CHAPTER EIGHT

CAN WE BE SURE ABOUT CONTINGENT RELIGIOUS INSIGHTS?

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1. Introduction

In this contribution I will discuss the questions whether beliefs that we acquire contingently can be reasonable and whether we can be sure about them. In the background of this paper is the common argument, against the truth of beliefs and the certainty of religious faith, that religious affiliation and beliefs are contingent, caused by historical, social and psychological factors. Contingent belief cannot be proven to be true. Now the presupposition of this objection—only non-contingent beliefs can be true—implies that only necessary propositions can be true, which is obviously not the case. Isn’t it right that, for example, the periodical table was contingently discovered and built over the centuries by human interpretations of natural, “chemical,” “realities,” but is nevertheless true—true in the sense that it is, for the time being, the best scientific description of chemical “atoms” in nature and the way in which they are composed. Therefore, the fact that insights into nature or life have been discovered in a process that could have taken other directions—the names of the elements are entirely contingent—or possibly could not have taken place at all, does not count against their truth. Contingent insights can be true. The names of the elements may be contingent but their composition is not. Behind them lie “hard facts” on which scholars agree.

However, the situation is different in the case of religion. In this case, there are no “hard facts” to agree upon. Rather, religious beliefs concern the whole of life, and religious truths cannot be proven outside their life-context. Therefore, the crucial point about the contingency of beliefs in secular and religious worldviews is not that they have been formed in historical, cultural processes that could have taken other directions. It is rather that their truth cannot be established on the basis of empirical evidence, and that there is no agreement about religious beliefs. Because
religious insights are interwoven with life and are related to faith-communities (in whatever form they may take), religious views seem to be contingent in the sense of being arbitrary: we could have learned to see things differently, and perhaps we will come to do so in the future.

The question now is, of course, whether this contingency renders religious beliefs non-rational. If they were caused, they would not refer to a religious reality, but have other, non-religious, grounds. Therefore I will start this discussion by analysing whether causal explanations of religious beliefs are successful in conclusively explaining religion in terms of psychological, sociological or other comparable causes. If this were the case, the issue of religion would be settled. Religious beliefs could effectively be “explained away” naturalistically. Yet, if causal explanations are not successful, as I will argue, we have to look beyond causality—as I will discuss in a short exposition of a Buddhist epistemology that reaches beyond facts which can be neutrally established. In the next section, I will describe the process of acquiring religious insights in its relation to traditions. In the last section, I will draw conclusions in relation to the possibility of giving an account for one’s beliefs and the issues of entitlement and certainty: how far is it justified to believe and to feel sure in one’s faith?

In this contribution I will introduce two distinctions: one concerning the meaning of contingency, and another concerning the nature of religious insights. We can distinguish between three ideas of contingency: *causality*, determined by a multitude of causes (“we do not know exactly how our beliefs are caused but they have their origin in socio-economic, psychological and cultural factors”); *arbitrariness* (“there are no grounds for having some religious beliefs and not others”); and *accidentalness* (“in the process of belief-formation accidental happenings do play a role”). The arguments pro and contra religious truth depend heavily upon presuppositions concerning the nature of religious insight. I will distinguish between basic religious insights, their formulations as beliefs, and reflections upon these beliefs. In what follows, I will discuss the objections against religious truth and certainty on the basis of both distinctions, which I will develop bit by bit.