

# Agnomancy: Conjuring Ignorance, Sustaining Belief

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**Abstract:** *Recent years have seen an increased interest in the construction and exploitation of ignorance, with the establishment of a field of agnotology (ignorance studies). This effort has focused almost exclusively on governments and corporations, though little or none on religion. After exploring work in agnotology and introducing the concept of agnomancy (the creation or conjuring of ignorance), the present article offers a preliminary application of these perspectives to religion, investigating what light agnotology sheds on religion and when and for what reasons religion engages in agnomancy.*

**Keywords:** Agnomancy, Agnotology, Ignorance Studies, Religion, Religious Faith, Philosophy of Religion, Epistemology, Knowledge, Cognitive Faculties, Confirmation Bias

## Introduction

“Consequently, ‘will to truth’ does *not* mean ‘I do not want to let myself be deceived’ but—there is no alternative—‘I will not deceive, not even myself.’”<sup>1</sup>

Richard Swinburne characterized philosophy of religion as “an examination of the meaning and justification of religious beliefs.”<sup>2</sup> For that purpose and others, a subfield of philosophy of religion called religious epistemology was invented as “the study of how subjects’ religious beliefs can have, or fail to have, some form of positive epistemic status (such as knowledge, justification, warrant, and rationality) and whether they even need such status appropriate to their kind.”<sup>3</sup> Presumably then, professional philosophers, as well as lay believers (not to mention secular critics) would and should be centrally concerned with the truth of specific religious beliefs or

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 201, [doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511812088](https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511812088); italics in original.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Swinburne, “Religion, Problems of the Philosophy of” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 763, [doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199264797.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780199264797.001.0001).

<sup>3</sup> Trent Dougherty and Chris Tweedt, “Religious Epistemology,” *Philosophy Compass* 10, no. 8 (2015): 547, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12185>.



entire religious systems. And an honest hearing on religion requires an objective assessment of those beliefs and a willingness to jettison them if they fail established epistemic tests of justification.

In an ideal world, such is how the pursuit of religious or any other kind of knowledge proceeds. However, we are all too familiar with the resistance to disconfirming evidence and argument, not only by the religious devotee but also the political partisan, the conspiracy theorist, or the holder of other dubious opinions and positions. A case in point is the Harvard-educated paleontologist and young-earth creationist, Kurt Wise, who confessed, “If all the evidence in the universe turned against creationism, I would be the first to admit it, but I would still be a creationist because that is what the Word of God seems to indicate.”<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the analysis of knowledge and knowing must also deal with non-knowledge and non-knowing, not only as an absence of knowledge but as a refusal to know or to allow knowledge to sway one’s beliefs (i.e., Wise would and does persist in his creationist belief in full view of and in spite of—ironically and perversely, as we will see below, perhaps *because of*—his awareness with the facts against his belief).

Scholars have attended to, and educators have despaired over, the tenacity of beliefs and opinions in the face of nullifying facts or indeed even the fortification of such nullified positions. An emerging field of inquiry explicitly insists that we must augment the study of knowledge with the study of non-knowledge *as a productive and produced force* and not merely as a pre-epistemological vacuum. Curiously, writers on non-knowledge have not generally extended their investigation to religion; and unsurprisingly, religion scholars have not applied the concept and literature of non-knowledge to their subject matter. This essay will begin to fill that gap, surveying the research on non-knowledge and relating it to religion, considering how the processes of non-knowledge contribute to the survival of religion among ordinary believers and obstruct the candid adjudication of religious claims among scholars.

### **Agnotology: The Study of Non-Knowing**

In scholarly and popular thinking about knowledge, ignorance is too often construed simply as the epistemic state before the acquisition of knowledge: a person initially does not know, then encounters the facts and subsequently knows. From this perspective, any absence of knowledge—or even worse, any perseverance of false ideas and beliefs—is nothing more than

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<sup>4</sup> John F. Ashton, ed., *In Six Days: Why Fifty Scientists Choose to Believe in Creation* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2000), 355.

### **Conclusion:**

In his classic essay on religion as a cultural system, Clifford Geertz characterized religion as a society's sense of the "really real," seeing it as "formulating conceptions of a general order of existence" and "clothing these conceptions with ... an aura of factuality."<sup>69</sup> The "really real" implies factuality and thus knowledge, indeed knowledge of the highest kind; yet both formulation and clothed aura suggest quite the opposite, that is, not fact but manufacture. He further explained that the ascribed and heavily-defended reality of religion is "devoted to producing, intensifying, and, so far as possible, rendering inviolable" its purported truths that are otherwise vulnerable to "the discordant revelations of secular experience."<sup>70</sup>

Knowledge and ignorance are as old as humanity and surely as intertwined as knowledge and power was for Foucault; we should probably revise the Foucauldian perspective to include power/knowledge/ignorance. The knowledge/ignorance nexus is inescapable because humans are a cultural species, a species that can and must invent imaginary worlds and inhabit them. Although distributed throughout culture, ignorance (like knowledge) is most often cultivated and manipulated when power and wealth are at stake, as well as when hierarchy and identity-protective cognition are operative. Significantly, religion is one of the principal cultural systems in which power, wealth, hierarchy, and identity protection are joined and, therefore, where the knowledge/ignorance dynamic is crucial and overt.

It is incumbent upon agnotologists, then, to widen their focus to include religion and upon professional religious epistemologists and lay believers to confront the agnomancy that pervades (and arguably sustains) their various belief systems.

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<sup>69</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

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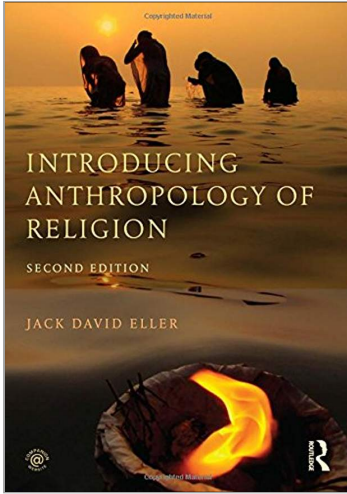
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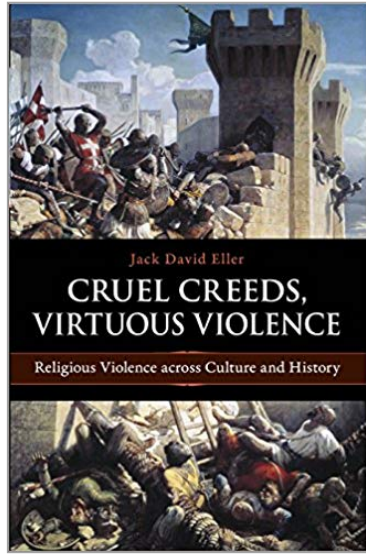
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