world—the collection of shared references making up Ricoeur’s re-described possible world—is not a new Archimedean common ground, but a *mobile plane of intersection, a locus hybrida*, sustained by the metaphorical encounter. It is a boundary phenomenon, a shoreline, created between and at the edges of religious traditions, synthesized out of materials taken from both. It is, in effect, a bridge or framework upon which the conversation of religions can take place” (Ruparell 2013, p. 128). The strategy that is best suited for being aware of the implicit background, communicating it efficiently, and creating an interstitial space of understanding depends, of course, on the context of an interreligious exchange.

5. Epistemic Virtues in Interreligious Dialogue and Intercultural Understanding

When considering the formation of beliefs and other epistemic practices, one way to frame their execution and their assessment is to use the notion of rationality and overall epistemic virtuousness. Both concern how well the agent is doing in utilising the best means toward selected epistemic ends (knowledge, understanding, wisdom, etc.) and the evaluation of these ends (Horgan et al. 2018). In comparison, ancillary epistemic virtues, as they might be called, concern specific aspects of epistemic practice. These include specific habits of mind pertinent to belief formation and other epistemic endeavours, habits such as impartiality, intellectual sobriety, intellectual courage, synoptic grasp, epistemic conscientiousness, sense for alternative points of view, salience recognition and focus, etc. (Montmarquet 1987; Eflin 2003), and habits specifically fitting with integrity and understanding, such as intellectual integrity, honesty, humility, transparency, self-awareness, and self-scrutiny (Baehr 2011, p. 21).

For the rest of this paper, I will focus on humility as an epistemic virtue because humility is vital for recognising our own limits in understanding, including the understanding of religious beliefs. At the same time, it is central to our ability to share epistemic space

with others. Humility is usually understood as a moral and epistemic virtue. It is often referred to in discussions about intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In addition to treating it as a virtue, I will also show that it is related to specific conceptions of morality and rationality. I will propose an understanding of moral vision within which humility is not only a response to moral or epistemic limitations or errors, but is itself a form of moral and epistemic thought (Strahovnik 2017).

Humility is a complex and multifarious phenomenon and cannot be framed within a fully unified model. Kellenberger identifies seven dimensions that are generally associated with humility. These are: (i) having a low opinion of oneself, (ii) having a low estimate of one's merit, (iii) having a modest opinion of one's importance or rank, (iv) lack of self-assertion, e.g., in cases where one has made a contribution or has merit, (v) claiming little as one's reward, (vi) having or showing a consciousness of one's defects or proneness to mistakes, and (vii) not being proud, haughty, condescending, or arrogant (Kellenberger 2010, pp. 321–22). Relational humility is “a relationship-specific judgment in which an observer attributes a target person with four qualities: (1) other-orientedness in one's relationships with others rather than selfishness; (2) the tendency to express positive other-oriented emotions in one's relationships (e.g., empathy, compassion, sympathy, and love); (3) the ability to regulate self-oriented emotions, such as pride or excitement about one's accomplishments, in socially acceptable ways; and (4) having an accurate view of self” (Davis et al. 2010). Humility can be understood as an inherent psychological position of oneself or towards oneself, which includes epistemic and moral alignment, calibration, or situatedness (Cole Wright et al. 2016, p. 2). This means that we understand and experience ourselves as limited and fallible beings who are part of a larger creation and, thus, have a limited perception of the surpassing whole. All of this can be experienced in a spiritual connection with God or in an existential connection with nature or the cosmos. Humility, in this sense, restricts our experience of ourselves in terms of unapt exceptionality, special distinction, or superiority. It restricts our prioritisation of our beliefs and our understanding. Epistemic humility is a stance of appropriate, modest, and non-haughty perception of our mental abilities, advantages, and disadvantages that enables us to adequately evaluate ideas and positions with respect for those who disagree with us (Hook et al. 2015, pp. 499–506; Montmarquet 2005).

Humility is, therefore, vital for interreligious dialogue and interreligious understanding. Several empirical studies confirm this. Research on the relationship between intellectual humility and religious tolerance shows that individuals with a high degree of intellectual humility (especially in relation to religious beliefs) also exhibit a high degree of religious tolerance (Hook et al. 2017). Moreover, intellectual humility is a good predictor of religious tolerance in the sense that it is relatively independent of religious commitment and conservatism of religious beliefs. It also diminishes defensiveness towards those who do not share the same religious beliefs (Hook et al. 2017, p. 6). This is important for the contemporary world, in which religious differences often lead to tensions, conflicts, and even violence. In this, the perceived or attributed intellectual humility is similar to forgiveness (Zhang et al. 2015; Hook et al. 2015). Perceived humility contributes to regulation of social relationships, allows us to predict the reactions of those around us, and promotes non-selfish and solidary social relationships. Humility encourages forgiveness in a similar way to that of the “victim”, who perceives the “perpetrator” as humble and more easily forgives wrongful behaviour (Zhang et al. 2015). Intellectual humility is important for establishing, maintaining, and restoring interpersonal and social bonds. “A high level of intellectual humility is an important virtue, especially for those individuals who are within their communities perceived as someone who has significant intellectual influence” (Hook et al. 2015, p. 504). In conjunction with honesty, humility leads to increased levels of integrity, sincerity, and loyalty, to collaborative and responsive behaviour, and to a reduction in the level of vindictiveness and manipulation. Humility is also related to (social and civic) responsibility, gratitude, compassion, benevolence and mindfulness, openness to others, and hope (Cole Wright et al. 2016, pp. 5–6). That is why it is important to cultivate

intellectual humility, especially in the context of interreligious dialogue (Zhang et al. 2015, p. 260).

Humility is central to interreligious dialogue, and it is one of its requisite conditions. Cornille emphasises that religious commitment—understood as identification and embracement of key religious practices and teachings—must be accompanied by humility. According to Cornille, humility is both an epistemic and a theological virtue that makes one aware that no knowledge or understanding is completely final. This encourages the individual to learn from the other (Cornille 2008). Such humility must be supplemented by empathy, interconnection, and hospitality. Crucial is the “recognition of the very possibility of change or growth within one’s own tradition. This presupposes a humble recognition of the limited or finite way in which the ultimate truth is grasped or expressed within one’s religion” (Cornille 2013, p. 21). In a similar vein, Moyaert (2019, p. 611) maintains that humility, alongside self-reflexivity, curiosity, and open-mindedness, forms basic interreligious literacy.

One can parallel intellectual virtues and epistemic reactive attitudes, including intellectual humility, with the way in which moral virtues, emotions, and reactive attitudes promote pro-social and moral behaviour. Moreover, intellectual humility is vital in dialogue because it emphasises participants’ equal status and impedes pre-existing biases, stereotypes, etc. One aspect of humility thus concerns self-situatedness in epistemic space, as well as the status that we ascribe to ourselves and to others in it. It produces an accurate view of oneself and an awareness of one’s limitations. In being humble, one’s interpersonal stance is other-oriented instead of self-focused and is characterised by respect for others rather than by superiority or arrogance. It situates us in epistemic space with others, facilitating non-arrogant and solidary cooperation (Centa and Strahovnik 2020; cf. Kramer 1990).

The proposed argument can go even further. Humility can be understood as a mode of thought or a mode of life. The proposed view is based on the work of Raimond Gaita and on his understanding of saintly love, compassion, moral vision, and common humanity. Gaita (2011) begins with autobiographical reflections, one of which is about his father. Gaita reflects on his father’s life story, especially on his actions and attitudes toward the madcap homeless man named Vacek, who lived in the wild on the edge of the estate. Gaita’s father treated Vacek as an equal human being, and Gaita tells how his attitude was marked by the complete absence of all superiority or condescension, showing the full and humble recognition of Vacek’s humanity. This, he says, was not a sign of a particular virtue, but of the fact that he saw him in a “normal light” because of the space of meaning that his father had established. The second reflection is about a nun whom Gaita met while working in a mental-health institution for patients with the worst illnesses. Before meeting the nun, Gaita admired hospital doctors who spoke of their patients as of someone with full human dignity (unlike most of the remaining staff, who saw them, at best, as “sub-human”). The nun, however, turned to all of the patients with saintly love and treated them as precious beings, with the purity of love for them as children of God. This opened a new moral level well beyond the recognition of human dignity. “The works of saintly love [. . .] have, historically, created a language of love that yields to us a sense of what those works reveal in any individual instance, in, for example, the demeanour of the nun towards the patients in the hospital” (Gaita 2011, p. 24). Gaita saw her actions not as overwhelming or awe-inspiring simply because of the virtue they reflected, nor because of the good that they had achieved, but because of their power to reveal the full humanity of the patients. Gaita grounds this understanding in the notion of saintly love (in relation to the sanctity of life or the dignity of a human being in the case of a nun) and in moral vision (in the case of his father), which are not to be understood as moral and epistemic virtues, but go far beyond that. The absence of condescension in relationships is humility, and the key to such humility is compassion. “The nature of charity or compassion depends on the concepts under which one sees those towards whom one responds charitably or compassionately. The concepts under which my father and Hora saw Vacek were historically constituted, I believe, by the works of saintly love, by the language of love that formed and nourished those works and

which was, in its turn, enriched by them. That was their cultural inheritance, although neither would have thought about it as I have just put it” (Gaita 2011, p. 6). Two levels are discernible in the quotation: One is the individual attitude and the other is the background or tradition that enables such an attitude. Religious traditions can be the source of a moral vision that enables humility, which allows for a deeper understanding of humility. It can be understood as a response to our limitations or mistakes that cause our moral wrongdoing or false beliefs. This deep understanding takes humility as a form of (moral and epistemic) thought, which establishes a unique space of meaning. Not being humble is not seen as a cause of an error, but as a form of an error.

All of this is crucial for interreligious dialogue and intercultural theology. “Honest and respectful dialogue nurtures humility and offers a corrective to the excesses of our own traditions. Dialogue can create trust and imbue a sense of security to help overcome the suspicion and fear our traditions have often instilled about the other. By forging bonds of support and solidarity across religious boundaries, people of religious good will can help overcome ethnic and national xenophobia” (Lander 2011, p. 150). It is necessary to focus on the potential of religions, religious traditions, and religious communities to foster humility (instead of, e.g., absolutism, exclusivism, or fundamentalism), in terms of both understanding and practice. Religious depth and authenticity encourage humble moral perception, which, in turn, allows us to overcome shallowness and superficiality. By following the examples (for example, of Jesus and the saints in Christianity), the depth of religion is a space of meaning that enables such humble perception. One can invoke sanctity, our being made in the image of God, and our relationship with God. Gaita argues that religion constitutes such a framework of meaning. “Think of how much of our sense of religious depth and authenticity is a function of our appeal to things in which we believe that form and content cannot be separated—art of course, but also prayers, hymns, religious rituals and so on. Appeals such as these and reflection upon them occur in what I have called ‘the realm of meaning’” (Gaita 2011, p. 12).

In recent debates on epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), hermeneutical (in)justice is a form of this phenomenon. Hermeneutical injustice emerges from a gap in hermeneutical resources or from a gap in shared tools of social interpretation. This gap creates a cognitive disadvantage that impinges unevenly on different social groups. Disadvantaged members or groups are “hermeneutically marginalized, that is, they participate unequally in the practices through which social meanings are generated. This sort of marginalization can mean that our collective forms of understanding are rendered structurally prejudicial in respect of content and/or style: the social experiences of members of hermeneutically marginalized groups are left inadequately conceptualized and so ill-understood, perhaps even by the subjects themselves; and/or attempts at communication made by such groups, where they do have an adequate grip on the content of what they aim to convey, are not heard as rational owing to their expressive style being inadequately understood” (Fricker 2007, pp. 6–7). Here, the epistemic wrong lies in the fact that situated hermeneutical inequity prevents the victims of epistemic injustice to understand an experience. In this regard, the victim is wronged as a subject of social understanding.

The relationship between epistemic (in)justice and religion is complex (Strahovnik 2018). One entry point into this debate is religious identity, which can be linked to prejudices, thus creating or maintaining hermeneutical injustice. This is relevant for how implicit background information influences religious belief. Kidd proposes an explanation of the relationship between religion and epistemic injustice as follows: “Religious persons and groups can be perpetrators and victims of epistemic injustice. Religious persons and communities can commit or can suffer epistemic injustices. [. . .] A religious identity can invite others’ prejudice and entail activities and experiences that others might find difficult to make sense of, while also shaping a person’s epistemic sensibilities. The practices of testifying to and interpreting experiences take a range of distinctive forms in religious life—for instance, if the testimonial practices require a special sort of religious accomplishment or if proper understanding of religious experiences is only available to those with

authentic faith. But it is also clear that religious communities and traditions have been sources of epistemic injustice—for instance, by conjoining epistemic and spiritual credibility in ways disadvantageous to ‘deviant’ groups” (Kidd 2017, p. 386). At the same time, Kidd stresses the following: “A religious life is only possible if one can engage in testimonial practices and draw upon rich hermeneutic resources within an epistemically nourishing tradition. But such abilities to participate in those practices and access those resources can be corrupted by a variety of prejudices, generating testimonial silencing and smothering, and hermeneutic marginalisation” (Kidd 2017, p. 388). Of course, the religious aspect of identity (or its absence) is in no way exempt from epistemic injustice.

Reflections on epistemic injustice are relevant because they outline the role of understanding in our epistemic endeavours and our lives. Such understanding, including an understanding of religious beliefs, is hard to attain if one disregards background information, which affects beliefs. That is why specific epistemic virtues prove to be of central importance in attaining this understanding. First, they support apt formation and maintenance of (religious) beliefs. Second, they enable understanding of these beliefs. The holistic nature of religious beliefs and the importance of background information provides a particularly apt context for humility. Habits of mind such as this enable us to understand the relevant connection between our beliefs in a way that fosters understanding. Such epistemic virtues often become aspects of one’s overall epistemic sensibility. They provide means for overcoming biases and prejudices and the elimination of irrational beliefs. Note that many of these phenomena are, most often, an aspect of the mentioned background information, which can and does operate in ways that do not confer proper justification onto beliefs that get formed. Third, epistemic virtues also offer an opportunity for improving oneself as an epistemic agent, e.g., to be more attentive to possible sources of bias, expunging prejudices, and reshaping the underlying cognitive processes and backgrounds. Their role in this regard is again related to how they interconnect particular beliefs with the background that supports them and how they further enable understanding.

In this paper, it was not my intention to argue for the impact of culture and cultural differences on religious beliefs and living faith. The latter is commonly known. My intention was to propose an understanding of the mechanism that reveals a cultural background in a specific instance of belief. Chromatic illumination is proposed as an answer to this puzzling challenge that is discussed in philosophy of mind and cognitive science (e.g., Fodor 2001). Furthermore, I argued that the cultivation of virtue allows for the development of apt moral, epistemic, and theological sensitivity to the background context of religious beliefs. In the paper, I highlighted the virtue of humility as a central virtue for understanding this background and for the awareness of one’s own position in relation to it. One particular virtue must be supplemented, of course, with other virtues, which is often stressed by authors who discuss interreligious dialogue and intercultural understanding (Cornille 2013). This set of virtues embeds pragmatic tools for uncovering cultural backgrounds, as discussed in the paper. Lastly, I highlighted the interconnection with epistemic justice because the failure to appreciate the background context of religious beliefs represents not merely an epistemic failure, but also an injustice to other participants in a religious encounter. The inability to reflect on the background is itself hermeneutical injustice. This final section thus underlined the relevance of epistemic virtues and, in particular, epistemic humility for recognising and overcoming our epistemic limitations with respect to this background and for grasping our and others’ religious beliefs.

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