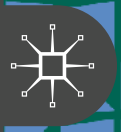

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Religious Knowledge

James Kellenberger

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1

Introduction

Abstract This chapter introduces religious knowledge by describing how different it is from nonreligious knowledge in its goal and value. Francis Bacon saw knowledge of the world as the means of gaining power over the world, and contemporary science is valued in great part for the ways its discoveries allow us to control nature. Religious knowledge is different. Its end is not power over nature. The central questions of the book are identified, including the issue of the nature of religious knowledge and the issue of the relation of religious knowledge to faith.

This introductory chapter concludes with brief descriptions of the topics and concerns of the chapters that follow.

Keywords Francis Bacon • Religious knowledge • Scientific knowledge

Knowledge, it has been said, is power. The bald aphorism "Knowledge is power" has been attributed to Francis Bacon (1561–1626), but whether or not he is the author, the force and accuracy of the dictum resonates with his thinking and with the epistemological orientation of modernity. Bacon observed that the end of scientific enquiry is "to endow human life

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with new discoveries and powers."[1] The means of this enquiry was a new empirical methodology, which Bacon elaborated in his *Novum Organum*, a "New Organon," a new set of principles for acquiring knowledge that was to replace the old *Organon* (a collection of Aristotle's works on logic).

Emphasis on empiricism is the hallmark of natural science as it developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Power over nature with its dividends for the human condition was to be the outcome of Bacon's "Active Science." In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and into the nineteenth century and later, the natural sciences and their adjunct technologies endowed humanity with power over nature through discoveries in physics, chemistry, anatomy, physiology, and other natural sciences, resulting in the steam engine, gas and then electric lighting, medical advances, radio, and in the twentieth-century computers and the internet. The influences of an increase in scientific knowledge are contemporaneously felt on every side.

Religious knowledge, knowledge of God, or other religious matters that theologians or religious believers might come to is different. Its end is not power over nature or the material improvement of the human condition. There are two primary questions that this study will address regarding religious knowledge: How is such knowledge to be treated religiously? and What is its significance in relation to faith? As we will see, in the Christian tradition there are threads of religious thinking and sensibility that question the very idea of religious knowledge and see knowledge as antithetical to religion. The second question arises for both Thomistic and existential ways of understanding faith. Other questions will be treated as well. One is: Does secular knowledge have anything to contribute to religious knowledge? Religious knowledge can be bifurcated into spiritual knowledge, come to by religious experience or given to one spiritually, and theological knowledge arrived at by theological reflection. It may be that secular knowledge can contribute to theological reasoning and so to theological knowledge even if not to spiritual knowledge. Such a theological role was given to secular, and pagan, knowledge by medieval and earlier Christian theologians. Another related question is this: How does modern scientific knowledge relate to religious knowledge embedded in teachings? This question addresses the tensions between scientific knowledge and religious doctrine or teachings, but

doctrines and teachings relating to creation and more have been promulgated and received as religious knowledge. In the modern period—after 1450—the question of the bearing of scientific knowledge on the religious knowledge embodied in religious doctrines and teachings came to the fore.

All these questions will be addressed in the chapters that follow this introductory chapter. In the main they will be considered as they have arisen in the Christian tradition and been treated by Christian theologians, thinkers, mystics, and others, though we will occasionally refer to other religious traditions, and in one chapter, we will consider the place given to religious knowledge in Eastern nontheistic traditions. Our concern is not to adjudicate between different knowledge claims found in the different traditions or with the question whether alleged religious knowledge qualifies as genuine knowledge. Our main focus will be on the internal issue of the importance of religious knowledge for religion and on the issue of the relationship between faith and religious knowledge as they are found within the Christian tradition.

In Chap. 2 we will examine the different assessments of knowledge and belief provided by the Western philosophical tradition, on the one hand, and by the Abrahamic religious traditions, on the other hand, particularly by Christianity. If in philosophical thought, and, in general, in Western culture, knowledge is more valuable, in the Christian tradition, belief in the form of faith is of greater value. In this chapter the differences between knowledge and belief that account for these divergent valuations are given attention, as are different forms of religious belief.

A certain ambivalence about knowledge is found in the Christian tradition going back to the New Testament and the letters of St. Paul. The extent to which the religious concern is with natural knowledge—knowledge of the world—is explored in Chap. 3. Within the Christian tradition there is a mystical tradition of unknowing, represented by Dionysius (or Pseudo-Dionsyius), the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and others. In this mystical tradition, also discussed in Chap. 3, even spiritual knowledge is to be discounted.

Chapter 4 addresses the contrast between the way curiosity is regarded in scientific disciplines and the way it has been regarded in the Christian tradition. In the main part of its discussion, this chapter examines the

opposition between scientific knowledge resulting from scientific discovery and theoretical advances, and also religious knowledge embedded in doctrine and church teachings. Three historical examples of this opposition are presented and discussed. One relates to the Copernican heliocentric system. The second relates to Darwinism. And the third relates to the cosmological theory of the Big Bang. Various resolutions of the perceived incompatibility between these instances of scientific knowledge and traditionally received religious knowledge are considered.

In Chap. 5 two contrasting views within the Christian tradition regarding the place of religious knowledge in religion are treated. One, which gives a place to proving God's existence, and hence to coming to religious knowledge that God exists, has a primary exponent in St. Thomas Aquinas. The other, which sees religious knowledge as antithetical to religious faith, is found in Søren Kierkegaard's pseudonymous work *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. The rationales for each of these views as offered by Aquinas and Kierkegaard are presented. It is observed that this division contemporaneously continues in religion in the views of such thinkers as John Baillie and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others.

A school of philosophy of religion emerged in the twentieth century that was strongly influenced by the thought of the later Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein had denied there was a place for knowledge in religion; this Neo-Wittgensteinian school, however, presented a more nuanced treatment of religious knowledge while remaining on Wittgenstein's side of the issue. In Chap. 6 the approach to religion of this Neo-Wittgensteinian school and its position on religious knowledge are examined.

In his pseudonymous corpus Kierkegaard provides two treatments of religious knowledge. One is that found in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, whose pseudonymous author is Johannes Climacus. The second—that faith allows and even requires religious knowledge—is, it is argued, implicit in the earlier *Fear and Trembling*, for which Kierkegaard used the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio. Each work addresses the nature of religious faith, although in different methodological ways. Chapter 7 examines these two Kierkegaardian ways of understanding the requirements of faith, concentrating on the view of *Fear and Trembling*. Although Kierkegaard claimed to be neither Johannes Climacus nor