

# One Notion of Religious Truth? *Hilary Putnam's Conceptual Truth and the Justification of Religious Propositions*

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores and gives a preliminary answer to the question whether, from a particular pragmatic pluralist perspective, the notion of truth can have any bearing on religious propositions in today's secularised and multicultural societies. It is argued that the realist and antirealist answers to this question are not satisfactory. Along the lines of an analysis of Hilary Putnam's notion of conceptual truth it is argued that establishing what a true proposition claims, and whether it is actually true, depends on the intellectual and practical abilities we have in the particular field in which the proposition is situated. I conclude that even in a secular or multi-religious society of today, the truth of at least some religious propositions can be assessed in ways similar to non-religious propositions.

## KEYWORDS

religious propositions, conceptual truth, Hilary Putnam, realism, antirealism

## INTRODUCTION

Societies that have to an important extent secularised and that host a multitude of cultures and religions, generally reveal a plurality of religious

and non-religious discourses with their own truth-claims. Often, the claims of one religious group conflict with those of another. In Western society, furthermore, religious claims are frequently thought to lack rationality, while the truth of non-religious claims is thought to be rationally decidable.

I am concerned, here, with the question of whether, in contrast with public opinion in secularised societies today, the notion of truth *can* perhaps function in religious propositions, and if so, what truth then amounts to. Can religious propositions be said to be true or false in a sense similar to propositions within the field of science, of everyday life, or of morality? I will briefly discuss two paradigmatic, but I believe problematic, answers to this question, after which I will turn to Hilary Putnam's pragmatic pluralist views on the nature of truth, and apply these to the question of truth in religious propositions.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of assessing the truth of religious propositions is, of course, a very complex one, and I doubt that one can develop a straightforward answer, be it affirming or negating. I do think, however, that with the analysis and application of Putnam's notion of conceptual truth we can at least provide a number of important preconditions for speaking about true and false religious propositions today.

#### 1. NEITHER THEOLOGICAL REALISM NOR ANTIREALISM

There are two paradigmatic answers to the question posed here. The first position is that of theological antirealism, which I define along the lines of the recent debate in philosophical realism and antirealism between Michael Dummett and others.<sup>2</sup> As Dummett puts it, '[t]he anti-realist insists ... that the meanings of these statements [of a particular disputed class, NB] are

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'propositions' denotes those parts of religious assertions that are thought to claim something that aspires to truth. For reasons that will become clear at the end of this paper, I provisionally take the word 'religious' in religious propositions in a broad sense – which I believe reflects common use, i.e. as stretching from questions about God or gods and issues in biology to matters such as the meaning of life. This is part of the problem and the solution that I propose.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Michael Dummett, *Thought and Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006); Michael Dummett, 'Realism', *Synthese*, 52/1 (1982), 55-112; Crispin Wright, *Saving the differences* (Cambridge 2003); Crispin Wright, *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*, Second ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993). In this debate, realism and antirealism pertain first and foremost to epistemological issues, rather than ontological ones. Michael Devitt's understanding of realism and antirealism is an example of an ontological thesis, which takes relevant objects in a particular class to exist or to be non-existent. Theological antirealism, in this respect, would be the thesis that objects in the class of religion do not actually exist. Cf. Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991).

tied directly to what we count as evidence for them, in such a way that a statement of the disputed class, if true at all, can be true only in virtue of something of which we could know and which we should count as evidence for its truth.<sup>3</sup> In the antirealist picture, truth depends on what we have access to, and true propositions are propositions justified on the basis of evidence.

The theological counterpart is as follows: a theological antirealist rejects the idea that there are true propositions in the field of religion independent of our doxastic abilities, and holds that truth, in religious propositions, equals justification. In that spirit, a theological antirealist such as Don Cupitt holds that there are no true religious propositions apart from those that count as justified on the basis of what we count as evidence for them. Religious statements have no truth-value in light of an objective reality but only by virtue of conventional human discourses.<sup>4</sup> The proposition 'God is love' is true if (and only if) the preconceptions about God and love, in the context in which the proposition is uttered, are such that the proposition counts as justified.

A position that, in the manner that I frame these views, I believe is also theological antirealist, is fideism, the view that truth, in religion, is incommensurable to truth in other fields of interest (in other language games). D.Z. Phillips is a proponent of the view that what the concept of truth amounts to depends on the language game that is at play. Language games in turn depend on particular forms of life.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, the justification of religious propositions can be – and is often regarded to be – incomparable to the justification of propositions in other language games. Fideism holds that truth, in religion, should not be confused with truth in other forms of life, such as those fields in which what is true depends on the evidence one

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1978), 146.

<sup>4</sup> Cupitt's views on whether or not religious propositions can be true or false are not altogether consistent. At points, for example, he holds that they should live up to the religious requirement, which implies that a proposition such as that 'God is love' is true if this corresponds to an apparently universal human religious requirement which, in this case, would require us to love, and not hate, one another (cf. Don Cupitt, 'Free Christianity,' in: Colin Crowder (ed.), *God and Reality: Essays on Christian Non-Realism* (London: Mowbray 1997), 14-25). At other times, however, he holds that nothing can be said with any certainty about a reality outside the human discourses, which undercuts the idea of a universal religious requirement altogether (cf. Don Cupitt, 'Anti-Realist Faith,' in: Joseph Runzo (ed.), *Is God Real?* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press 1993), 45-55).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. e.g. Dewi Z. Phillips, 'In the Beginning was the Proposition, in the Beginning was the Choice, in the Beginning was the Dance,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 21 (1997). 150-174 and Dewi Z. Phillips, 'Wittgensteinianism,' in: William Wainwright, *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2005), 447-471.

has.<sup>6</sup> Religious truth, fideists hold, doesn't aspire to objectivity, i.e. religious propositions don't aim at giving a description of reality. Rather, religious discourse should accord with regulative religious practices. As part of a religious language game, the proposition 'God is love' is justified if this lives up to what is prevalent in the appropriate religious practice. Since, as I take it, a fideist ultimately needs to hold that religious truth doesn't depend on a relation with the way things are, but upon justification on the basis of conventional beliefs, I take it to be antirealist in a sense similar to the theological antirealist take on truth mentioned above.

Without entering into discussion about the prospects and problems of antirealism on a general, philosophical level, we can say that a central problem with the *theological* antirealist notion of truth is that it fails to acknowledge the commonsense idea, in religion as well as beyond, that truth in one way or another depends on the way things are, and that the notion of truth has a meaning that outruns what can be established within the borders of particular discourses.<sup>7</sup> If we want to do justice to this commonsense notion, truth should be tied to reality in such a way that the truth of religious propositions, such as 'God is love', depends on whether reality is such that it accords with them, i.e. on whether reality is such that God is love.

The theological *realist*, in trying to save such a notion of religious truth, argues that religious propositions are true if (and only if) they correspond to the way human-independent reality is. As such, it is coherent with Crispin Wright's contention that '[w]hat seems essential [to realism] is the conception of truth as constituted by *fit* between our beliefs, or statements, and the features of an independent, determinate reality'.<sup>8</sup> In Wright's view on realism, reality confers truth on propositions.<sup>9</sup> *In tandem* with such a view, a theological realist such as Roger Trigg holds that to be objective religious

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<sup>6</sup> Phillips, 'In the Beginning was the Proposition.'

<sup>7</sup> In this commonsense view, I would argue, true religious statements *are* related to reality in such a way that their truth is not entirely conventional, and does eventually depend on reality. The same goes, I believe, for the commonsense atheist idea that religious statements are false because they fail to do justice to the way the world is – not because those who hold the religious propositions are not in the right epistemic circumstances to hold the propositions justifiably.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Realism, Meaning, and Truth*.

<sup>9</sup> If one were to combine an ontological realism concerning religion – the idea that there is a religious reality – with a coherentist notion of truth, this would, in the picture sketched here, lead to a theological antirealist position in as far as, in a coherentist view, reality doesn't confer truth on one's statements.

claims should correspond with (religious) reality.<sup>10</sup> As a kind of natural theology, Trigg's work reveals the difficulty of balancing between giving reason a role in the justification of religious propositions that equals the role of reason in say physics, while holding on to revelation as a necessary and fundamental component of religious truth-claims. I take it that, even if theological realism of this sort would want to restrict the justification of religious propositions to reason, this would not work. For, since reason doesn't generate the access to religious reality that is required to be able to verify whether our religious propositions fit with the way religious reality is, reason alone could never determine truth in religious propositions.<sup>11</sup> Only immediate access to religious reality – revelation – can facilitate an assessment of our religious statements, since only immediate access allows us to establish whether our propositions correspond to religious reality.

The correspondence notion of truth in religious propositions, I believe, thus necessitates the introduction of revelatory experiences. This, however, renders it unclear how propositions can be assessed, especially in a secular society. If people have revelatory experiences at all, these may very well be contradictory. How then can (a lack of) revelation function in showing which religious propositions are and which are not true? Even if revelation has the same status as reason, as Trigg maintains, it remains unclear what to do if two conflicting religious claims, which both live up to the requirements of reasonable scrutiny, are defended by appeal to revelation. If one religious person claims that 'God asks us to love our enemy' while another holds that 'God asks us to hate our enemy', and both do so on the basis of a revelatory experience, no rational decision between conflicting religious claims seems possible.

Regarding propositions concerning religious aspects of reality, therefore, what we need is, on the one hand, not to discount the notion of truth, either by supposing that religious propositions have no bearing on truth or by taking truth to amount to no more than some kind of living up to epistemic practices. On the other hand, the notion of truth should not be such that it can have no function whatsoever in reasoning about the justification of our

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. in his influential Roger Trigg, 'Theological Realism and Antirealism,' in: Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (eds.) *A Companion to the Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997), 213-220.

<sup>11</sup> Like many realists in other fields of inquiry theological realism presupposes a duality of mind and world. Although this seems to be an equally problematic facet of theological realism as its notion of correspondence truth, and even though another central part of Hilary Putnam's work aims to do away with such an 'interface' notion of mind and world, I will not discuss this matter in this paper.

propositions within the field of religion discourse (as is the case in the theological realist notion of truth as correspondence), because it necessarily invokes an instance, i.e. revelation, which is in its relevant aspects immune to reasoning.

## 2. PUTNAM'S NOTION OF CONCEPTUAL TRUTH

I turn to Hilary Putnam's conceptual notion of truth since I take it that with that notion of truth he manages to go beyond traditional realist and antirealist viewpoints,<sup>12</sup> and to draw up a notion of religious truth that accommodates some of the requirements for truth in religious propositions listed above. I will restrict myself to one aspect of his notion of truth, the conceptual aspect, while leaving other important (pragmatic pluralist) aspects, such as the entanglement of fact and value, largely unaddressed.<sup>13</sup>

Putnam takes current forms of realism to combine (on an ontological level) a Cartesian *cum* materialist notion of reality with (on an epistemological level) a substantive notion of truth, as a property that some propositions gain in virtue of living up to one discourse-transcendent requirement.<sup>14</sup> These realists, whom Putnam calls metaphysical realists, face what he calls the antimony of realism, i.e. the difficulty of relating language to reality when one

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<sup>12</sup> Putnam's own, former, traditional realism was, as he put it, a 'rejection of logical positivism, operationalism, and related positions' (Hilary Putnam, 'Between Scylla and Charybdis: Does Dummett have a Way through?' in: R. E. Auxier and L. E. Hahn, *The Philosophy of Michael Dummett* (Chicago, IL: Open Court 2007), 156-7; cf. also Fred Stoutland, 'Putnam on Truth,' in: Martin Gustafsson and Lars Hertzberg, *The Practice of Language* (Dordrecht: Kluwer 2002) 147-176). Even in his internal realist period, Putnam never adopted Dummett's global antirealism. The internal realist holds that we should neither take truth to consist of a correspondence to these supposed fixed objects nor as mere justification. Instead, Putnam argued, truth is 'idealized justification' or '(idealized) rational acceptability' (Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1981), 49; Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1988), 115 (where the brackets have disappeared)). Other than in the antirealist view, in internal realism truth is not reduced to an epistemic notion, but rather '[t]ruth and rational acceptability are *interdependent* notions' (Putnam, *Representation and Reality*, 115).

<sup>13</sup> As said, I will not go into the issue of the interface picture of mind and world either, even though I believe it to be a salient second feature of a strong resolution to the problem of the justification of religious propositions.

<sup>14</sup> Basic to 'this Cartesian *cum* materialist picture' (Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life* (ed. James Conant) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1994), 283; cf. also Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press 2000), 15-9, 43-8, 165-6) is 'the idea that perception involves an interface between the mind and the "external" objects we perceive' (Putnam, *The Threefold Cord*, 43).

presupposes an interface between reality and our understanding of it.<sup>15</sup> Realists call upon a particular notion of correspondence truth to bridge it, while antirealists call upon an epistemic notion of truth in order to dodge it.

The antinomy of realism resides in the postulation of this dualistic notion of mind and world which necessitates showing that one has some referential access to reality, in order to be able to speak of true propositions. One of the pivotal things that we need in order to get out of this problematic situation,<sup>16</sup> Putnam holds, is to go beyond the substantive notion of truth; truth is not a property that particular propositions can gain if they live up to a single, discourse-transcendent requirement, i.e. of corresponding to reality.

In Putnam's alternative picture, truth is not something beyond a claim, but coincides with a claim. Whereas in the substantive notion of truth, truth is a property that a proposition may acquire in addition to its assertoric content, the conceptual notion of truth is that truth is already present in a (true) proposition's assertoric force.<sup>17</sup> As a concept which is part of practical reasoning, truth doesn't always consist of description of ordinary fact, i.e. of describing 'ordinary empirical properties of empirical objects'.<sup>18</sup> Neither should we presume that truth may consist of 'a description of non-natural relations between [supposedly, NB] transcendent 'objects'.<sup>19</sup>

One of three central aspects of the notion of conceptual truth is that a proposition may be true if seriously asserting its negation makes no sense. Since making sense of the negation of a proposition is a necessary condition for practically applying it, being able to make sense of it is a necessary component of the truth of the proposition. E.g. the proposition that 'one should gain informed consent before giving people trail medicine', supposing that it is true, is not true because it corresponds to a world of (super)sensible reali-

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<sup>15</sup> This problem with the Cartesian *cum* materialist picture of perception, mind and world is the first part of the antinomy of realism. The second part of the antinomy, which I cannot discuss here, is made up of the difficulties concerning reference and experience.

<sup>16</sup> The other being the rejection of the interface notion of mind and world.

<sup>17</sup> I am not sure whether, in Putnam's view, all truth is conceptual in the sense that the various ways in which propositions in different fields may be true are varieties of the general conceptual nature of truth, or that conceptual truth is a variety next to other varieties such as correspondence. In *Ethics without Ontology*, Putnam seems to suggest that the conceptual notion of truth not so much replaces the substantive notion but sets it aside as being mistaken both in its monist view of truth and in its idea that truth would be a substantive property (cf. Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2004), esp. Lecture 2 and 3). For now, I will proceed from the latter view.

<sup>18</sup> Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 59.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

ties in which this is the case, but may be true because, with all practical and intellectual abilities that we have, its negation makes no sense to us.

A second central aspect of the conceptual notion of truth is that what counts as a true proposition depends on the field in which it is employed (*pace* the hegemonic view of substantive truth as always consisting of a correspondence of the propositional content with reality). The conceptual abilities that we have concerning a particular discourse are interdependent on the particular practical abilities that we have within that field. 'We learn what mathematical truth is by learning the practices and standards of mathematics itself, including the practice of *applying* mathematics.'<sup>20</sup> But it works the other way around as well: we learn how to work within such a field by learning what the concepts (such as simplicity and coherence) amount to. Mathematical assertions are exemplary of how meaningful propositions are possible without their objectivity depending on the correspondence to supposed objects. With the conceptual resources we have now, such as the rules of simplicity and coherence (but these may change), it makes no sense to negate particular mathematical propositions such as ' $2 + 2 = 4$ '.

This, Putnam holds, counts for moral statements too. There can be indicative ethical statements without those statements being – in one way or another – descriptions of (super)sensible fact, but whose serious negation makes no sense (unless perhaps one is pathological). The statement 'it is wrong to torture a newborn' cannot sensibly be negated. However, and this is linked primarily to the second component of conceptual truths, 'one cannot say ... simply', as one *can* about logical truths, 'that [all] ethical truths are not descriptions, because it is a matter of *which* ethical statements one has in mind.'<sup>21</sup> Some moral propositions – or parts of them – *are* descriptions of fact. A statement such as 'abortion is killing a fetus' can have a predominantly descriptive meaning in the sense that it aims to tell us something about what abortion means, while it can also have a normative meaning in that it tells us that abortion is wrong as it involves killing (or murdering) a fetus.

Of course, some negations make less sense than others. While it makes no sense, with the beliefs we currently have, to deny that 'all bachelors are unmarried', it is often easier to make sense of the negation of other conceptual truths, such as those in the moral domain mentioned above. This is the third aspect of Putnam's notion of conceptual truth: '[c]onceptual truth is a

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<sup>20</sup> Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology*, 66.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

matter of *degree*.<sup>22</sup> Even though, however, the truth of a moral proposition may be not as hard as a truth about middle-sized objects, the notion of truth can still do its work. This aspect will prove of central importance when it comes to religious conceptual truths.

Thus, the Putnamian notion of conceptual truth revolves around the views (1) that for at least some truths, i.e. those Putnam calls conceptual truths but that others have often called ‘analytic truths’, it is the case that they are true because, with the background notions that we currently have, we cannot seriously make sense of its negation, (2) that what we can and cannot sensibly negate depends on the conceptual and practical abilities that we currently have, and (3) that we can make more sense of some negations than other. Though as a conceptual notion truth can be intrinsically linked to propositions in any field of practical reasoning, what it amounts to in a particular field depends on the practical and intellectual abilities we have in that particular field.

### 3. CONCEPTUAL TRUTH IN RELIGIOUS PROPOSITIONS

Can propositions in the field of religion be said to be true or false in a sense similar to the fields mentioned, and how does this facilitate the assessment of religious propositions? Though there are also more empirical truths in religious discourses, such as those pertaining to religious experiences, I take it that at least some religious propositions can be said to be comparable to the notion of conceptual truth laid out above.

According to the picture I have sketched, we would have to discern what the practical abilities are concerning particular religious propositions. There are many fields of inquiry or discourses in which we utter religious claims: we make religious claims about physics, history, morality, politics, the meaning of life, and so on.<sup>23</sup> Depending on the practical abilities that we have in these different fields, our conceptual abilities have a particular content and use (and the other way around). Which of these uses we should apply to the propositions depends on these contexts.

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<sup>22</sup> Putnam, *Representation and Reality*, 133; cf. also Jennifer Case, ‘The Heart of Putnam’s Pluralistic Realism,’ *Revue Internationale De Philosophie* 4/218 (2001), 417-430, esp. 423.

<sup>23</sup> E.g. claims about the natural world (‘The world was created in 6 days’), about history (‘Muhammad received the words of the Qur’an from archangel Gabriel’), in morality (‘If you follow the Eightfold Path you will lead a moral life’), and about the meaning of life (‘Even if I don’t live to see it, my offspring will once witness the Dutch Lions winning the World Cup Soccer finals’).

In this view, the negation of specific religious propositions would not make sense to adherents of particular religions. It would be hard for someone who firmly believes – i.e. whose life is centred around the conviction – that one should make the most of one’s life to make sense of the negation of a proposition such as ‘it’s a shame to let one’s life go to waste’. It would be hard for someone whose life ‘depends’ on a loving God to make sense of the negation of ‘God is love’. Like in other fields of practical reasoning, the conceptual abilities that we have concerning religious discourse are interdependent on the particular practical abilities that we have within that field.<sup>24</sup>

It is in the interaction with reality – which includes those parts of reality that make us reflect on issues such as the meaning of life – that we acquire particular practical abilities concerning e.g. the issue of the meaning of life, and we that come to make particular claims about the meaning of life. Our conceptual abilities are tied to reality, as these depend on our practical abilities – our means of dealing with reality – and vice versa. Revision and assessment is in that case possible in light of our conceptual abilities. Thus, in the end, religious aspects of reality may confer truth on those statements. As such, we retain a realist notion of truth in religious propositions.

The notion that conceptual truth is a matter of degree, I take it, is of central importance when it concerns religious truths. The conceptual and practical abilities that we have differ considerably when it comes to the religious sphere. Correspondingly, our abilities to make sense of the negation of particular propositions differs too. Nevertheless, in this view, those propositions the negation of which we have a hard time making sense of, may be called conceptually true.

This view allows space for truth in at least some religious propositions without invoking the in this respect problematic notion of revelation: the truth of some religious propositions can be assessed using the methods available in the fields they stand in (physics, history, etc.), and some propositions (e.g. in the fields of the meaning of life and the qualities of God) can be conceptually true or false, i.e. their negation cannot be meaningfully adopted. Though the truth or falsity of some religious propositions may be firmer than others, I would contend, against theological antirealism, that truth need not be alien to religious propositions, and, in contrast to fideism, that religious truth need not be incommensurable to truth in other domains. Nor need it,

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<sup>24</sup> Our ability to understand the concepts of God or of the meaning of life are interdependent with our abilities to apply these concepts (intellectually or practically).

*pace* traditional theological realism, in a problematic monist manner, depend on revelatory insights.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This view of truth in religious propositions urges us to differentiate between the various fields in which we utter our religious propositions and to assess them with the various practical and intellectual abilities that we have in those fields. In that sense, there is not just one way in which a religious proposition can be true or false (or neither). Furthermore, we can examine and revise at least some of our propositions in light of our conceptual abilities within the specific field of interest – conceptual abilities we have in virtue of our interaction with reality. In this sense, religious propositions can be assessed in ways similar to assessing other, secular propositions. If e.g., with the proposition that ‘Adam was the first human being’ one intends to make a historical claim, then in assessing it one has to apply the abilities that we have in that field. Other propositions, such as that ‘God is love,’ may be true, because with all the abilities that we have in that particular religious field – and that we have gained in our dealings with reality – we can make no real sense of the idea that God would not be love.

In a society with an rich diversity of religious discourses and propositions, where religion is not taken for granted, appealing to shared revelations to justify our religious propositions is hardly an option. If, however, following Putnam, we keep our notion of truth as close as possible to how it functions in the various fields of practical reasoning, it may sometimes be conceptual, i.e. denoting what we already *do* when we make particular claims, then this can provide us with a useful definition of religious truth today.

The function of the notion of truth is similar in different fields of practical reasoning – religious and non-religious: in all these cases, it denotes what the true proposition already is, i.e. ‘true.’ Establishing, however, what the true proposition claims, and whether it is actually true, depends on the intellectual and practical abilities one has in the particular field in which the proposition is situated. Thus, even in a secular or multi-religious society of today, the truth of at least some religious propositions can be assessed in ways similar to non-religious propositions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> I thank all of those who entered into the discussion at the presentation of this paper at the conference as well as two anonymous reviewers for valuable remarks on an earlier version of this paper.

