

Getting Things Less Wrong:

Religion and the Role of Communities in Successfully Transmitting Beliefs

Abstract:

I use the case of religious belief to argue that communal institutions are crucial to successfully transmitting knowledge to a broad public. The transmission of maximally counterintuitive religious concepts can only be explained by reference to the communities that sustain and pass them on. The shared life and vision of such communities allows believers to trust their fellow adherents. Repeated religious practices provide reinforced exposure while the comprehensive and structured nature of religious worldviews helps to limit distortion. I argue that the phenomenon of theological incorrectness noted by many cognitive scientists of religion is not as worrisome as it may appear. Believers may be employing models that are good enough for practical knowledge, as much of the relevant sociological evidence suggests. Further, communities can help us both in acquiring our initial beliefs and in correcting our errors.

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1. Introduction: Conditions for Transmission

Contemporary epistemologists typically offer norms for testimonial exchanges that are supposed to provide sufficient conditions for passing on knowledge.¹ However, meeting these norms (e.g. having a sincere and competent speaker addressing a receptive hearer) is often not enough to consistently and effectively transmit knowledge over time, particularly when passing on complex and counterintuitive claims to a broad population. Students do not always learn what knowledgeable teachers tell them, even when they trust their teachers. Further, those who do learn often fail to retain their knowledge. For example, those who have successfully taken high school or college physics courses often give intuitive but wrong answers when asked to predict the motion of objects (McCloskey and Kohl, 1983). The problem here is not a lack of confidence in the sources from which they learned, but the challenge of fully assimilating difficult concepts.

¹ Most discussions of testimony take a one-one exchange between an individual speaker and an individual hearer as their model (recent influential accounts include Lackey 2008 and Fricker 1994; see Greco 2012 for an opinionated survey of the state of the field). Linda Zagzebski's discussion of epistemic authority and the role of communities in belief is a recent exception (2012).

If our goal is to figure out how knowledge is effectively passed on through testimony, we need more than just an account of the relevant norms that hearers and speakers should satisfy. We also need to articulate the practices and supports that enable people to receive and retain knowledge from testimonial sources. Ethics needs to consider not just what ethical norms are, but also how they relate to human moral psychology, so that we can effectively live out and act upon them. So too, epistemology needs to consider not just what testimonial norms are, but also how these norms relate to human cognition, so that we can develop ecologies that successfully transmit and reinforce knowledge.

This is particularly important when it comes to beliefs about reality and our place in it, the kind of beliefs that orient and guide us. Testimonial transmission plays a crucial role in two of the most influential sources for forming such beliefs, science and religion. Almost all of us get most of our religious and scientific information from small groups of scientists, religious leaders, and those who communicate on these subjects. Can the religious and scientific concepts of these small groups be successfully passed on to a wider public audience?

I will argue that communal institutions are vital to realizing this possibility. They can help members of the community assimilate challenging beliefs by presenting them repeatedly in a variety of contexts. Recognizing the importance of these social and communal factors allows us to be more humble about the extent of our own personal contributions to achieving and preserving knowledge. Developing strong ecologies of knowledge and being an active member of epistemic communities is a key part of intellectual humility: it is only through such participation that we can properly benefit from what others know.

On my view, there are three key factors that enable general transmission to be successful.² All three of them can best be met in communities. The first has to do with the

² These factors are not intended to be either necessary or sufficient conditions. In some instances, transmission can succeed even though these conditions are not met. Conversely, meeting these conditions does not ensure that the vast majority of hearers will successfully receive the message (facts about the content of the transmission and the status of the hearers make a significant difference). My claim is that they are key factors insofar as they significantly increase the probability of successful transmission to a broad population and play an important role in explaining testimonial success. An example of a key factor of this sort would be the relationship between winning hockey games and having more shots than the opposing team, as measured by metrics like Corsi and Fenwick (“Stats Made Simple Part 1: Corsi & Fenwick,” accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.seconddcityhockey.com/2013/12/4/5167404/nhl-stats-made-simple-part-1-corsi-fenwick>; NHL, “Enhanced Statistics,” accessed July 15, 2016, <http://www.nhl.com/stats/enhanced>). Having more shots is predictive of success and is a causal factor in explaining winning, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for victory.

hearers' attitude towards the speaker. In general, hearers need to trust their sources to receive knowledge; they need to be convinced of their good will and competence. This is the *Trust Condition*. Most epistemologists of testimony acknowledge some version of this condition. When it is not met, the hearer is not in a position to receive knowledge, even if the speaker has it.³ The trust requirement is particularly relevant in the case of general transmission, because here most of us do not have enough independent knowledge to learn from those we do not trust, in the way that experts might be able to. If we suspect that the speakers have different goals and values, we may discount what they tell us and fail to receive knowledge.

Secondly, we need sufficient access to the knowledge, including clear initial communication and repeated reminders. We easily forget something that we only hear once, so claims, particularly ones that we only make use of occasionally, need to be repeated and reinforced. This is the *Reinforced Exposure Condition*. Clarity is important for meeting this condition. The more complex the idea, the more repetition and varied exposition required to give us sufficient access to it. In the case of knowledge that is to be communicated to the general public, we need avenues of transmission that will consistently and accurately communicate claims so that the public gets sufficient opportunity to receive them. Accounts of testimony that take one-off informational exchanges as paradigmatic often miss out on the importance of this condition for actual transmission.

Thirdly, even if the hearers trust the speakers and are repeatedly exposed to their testimony, the mode of communication and the way it is received need to possess sufficient fidelity. This is the *Minimal Distortion Condition*. If the way knowledge is communicated modifies or obscures its content or implications, then the transmission fails. This is of particular importance for public communication, where the goal is distributing knowledge to almost everyone. Here, again, clarity is important, as is differentiation. To avoid distortion, you will need to have clear and well-defined messages that distinguish between what is central and what is peripheral in a way that almost everyone can hear and understand. Further, to successfully assimilate and use these messages we often need to repeatedly be

³ If I think you are incompetent at identifying birds, then I cannot come to know that this bird is a Western scrub jay on the basis of your testimony. Further, even if I think you are competent, I cannot come to know if I am not convinced of your goodwill and sincerity, as in Jennifer Lackey's example of the untrustworthy whale-watching captain, who knows that whales were sighted yesterday, but would have told me that even if it were false (2006, 436–437).

corrected. As we will see, cognitive science suggests that in many cases the goal will be to have conceptions that are less wrong, not ones that are perfect.

I will use the case of religious beliefs to argue that communities are central to meeting these three conditions and enabling successful transmission of knowledge to a broad public. The transmission of many religious concepts, particularly maximally counterintuitive concepts, depends on the communal practice of religion. The persistence of these beliefs cannot be explained other than by reference to the communities that sustain and pass them on throughout the centuries. I argue that the phenomenon of theological incorrectness noted by many proponents of cognitive science of religion (CSR) is not as worrisome as it may appear. Even if many believers exhibit some theological incorrectness when explaining and applying their religious beliefs, they may still be employing models that are good enough for practical knowledge, as much of the relevant sociological evidence suggests. On my view, our goal as those learning from others (whether in science or religion) should be to have beliefs that are open to correction and that can serve the requisite purposes, even if they are underdeveloped or even somewhat incorrect. Communities help us both in acquiring our initial beliefs and in correcting our errors.

2. Religious Concepts: The Minimally and the Maximally Counterintuitive

Why focus on the case of religious beliefs, particularly since many philosophers would deny that there is, in fact, any religious knowledge?⁴ There are several reasons to do so. Religious beliefs are typically formed in social contexts: in families and local communities. Religion is clearly a sphere where social dynamics play a large role, so we can see what communities can do. Further, many religions have existed and continued to adapt over millennia, giving us evidence about religious stability or instability over time. There are few other belief systems with similar records of both change and persistence. Scholars have also engaged in extensive comparative study of religions, examining which elements show up repeatedly across cultures and which seem to be more idiosyncratic to a particular religion. By contrast, highly specialized, labor and capital intensive, institutionalized scientific research is a recent innovation, as are the means for transmitting the results of such investigation. It is only in the last seventy years that some countries have begun to require upper secondary

⁴ My interest is in the conditions needed for successful transmission *in addition to the epistemic qualities the testifier needs*, so I am not going to discuss to what extent religious or scientific communities meet all the conditions for good testifiers, but discuss what they need to do to transmit knowledge, proceeding from the conditional assumption that some of them are good testifiers.

education, the minimum level necessary for attaining knowledge of most sciences.⁵ Thus our information concerning how successful science education can or should be or what levels of comprehension it can achieve is actually quite limited. Looking at the transmission of religious beliefs can help us to see the role that communities play and what they can or cannot do.⁶

CSR Scholars have argued that many religious ideas are easy to pass on and retain because they fit with humans' intuitive or maturationally natural conceptions. Justin Barrett notes that many

religious concepts, including concepts of gods, ghosts, and spirits, may be counted within a large class of concepts I have termed “minimally counterintuitive” (MCI) concepts. These MCIs may be characterized as meeting most of the assumptions that describers and categorizers generate—thus being easy to understand, remember, and believe—but as violating just enough of these assumptions to be attention demanding and to have an unusually captivating ability to assist in the explanation of certain experiences. These MCIs commonly occupy important roles in mythologies, legends, folktales, religious writings, and stories of peoples all over the world. (Barrett 2004; cf. Boyer 2001; McCauley 2011)

These concepts take a maturationally natural notion that most humans possess, like the concept of an intentional agent, and tweak it slightly (e.g. a spirit or ghost as an *invisible* intentional agent that otherwise possesses the characteristics we intuitively ascribed to intentional agents). However, not all religious concepts fall in this category: some concepts such as an atemporal deity or a triune God are very counterintuitive. They depart severely from the intuitive ontology with which most humans operate.

Many proponents of CSR predict that religions that involve such maximally counterintuitive beliefs will either die out or be modified so that their beliefs become less counterintuitive. They present both anthropological studies and controlled experiments to

⁵ Less than 50% of those born in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (which have the highest rates of higher education) in the 1930s completed upper secondary education (i.e. the equivalent of American high school) and only around 15% completed tertiary education (OECD 2011, p. 14, chart 1, <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/48642586.pdf>). In 2013, in OECD countries 33.3% of 25-64 year olds had completed tertiary education (including technical training and non-university degrees), 44.0% had completed upper secondary education and 23.5% had only completed below upper secondary education (<https://data.oecd.org/eduatt/adult-education-level.htm#indicator-chart>).

⁶ Further, if the skeptic of religion is right and all the maximally counterintuitive religious beliefs I discuss below are false, then their transmission over time becomes even more impressive evidence for the ability of communities to successfully transmit their beliefs. If a well-organized community can do that with a false and maximally counterintuitive belief, then surely a well-organized community could do just as well with a true but counterintuitive belief.

support this claim (e.g. Barrett and Keil 1996, Barrett 1998). Jason Slone, for example, presents the case of Buddhist (a)theology. Many learned exponents of Buddhism present it as a non-theistic religion or philosophy and claim that true Buddhists do not attribute divine attributes to Buddha. But, Slone claims, scholars of lived Buddhism find that, in practice, both Buddhist lay people and Buddhist monks and nuns conceive of Buddha “as having many of the characteristics of deities in other religions” and perform rituals designed to acquire special status or bring about miraculous outcomes (Slone 2004, 74-75 and the works he cites). This suggests that it may be hard or impossible to consistently transmit religious concepts that are not MCIs.

Whether counterintuitive concepts can be successfully transmitted to a wide population over time is an important question for science as well as religion. Many, if not most, scientific concepts are quite counterintuitive, which can make transmitting them challenging, as in the intuitive physics of motion example I mentioned above. Some CSR scholars go quite far in claiming that counterintuitive concepts cannot successfully be transmitted. For example, Pascal Boyer speaks of the “mirage of theological correctness.” (281) He claims that “people always add to or distort the doctrine,” (281) adding that, “it is very difficult for literate groups to counter people’s tendency to make their religious concepts more *local* and more *practical*. People are never as ‘theologically correct’ as the guild would like them to be.” (283) Now, religious institutions can try to counter this by emphasizing and enforcing doctrine but, in Boyer’s view, “the only way to make the message immune to such adulteration renders it tedious, thereby fueling imagistic dissent and threatening the position of the theologian’s guild.” (285)

Here Boyer is drawing on the work of the anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse. Whitehouse distinguishes between two modes of transmission. The first mode is an imagistic one that involves intense, high-arousal rituals that effectively bond group members together, but are open to a variety of interpretations. The doctrinal mode, by contrast, offers a coherent, systematic, and frequently repeated set of messages.⁷ The challenge for the doctrinal mode is to navigate between two dangers. On the one hand, if group leaders are too rigid and demanding in policing practitioners’ beliefs, people may become discouraged and disengaged: the tedium effect. On the other hand, if leaders are too lax in training and

⁷ Whitehouse 1995, 2000. On his view, this mode can be particularly effective when carried out with the aid of written texts and formal instruction, though it is also present in non-literate societies.

safeguarding practitioners' beliefs, then people will simplify and distort the official teaching to make them more minimally counterintuitive, what Whitehouse calls the "cognitive optimum effect." (2004)

Boyer is quite skeptical that a successful mean can be found. In section 4a, I will consider whether the evidence backs him up. For now, I want to note an issue about what counts as evidence against the possession of a belief. Boyer seems to assume that any evidence of practitioners using theologically incorrect conceptions counts as evidence that they do not, in fact, hold the theologically correct beliefs. This is clearly too quick: while I may use the physically incorrect belief that the sun is moving downwards to estimate how soon it will set, my use of this belief does not signal a rejection of the earth's rotation. My naïve representation of the sun's motion is simply easier to use and it is sufficient for the practical knowledge I am interested in about how long I have until the sun's light disappears.

3. Religious Knowledge Transmission

a. Goals of Transmission: Practical vs. Theoretical Knowledge

This points to the importance of the distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge (Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.1-3, 7). Religions often transmit comprehensive accounts of reality, and thus can serve as a source for beliefs about the way things are. The goal of such beliefs is theoretical knowledge or understanding in the Aristotelian sense: knowledge whose value is intrinsic and consists in what it enables us to appreciate about reality. Incorrect or misleading concepts rule out or at least impair such theoretical knowledge. The goal of practical knowledge, by contrast, is successful action. Religions often provide actionable information about what to do. For practical knowledge to succeed, it has to be good enough for action-guiding purposes. It does not, however, need to be complete or even correct, as the setting sun example indicates. Thus whether religious knowledge is being successfully transmitted depends not simply on whether the concepts the practitioners employ are entirely correct, but on whether they are good enough for the required purposes.⁸

The diversity of religions is a complicating factor here: religions operate in many different ways and their different goals affect what sort of knowledge they may be trying to transmit.⁹ While many offer some view of reality as well as practical guidance, the relative emphases on theoretical and practical claims differ significantly. Some may have a well-defined view of the nature of reality that is centrally used for their practical knowledge (e.g. the Buddhist view that the central problem of life is suffering and that the way to avoid suffering is to banish desire) or well-defined creeds that propose truths about reality (e.g. the role of the ecumenical creeds in many traditional Christian communities). Other kinds of religion may have detailed practices that adherents engage in, but without specifically

⁸ You can have a conception that is sufficient for practical purposes but insufficient for theoretical purposes. For example, in a recent NSF survey only 51% of respondents correctly identified as false the claim that *Antibiotics kill viruses as well as bacteria* (NSB 2014, Chapter 7, Appendix table 7-9). Nevertheless, many people still have the practical knowledge that they should follow the doctor's instruction. So here we have something close to success on the level of practical knowledge—most people know that they should follow the doctor's instruction—but widespread failure when it comes to theoretical knowledge—few know what viruses or antibiotics are.

⁹ There is continuing scholarly debate over whether the notion of “religion” is useful and how it should be applied. See, for example, the discussion in Boyer 2001, 4-57: in any case, religions are certainly not all members of a well-defined natural kind.

formulated theoretical accounts of reality that their adherents are expected to adopt. Exactly what theoretical commitments are involved is often subject to debate within communities.¹⁰

b. Ecologies of religious knowledge

There are also two rather different sorts of ecologies of knowledge that are relevant. Those outside of a religious community often know little about it, and may not be aware of even knowing someone of that religion. The current distribution of religious adherents influences this: according to a 2012 Pew report, “nearly three-quarters (73%) of the world’s people live in countries in which their religious group makes up a majority of the population.”¹¹ Further, media reporting on religion focuses on the sensational and controversial and is often conducted by people with an incomplete understanding of the religion they are covering.

c. How Religious Communities Can Meet Transmission Conditions

Billions of people are part of religious communities that meet regularly and go through life together. While the details vary, in general, religious communal practices provide a way of transmitting both theoretical and practical knowledge from trusted sources to members of the community. Those who are active participants in a religious community have several advantages. To begin with, communal religious life provides regular means of transmitting the central views of the religion. This means that many religious communities will meet the *Reinforced Exposure Condition*: since members of these communities are repeatedly exposed to the central practical and theoretical claims of their tradition.

Members can also rely on other members of their community for advice and guidance. Religious communities are formed around shared visions of reality, shared moral views, and shared practices. Dedicated religious adherents can be reasonably confident that they have similar goals and aims and are weighing things similarly to their co-religionists. This means that the *Trust Condition* will be met for many religious participants: they trust the good will and competence of their communal sources.¹² These conditions will not, however, be met

¹⁰ E.g. in the context of Judaism, Menachem Keller has recently argued that Judaism aims at a particular kind of life, one that trusts in God, not at the affirmation of particular beliefs: “if ‘belief’ is the intellectual acquiescence in carefully defined statements of dogma, the answer is that there is nothing that a Jew must believe.” (1999, 9) Cf. Wettstein’s exploration of naturalistic religious practice (and naturalistic Judaism in particular). (Wettstein 2012)

¹¹ Pew Research Center 2012, 11. This includes the religiously unaffiliated, 71% of whom live in countries where the majority of people are religiously unaffiliated.

¹² This will particularly apply in the case of the central claims of their tradition. I am also leaving open the question of how the transmission of knowledge occurs. Some religions may be more hierarchical in

for all adherents. If adherents see religious sources as unrepresentative or as compromised by their concern for power and status or as unduly affected by factors extrinsic to what their religion really teaches, then the *Trust Condition* will not be met, even for those within the community. Given the importance of consistent practice for trustworthiness, religious sources that are seen as being hypocritical or behaving in ways that compromise their authority often prevent their claims from being received.

Finally, most religions also have worked out views on what their core commitments are, both theoretically (what is at the heart of their view of reality and the human place within it) and practically (what actions and ways of living are most important for us to pursue). Religious services and practices tend to focus on these central messages, with more esoteric and debated doctrines or teachings a matter of theological debate but less commonly a matter for sermons or key rituals. Further, this exposure may take place in a variety of settings and practices, all designed to help communicate the central messages. The emphasis on core teachings and the combination of teaching and practice characteristic of many religious communities puts them in a position to meet the *Minimal Distortion Condition*. Having clear and central claims that are passed on through teaching and practice increases the probability of successful transmission.

4. Evidence for Successful Transmission of Religious Beliefs

a. The Persistence of Some Maximally Counterintuitive Ideas

As we saw above, Boyer suggests that religions are not going to be able to successfully transmit complex and counterintuitive beliefs over time. In fact, there are indications to the contrary. Whitehouse presents evidence for thinking that religions operating primarily in a doctrinal mode can effectively transmit their beliefs by maximizing the “*relevance* of ritually transmitted semantic knowledge in everyday settings.” (2004, 327) In such cases, the beliefs being passed on are not seen as inert and formulaic but of vital practical importance, avoiding the tedium effect. Doctrinal mode religions can also use the mechanism of “*periodic arousal*,” intense but regulated rituals that are closely connected to the doctrinal commitments of the religion because they “are typically subjected to extensive narrative rehearsal afterwards, prompted by orthodox interpretative concerns.” (327) Thus Whitehouse’s evaluation of the relevant evidence from anthropology and religious studies suggests, contra

knowledge transmission, with a defined top-down order of transmission, while others may be more egalitarian, with reciprocal transmission among members.

Boyer, that faithful transmission of even challenging religious concepts is possible. However, it can succeed only if the religious community is set up to successfully maintain the conditions necessary for accurate transmission. As Whitehouse notes,

Policing can break down for a range of reasons. If the frequency of transmission is significantly reduced, if the authority of the tradition's leaders deteriorates, if the sanctions for innovation and heresy are minimized, then the doctrinal mode may face extinction. (Ibid., 327-328)

So, when the community no longer meets the relevant conditions (ones quite similar to the three I have laid out), there will be a reversion to intuitive concepts. As Whitehouse puts it, “once the controls of doctrinal authorities and ritual experts fade, cognitively optimal concepts [i.e. MCIs] may be all that remains.” (328)¹³

Christianity offers a good example of a religion that employs a doctrinal mode and has communities set up to faithfully transmit its central theological commitments. Rituals such as the reciting of creeds as part of regular public worship and the development of detailed catechetical instruction help to pass on the central beliefs, including the counterintuitive ones. Similarly, emphases on an authoritative sacred text has made it problematic to deny the divinity or humanity of Jesus and led practitioners to defend the doctrine of the Trinity as the best way of maintaining the scriptural teachings on the unity of God and the distinctness of divine persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The persistence of affirmations of these doctrines across the centuries provides significant evidence for some degree of success in transmission.¹⁴ Absent repeated engagement with these texts and rituals and the communities that pass them on, CSR predicts that such maximally counterintuitive concepts would rapidly be dropped. The fact that they have persisted for many centuries, even in the face of Christian groups promoting less counter-intuitive theological views such as Arians and Unitarians, points to the success of these communal methods of transmission (Cf. Barrett 2004, chapter 6, *Additional Factors*). If such claims were not actually being received then we would expect Christian groups over time to significantly modify these doctrines:

¹³ To give a scientific analogy, if physics were no longer widely taught and physicists lost their authority and standing, the cognitive science of science predicts that counterintuitive Newtonian or relativistic understandings of motion would quickly fade away until only naïve folk physics remains (cf. McCauley 2011).

¹⁴ Now it is true that many actively practicing Christians would not do well when put to the question about the Trinity, particularly given limited time or opportunity for reflection. Barrett has found that under such conditions believers often switch to more intuitive, less theologically correct conceptions (Barrett 1999). However, this does not show that most Christians deny the Trinity, as it seems likely that in many contexts they are employing a less correct but easier to employ representation for practical purposes.

dropping them or simplifying them. While this has happened in a few Christian communities, the vast majority, from Orthodox to Catholics to Protestants, retain such beliefs and teach them as part of their religious instruction.

b. Evidence from Comparing Nominal and Practicing Adherents

Those who are only irregularly involved with a religious community have many fewer opportunities to take on religious knowledge in lasting ways. Sociological findings provide strong evidence for thinking that this difference in opportunities for formation has large effects on both the knowledge adherents have of their religion and the way they live their lives. On the theoretical side, in a 2015 US survey, significantly more practicing Protestants could correctly respond to questions about the Bible than those who identified as Christians but were non-practicing.¹⁵ On the practical side, W. Bradford Wilcox's research on the United States finds a strong contrast based on practice: "evangelicals who attend religious services weekly, when compared with average Americans, are less likely to cohabit as young adults (1% vs. 10% of other young adults), to bear a child outside of wedlock (12% vs. 33% of other moms) and to divorce (7% vs. 9% of other married adults divorced from 1988 to 1993)." So, regular participants adhere more closely to their professed moral norms than those in the general culture. On the other hand, Wilcox says, "nominal evangelicals have sex before other teens, cohabit and have children outside of wedlock at rates that are no different than the population at large, and are much more likely to divorce than average Americans."¹⁶ This suggests that religious participation and the knowledge it transmits make a real difference to people's actual behavior. Those who are nominal adherents may either fail to receive the views of their professed community or be aware of them but not receive them as action-guiding practical knowledge.¹⁷

¹⁵ Out of five multiple-choice options, 78% of practicing Protestants correctly picked Esther as a book in the Bible (compared to 49% of non-practicing Christians) and 74% picked Isaac as Abraham's son (compared to 48% of non-practicing Christians). (American Bible Society 2015, 68-69)

¹⁶ Wilcox 2007; cf. Stokes 2014 who shows that the correlation between divorce and conservative Protestant religiosity is negative for those who regularly attend services but positive for the nominal. The positive psychological benefits of religion that researchers have found also correlate with religious practice, not with affiliation. For more on the positive and negative roles of religion in America, see Putnam and Campbell 2012.

¹⁷ Of course, this requires that the transmission meet the necessary conditions: that the knowledge be clearly and consistently passed on by trusted sources. Some means of transmission may fail to meet these criteria. For example, a study found that for young American Catholics, attendance of Confraternity of Christian Doctrine or Catechism classes did "not correlate in any way with knowledge about Catholicism." (Prothero 2008, 44)

5. *Minimal Distortion* and Transmitting Practical Religious Knowledge

When it comes to the practical sphere, the practical knowledge that religions seek to transmit has to be applied to the situations of people's lives to be useful.¹⁸ This raises serious issues. Often, religious practical knowledge involves either applying quite general principles (e.g. love God first and love your neighbor as yourself) to specific situations or taking rules and norms given in one situation and applying them to contemporary circumstances (e.g. Orthodox Jewish communities applying the Torah to life in this time and place, using the continuing tradition of rabbinical interpretation). The translation involved in this enterprise leaves significant scope for error, even if the initial principles are correct.

While presenting challenges, the requirements for practical knowledge also allow for more flexibility when it comes to the representations employed. Practitioners who think that "God wants me to help this person in need" do not need an absolutely theological correct conception of God in order for that belief to be action guiding in a way that coheres with their theology. The representation that they are using or the heuristic they employ just needs to give the same verdict as the theologically correct concept. When the action performed and the motivation for performing it match up, then defects in the representation do not undermine the person's practical knowledge or action.

Practical transmission does, however, require that the implications of religious beliefs be discerned correctly. In addition to translation problems, there is an accommodationist worry: the prevailing attitudes of one's society may corrupt or distort this transmission. The exposition and understanding put forward by leaders and the reception by members sometimes consists of ways of avoiding the practical implications of central religious teachings. This is a challenge that many theologians and preachers have expressed over the years (e.g. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* on the way Christians are tempted to anesthetize the message of Jesus [2003, 70-71/78-79]). A striking example comes from Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*:

[The early] church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators.".....Things are different now.....Far from being

¹⁸ While this issue arises in science as well (e.g. do findings about the benefits of a drug or diet apply to all humans or just those with certain characteristics) the design of studies are usually such that they at least attempt to include all the relevant populations.

disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's often vocal sanction of things as they are.

Here King is claiming that the church in America is no longer reflecting theologically correct Christian beliefs about power and oppression, but instead has distorted the Christian message to sanctify oppressive and un-Christian power structures. Transmission fails if religious teachings are heard and then acted on in a way that robs them of their force or distorts their content so that it is no longer providing helpful or correct instruction.¹⁹ Knowledge only counts as practical when it can serve as the basis for action. Adherents need to do more than affirm beliefs as true on a survey. This sort of transmission is more difficult. Saying that you believe you should love your enemies is much easier than actually loving them. Thus meeting the *Minimal Distortion Condition* is particularly challenging in the case of practical religious knowledge.

The difficulty seems particularly acute given the contemporary ecology of knowledge transmission.²⁰ The huge number of sources on religious and moral views and the huge number of communities available for a given adherent to pick means that it can be easier to change your community than to conform to its views.²¹ Contemporary sociology suggests that, in the American context, many of those raised in particular religious communities end up with vague moral and religious views that are more similar to their peers than to those supposedly articulated by their communities.²² Based on thousands of interviews with young people in the United States, sociologist Christian Smith found that the dominant de facto creed is what he calls Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD), which conceives of God as a being who rewards good people, encourages you to feel good about yourself but is not

¹⁹ There is also those who, say, are pressured by their religious leaders to sell everything they have and give it to them, so the opposite can occur, it just is not the predominant issue.

²⁰ In highly hierarchical and controlled societies, by contrast, the most serious challenges might be more about whether the power and influence of the elites lead them to modify religious teaching to serve their own interests (this is still an issue, but the baseline of influence that religious institutions have is lower in the US than in some other societies, past and present).

²¹ As societal pressures for religious belonging and participation decrease and more temporary and ad hoc forms of community, joined by those with the money and time to spare, become more common, the question is whether religious communities are capable of influencing their members in ways that are sufficient for forming them so as to successfully transmit theoretical and practical religious knowledge. This is a largely empirical question with a variety of answers relative to various religious communities and social contexts.

²² Now, one question is what baseline we should be measuring against. Maybe current religious communities do not transmit knowledge well, but perhaps fare no worse than religious communities in America in the 19th century or in France in the 13th or Greece in the 5th century B.C. The further back we go the less direct evidence we have about the beliefs and practices of anyone outside the elite (and what the elite report about everyone else's beliefs and practices).

particularly involved with the world except as a personal problem solver. (Smith 2010, 41-2) These beliefs are shared across a variety of formal religious identities.²³ On this view, religious belief and practice is “about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents.” (Ibid., 42) Those interviewed mentioned concepts such as feeling good and achieving happiness much more frequently than specifically religious notions of sin, salvation, holiness, resurrection, or justice.²⁴

These beliefs and attitudes do not involve a new religion, they are instead about how adherents are receiving and appropriating the religious claims of their own tradition. As Smith puts it, “[MTD’s] typical embrace and practice is *de facto*, functional, practical, and tacit—not formal or acknowledged as a distinctive religion....[it] appears...to operate as a parasitic faith that cannot sustain its own independent life.” (43) Because Smith’s interviews were conducted under reflective and low cognitive load conditions, they allowed the subjects to display any theologically correct knowledge they might possess. So his research suggests that many of the subjects have not adopted the theologically correct concepts of their traditions into their own religious understandings. The *Minimal Distortion Condition* has not been met and transmission has failed.

This challenge points to the importance of continuing adaptation by religious communities and institutions. Historians and sociologists of religion have identified many ways in which religious communities develop new practices or adapt old ones to attempt to pass on their teaching and practices. For example, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, many working class children in 18th century England worked six days a week, with no time for schooling, either secular or religious. English Anglican evangelical Robert Raikes (1725-1811) developed Sunday school as an institution for working children who would learn to read and write by studying the Bible while also receiving catechetical instruction and participating in prayer and hymn-singing (Larsen 2008). This practice became widespread, adopted by a variety of Christian denominations across the globe, with the focus shifting to

²³ “[This] *de facto* creed is particularly evident among mainline Protestant and Catholic youth, but is also more than a little visible among black and conservative Protestants, Jewish teens, other religious types of teenagers, and even many “non-religious” teenagers in the USA.” (Smith 2010, 41)

²⁴ “We counted less than 50, and often less than 10, counts of concepts such as personally sinning or being a sinner, obeying God or the church, righteousness—divine or human, the kingdom of God, and loving one’s neighbor.... We found at least 20, and often close to 100, counts of the following concepts: personally feeling or being made happy, feeling good about oneself, and feeling personally satisfied or enjoying life satisfaction. Our interviewed teenagers used the single, specific phrase to “feel happy,” for instance, more than 2,000 times.” (Smith 2010, 44)

religious education after the introduction of compulsory schooling. New practices and institutions can develop to transmit knowledge more effectively within the social environment. Thus, whether a religious community succeeds in transmitting its beliefs depends on how its ecology of knowledge adapts and develops over time to continue to successfully transmit its vision and practices in the relevant social context.

6. Conclusion

Communal institutions and their teaching and practices are vital to successfully transmitting knowledge. They can help members of the community assimilate challenging beliefs by presenting them repeatedly in a variety of contexts. Through an examination of religious beliefs, we have seen that communities are central to meeting the conditions for general transmission: *Trust*, *Reinforced Exposure*, and *Minimal Distortion*. Religious communities have a shared vision of reality and live together in a way that allows the believer to trust her fellow adherents, meeting the *trust condition*. The repeated practices and habits of the religious life help adherents to meet the *reinforced exposure condition*. Finally, religious communities offer comprehensive theoretical and practical guidance that distinguishes between the central elements and the more peripheral, helping to meet the *minimal distortion condition*. However, the challenges of translation and cultural accommodation make it difficult for communities to effectively pass on their action-guiding beliefs about how to live. While being an active member of a community does not guarantee understanding, it does put us in a position to have our errors and misconceptions corrected. A key part of intellectual humility is engaging with such communities, enabling us to benefit from the knowledge of others. It's hard to get everything right, but with the help of others we can get things less wrong.²⁵

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