AXTELL Guy, *Problems of Religious Luck: Assessing the
Limits of Reasonable Religious Disagreement*

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- 1 The primary purpose of this book is to discuss the concept of religious luck as linked to ethical values. The author emphasizes that the quality and interpretation of the luck factor can be studied in a variety of ways, not only in theology but also in social sciences and philosophy. In the first chapter of the book, Axtell defines what he means by problems of religious luck. He believes that the new issue of religious luck is concerned with asymmetric trait attribution in connection with a broader study of inductive risk or the epistemic risk of “getting it wrong” in an inductive context. In other words, the concept of luck appears as a new study of religion. In doing so, he gets inspiration from many contemporary theologians and pragmatist philosophers such as William James, Linda Zagzebski, Charlotte Katzoff, Joel Feinberg and Thomas Nagel.
- 2 The methodological aspects of the problem of religious luck are central in the first chapter. For Axtell, religious luck appears as a main factor that affects the control mechanism of religious behavior. Therefore, he demonstrates that it would not be appropriate to interpret moral luck – in which luck makes moral differences – as a phenomenon exclusively philosophical, but it should also be evaluated psychologically. Hence, Axtell gives us explanations from socio-psychological studies according to which the righteous judgments of people emerge from the lack of knowledge. He investigates the relation between religious luck and moral as well as epistemic luck.

While doing so, he tries to look for an answer to the question whether any concept of luck philosophically should also be valid and useful in ethics, epistemology, and science. Separately from other philosophers, the author does not discuss the functioning of cognitive illusion as refers to the understanding of luck. Thus, on the following pages, Axtell speaks of the diversity of religious luck.

- 3 One example of this religious luck would be *resultant luck*, which is defined as the bad/good luck of being harmed or benefited in consequence of an act. The second type of luck, *criteria religious luck* is defined as suffering harms or enjoying benefits through being judged or punished. However, while *constitutive religious luck*, as a different one, is explained as religious analog of bad/good luck in being the kind of person one is, *propositional religious luck* is understood as impacting the agent in a malign way when he or she has good evidence available for a belief, yet does not believe on the basis of the good available evidence. Axtell continues with *veritic religious luck*, which is a religious analog that is associated with epistemology. Finally, he focuses on *environmental veritic religious luck*, as a religious analog of the kind of malign epistemic luck that operates in Fake Barn cases. The assumption is that such luck factors have significant effects not only on religious teaching but also on human psychology.
- 4 The second part of the book explains the interpretation of religion through the philosophy of science and the role of *risk* in determining ethical and moral values. Before examining the second part in detail, it is necessary to state what the philosophy of science means and how the term *risk* determines ethical and moral values as well as human biases. The philosophy of science explains the events that await clarification or the secrets of nature using a number of techniques such as experimentation and observation. However, the concept of risk refers, often rather vaguely, to situations in which it is possible, but not certain, that some undesirable event will occur. In this sense, it is seen that the concept of *risk* is uncertain and includes the lack of knowledge. Therefore, differences in religious beliefs, according to Axtell, appear as the result of an epistemological problem. In other words, how and why one knows certain things is an epistemological problem rather than religious.
- 5 The philosopher understands that epistemology explains how perception or beliefs can give us information or justified faith about the external world, about the things that are outside of us, such as the belief in a god and religion. The culturally nurtured faith shows the influence of social norms on the belief system of a community. Especially, inductive thinking and epistemic risk have shown the importance of epistemological problem by comparing it with spiritual salvation, values, and beliefs.
- 6 On the other hand, the author addresses the philosophy of science and explains the disagreements between religious norms by using the inductive risk, which is the chance or possibility of getting it wrong in an inductive context. He accepts that inductive risk can be an essential basis for discussions between philosophers and theologians. Axtell is convinced that social norms and values must be considered to reach a clear understanding of the concept of truth. He emphasizes that scientists, philosophers, and theologians must make a value judgment while choosing the standards of evidence which they need for accepting or rejecting a given hypothesis. Although it is unquestionable that values can affect many aspects of science, the inductive risk argument goes further, showing that even the evaluation of theories should contain some reference to values and valuations.

- 7 Another critical point in the second chapter consists of the four crucial theses of the new problem of religion. The first issue is *familial-cultural displacement symmetry*, which is more about the identity of an adherent of religion and it focuses on family and culture. The second problem is *etiological symmetry*. This thesis tries to explain how one becomes religious under the influence of the epistemic locations and purported revelations. In other words, the religion or a sect-based belief that an individual has acquired is mostly due to the reason that one witnesses the rituals and practices of the given belief. The third thesis refers to *exclusivist asymmetries*, the belief of people that is shaped according to the epistemic location. In other words, people believe that their religion is accurate and that those who believe in another faith are wrong. Axtell continues, "The exclusivist ascribes falsehood to the theological systems of religious aliens, but true to their own, through what any non-committed party would judge to be a common mode of belief uptake: testimonial authority assumption" (p. 59). As the last point, *counter-inductive thinking* demonstrates how the mindset of religious exclusivism is enabled only through counter-inductive thinking. It is a measure that calls something into question by producing an anti-thesis against it.
- 8 The third chapter of the book focuses on the types of fideism, such as psychological and religious. According to Axtell, psychological fideism is an explanatory thesis and one that can be tested and continually revised. By explaining so, the main focus of the philosopher is the religious fundamentalism, a type of belief system which enables individuals to make sense of their lives and provides them with an identity. Axtell gives an understanding of religious radicalization through the theory that he takes from Whitehouse and McQuinn who coined the term DMR (*Divergent Modes of Religiosity*, 2013). DMR highlights that the more severe or risky the requirements for entry into a group identity are, the higher emotional connection appears with the group members. It is designed to explain how religion was created, the way it is transferred from generation to generation and its evolution over time. The theory emphasizes the combination of beliefs in two different categories according to the structure of religions or, in other words, it suggests that religions tend to unite around two different modes, namely imaginary and doctrinal. The imaginary mode is characterized by high arousal rituals, which are rarely performed, and are associated with small-scale, specific religious groups. In contrast, the doctrinal method is usually defined by low stimulation rituals and is associated with larger inclusive communities as in large world communities.
- 9 Taking this theory into consideration, Axtell emphasizes that religious fundamentalism is not only as what to believe but also how to have a faith. Hence, the author refers to the psychological and social effects of religious norms on the individual. By developing this type of assertion, he makes a commentary on Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In doing so, the philosopher benefits from the researches that have been done by Jose Light and Sarah Savage, who take a sensible approach to establish scales that support a cross-cultural or comparative studies of fundamentalism, which shows itself differently in every religion. Some religious values or features indicate fundamentalism. For example, for Axtell, the salvific exclusivism, which states that one religion has the correct version of god, truth, and salvation, is one of the characteristics of fundamentalism.
- 10 Axtell believes that the psychological effect of religious teachings and its influence cause significant elements of extremism. His Jamesian philosophy influences his efforts

to connect the psychology of religion and philosophy of science. In *The Will to Believe*, American psychologist and philosopher William James, defines religion as a tendency in which philosophy of science can take advantage. James believed that the psychological dynamics, such as norms, characteristics, and values are involved in the nature of human agents. Such a psychological understanding of religion is called descriptive fideism; therefore, James's term *faith-ladder* is illustrated as an expressive of psychological fideism. According to James, anything proposed to one's faith is called a hypothesis, and within the scope of interpretation, there are options. To really understand James, we need to understand the terms he defines or introduces. A hypothesis is a suggestion or an idea. It exists because it is seen as a possible and acceptable belief. Such hypothesis can be divided into two categories. A live hypothesis, which is actually a proposition in which we can believe and a dead hypothesis, which is a proposition that we cannot believe. In light of this, James introduces the theory of option. In his characterization, decision between two hypotheses is an option. Therefore, there are several kinds of options. For example, (1) a live or a dead option, (2) forced option, and (3) momentous option.

- 11 Thus, the Jamesian faith-ladder crosses division between philosophers as long as it consists of "is" and "ought."
- 12 Axtell indicates that risk and responsibility are intimately connected. He says, "The riskiness of one's method of forming one's religious belief is central not just to critical concerns in the psychology of religion, but also normative concerns with the ethics of belief" (92). To sum up, the primary point that chapter three indicates is the link between counter-inductive thinking and religious fundamentalism. To put it differently, the third chapter analyzes how the philosophy of science and psychology of religion act to understand religious radicalization.
- 13 In the fourth chapter, the author emphasizes the role of biases that create differences among religions. Especially, psychological and philosophical effects of in-group and out-group separation. The concept of prejudice is explained more psychologically, thus, the theory *bias blind spot* which shows the impact of the biases on the decisions that people make for others, is emphasized. The author gives examples from French philosopher Michel de Montaigne as he discusses biases. In Montaigne, the judgments that people make in ignorance of their preferences are called *importunate presumption*. Montaigne most often associated errors with some form of presumption. So, he categorized these errors with two kinds of hypotheses; the first error is the failure to be open to the unfamiliar and the second presumption is the error of not coming back to ourselves, to the most familiar one. Hence, for Axtell, our biases are the essential elements that drive mentality of a religious holder into fundamentalism. As he points out, "Our bias blind spot and our tendency to engage in doubtful, sharply asymmetrical characterological trait-ascription are intimately connected" (113). The psychological study of bias takes attraction as one of the explanatory notes for sociologists and psychologists. For instance, Christina Cleveland, an American social psychologist, points out that when social preferences, such as out-group and in-group, take place in any sphere of life, the tendency to classify people and exaggerate differences became more frequent and visible. Another psychologist, Tricia Yurak, explains bias in two different terms. One of the theses is *false consensus effect* which demonstrates a kind of bias that ordinary people create in their mind. She names such bias *cognitive bias*. *False consensus effect* appears when people realize that others are more similar to them. The

second thesis is *pluralistic ignorance* which, according to Yurak, refers to instances of actual similarity interpreted as dissimilarity. Taking psychological research into consideration, Axtell combines them with *counter-inductive thinking* and refers to another philosophical book entitled *Confabulation*, written by William Hirstein, an American philosopher of mind. Hirstein writes, “Confabulation involves the absence of doubt about something one should doubt: one’s memory, one’s ability to move one’s arm, one’s ability to see, and so forth” (116).

- 14 After taking an in-depth look of biases, the second part of the fourth chapter analyzes fundamentalists’ thinking rather than their belief. By doing so, the author gives examples from the other studies that have been done by James Peacock and Tim Pettyjohn, who claimed that narratives are useful analytical windows into fundamentalist religious traditions. As a result, the writer believes that social biases can be a strategy of self-exculpating while they are most of the time motivated religiously.
- 15 The next chapter of the book covers religious teaching. The fifth chapter addresses the relationship between belief, which is a dogmatic and knowledge, which is doxastic. The writer refers to dogmatic belief as an undetermined idea while doxastic means over-determined. By giving various definitions of fideism, the author credits the diversity of a conception of faith. In other words, the interpretation of faith conquers an essential place in the new problems of religious luck. At the same time, Axtell mentions the importance of *parity arguments* and its link with *naïve realism* while he gives us a symmetrical and asymmetrical outlook not only in the philosophy of religion but also in epistemology. Thus, he emphasizes that deism and theism provide the first example of *parity arguments*.
- 16 Consequently, the last chapter of the book focuses on *counter-inductive thinking*, *counter-intuitive ideas*, and the *cognitive science of religion*. The author emphasizes *the cognitive science of religion* (CSR), which is a psychological and evolutionary approach to the religious faith, behavior and rituals. CSR is a scientific study of religion and it focuses on the methods and theory from a very broad range of disciplines including: cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, and cognitive anthropology. Specifically, CSR explores the cause-effect relationship among religious events, considerations, and practices among people. It mainly focuses on how ordinary human psychology reacts to religious phenomena. What Axtell does, is a try of combination between psychology and philosophy: “My point is that only by more closely aligning philosophical normativity with psychological study can we hope to improve real-world critical thinking, as is crucially necessary to address many problems that we face” (205), as he puts it. Regarding the aligning of rational normativity and psychological studies, Axtell describes Olli-Pekka Vainio’s recent book, *Disagreeing Virtuously: Religious Conflict in Interdisciplinary Perspective*, where Vainio underlines the concept of disagreement among religious holders. As a conclusion, chapter six goes into CSR and its relation to the philosophy of religion while the *luck* factor and the concept of *risk* allow us to find out the connections between *counter-inductive fideism* and *counter-intuitive ideas* of popular religiosity.

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