

# The challenges of practising intellectual humility with deeply held religious beliefs

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## In this fourth of a five-article series in Open Access Government on the topic of intellectual humility (IH), Peter C. Hill explores the challenges associated with practising IH with deeply held religious beliefs

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Given the contentious nature of much religious dialogue and strongly held religious beliefs – where roughly two-thirds of the world’s population consider religion to be important for daily living – it is no surprise that the domain of religion is fertile ground to study the social effects of intellectual humility (IH).

For several reasons, religion can be a powerful and successful meaning system which can impact how people see, interpret, and function within their world. For example, religion can serve as a philosophical orientation that provides individuals with a core schema or cognitive map to help navigate their experiences.

In addition, it provides a means of transcendence and association with what is beyond us, a concern and interest for many. Religion also contains other sources of meaning, such as creativity, relationships, work, ideals, and values. On top of all this, religion is often a direct provider, with explicit claims, of meaning and purpose in life.

As with political beliefs noted in the [third article](#) of this five-part series in Open Access Government, there are strong headwinds to practising IH in the religious domain.

Religion, because its concerns are heavily weighted with strong existential issues, is, for many, a certainty-driven motivation. Thus, one may fear discovering that they could be wrong, which, in turn, can undermine one’s religious meaning system’s sense of coherence and certainty reinforced by strongly held religious beliefs.

### The intellect in intellectual humility

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Before summarising the IH and religion research, we should consider our understanding of what the word intellect means as part of intellectual humility. One may (falsely) conclude that IH is strictly a rational process, suggesting it is entirely devoid of a-rational human functioning.

However, what has been emphasised in this five-part series is that IH involves fundamental motivational components that extend far beyond just rational functioning.

Psychologists have long recognised that important beliefs and values are supported by two fundamentally different psychological processes, one that involves the ability to evaluate evidence and arguments and another that involves generating affective

meaning, including meaning found through social relationships and moral considerations.

## **The types of psychological processes and reasoning**

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At the cognitive level, these two psychological processes also involve two types of reasoning. One type, frequently called Type 2, is what we usually associate with the word 'reasoning' in that it involves deliberate, effortful, and controlled cognitive processing of information.

But people, even those considered extremely rational, also use Type 1 reasoning, which is more automatic, implicit, and even intuitive in nature (such as the belief in human dignity). It is important to note that different tasks call for different types of reasoning and processes beyond strictly a cognitive analysis.

For example, some situations may require a degree of empathy that extends far beyond what an analytical approach can provide.

It is tempting to consider religious beliefs and values as a social and emotional process that involves Type 1 reasoning and religious disbelief (or at least agnosticism) as an empirical/ analytical process that involves Type 2 reasoning. This, however, is too simplistic.

Recent neuroscience evidence suggests that in everyone, there are at least two anatomically independent neural networks (the analytically oriented task-positive network and the social and emotional default-mode network) that are functionally antagonistic to each other, resulting in psychological tension such that when one network is activated, the other network is deactivated. Simultaneously engaging the cognitive processes of both networks appears to run contrary to how the functioning brain is organised.

The psychological and reasoning processes at work will depend upon which network is most salient and given priority, both in terms of individual differences (e.g., the religious person versus the non-religious) and situational demands.

## **What does the research say about religious beliefs and teachings?**

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Indeed, though many religions teach humility, including IH, as an important virtue (e.g., acknowledging that we see only a 'dim likeness of things' – I Cor. 13:12, NIV), most of the evidence suggests that IH is either negatively correlated or unrelated to many aspects of religiosity; for example, IH appears not to be associated with religious activity and intrinsic religious motivation (i.e., religion as an end rather than a means to some other desirable end).

One study found that religious fundamentalism, religious belief salience, prayer fulfilment, and universality (the belief that one's religious beliefs apply to all people regardless of culture or station in life) were all associated with less IH. Another study found that a greater reliance upon religious beliefs as a foundation for a specific view on an issue is associated with lower IH.

Yet, for many religious people, IH has a positive value. For example, one study found that IH is associated with positive attitudes toward God and, inversely, related to anger toward God.

Such findings are important given the well-documented association between religiousness and spirituality with overall mental health and (though less well-established) physical health.

It may well be, as one study with Christians has found, that IH for religious people should consider what can be called a vertical IH (an IH that acknowledges human finiteness and divine authority) in addition to the horizontal interpersonal IH that heretofore has been exclusively characterised by measurement in the empirical literature.

That study found that considering the vertical theistic dimension in religious people's meaning system, IH predicted greater flourishing and less depression, anxiety, and religious struggle.

## **Changing one's religious beliefs should not be a necessary criterion for intellectual humility**

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As pointed out in previous articles of this series, religion will likely serve as a non-negotiable moral conviction and, as such, changing one's religious beliefs should not be considered a necessary criterion for IH.

That said, an openness to what can be learned by transcending religious barriers is perhaps an indicator of the wisdom required to properly discriminate between those religious beliefs that should be open to revision and those that are justifiably held as non-negotiable.

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[Peter C. Hill – Psychology of religion](#)

Dr Hill discusses his research interests into the psychology of religion and its impact on healthy wellbeing.

